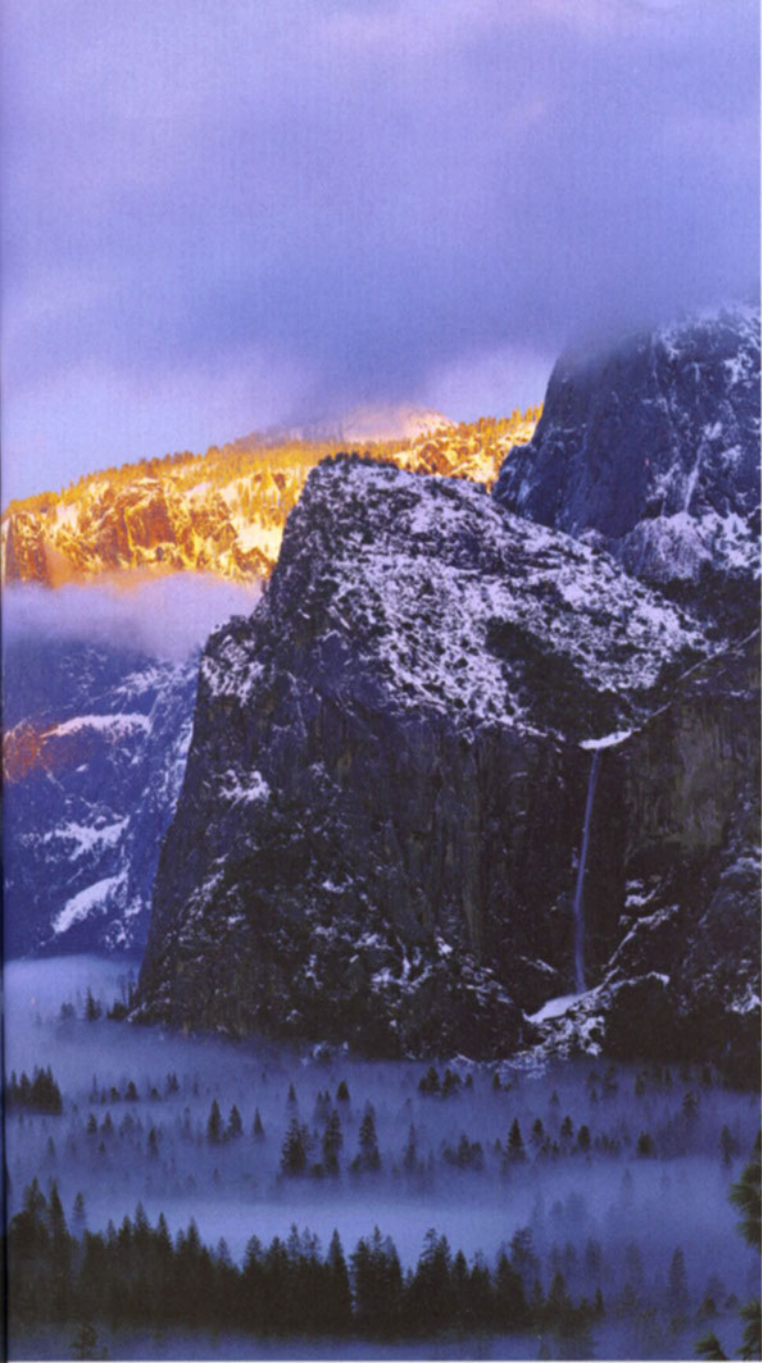


QT Luong is a French-born scientist, mountain climber and artist. He's also a master of landscapes whose passion was ignited by the magnificent scenes of the Sierra Nevada.

BY WILLIAM SAWALICH | PHOTOGRAPHY BY QT LUONG

TRANSIENT AS THE LIGHT



andscape photographer QT Luong has done something not even Ansel Adams accomplished. He has photographed all 58 of America's national parks. More importantly, though, Luong has spent time in them, explored them, really gotten to know each of the parks. And he did it all simply because it offered the best way to experience the wide variety of natural landscapes available in the United States.

"The diversity of the natural world," Luong says, "and its potential to draw parallels and contrasts has always inspired me. I thrive looking for new experiences."

Luong came to photography after a career as a research scientist working on artificial vision, a subfield of artificial intelligence. He taught computers how to see.

"The kind of mathematics I was working with," he explains, "had to do with geometry, the organization and perception of space, and the relationship between space and the two-dimensional image. So, in some sense, it was a different take on some of the same problems photographers face."

His research background instilled in him a special ability to make sense of structures and patterns. It refined his affinity for organization and systematic comparison, which has clearly benefited his photography. But landscape photography has never been a scientific endeavor for Luong. It's simply a labor of love.

"One of the primary reasons I made the career change," he says, "was so that my job would require me to spend time in nature."

Raised in Paris, Luong has been an outdoorsman since climbing the Alps in his youth. He became an avid mountaineer, and eventually a guide, and he started using a camera simply to show others the beauty of what he experienced. He relocated to the United States as a young scientist, and specifically chose the University of California at Berkeley because, among the top research institutions, it was the closest to Yosemite National Park. He had been hearing a lot about that place.

Yosemite turned out to be even more amazing than Luong imagined. Not only was the mountaineer thrilled, the artist was inspired. He decided to learn large-format photography and quickly set out on what would become a 10-year quest to make a representative photograph of every park.

Ever the researcher, Luong grounded himself in the rich tradition of Western landscape photography by studying the work of those who went before. He was inspired by Adams, of course, but it was fellow scientist-turned-photographer Eliot Porter whose color work especially spoke to him. Fellow mountaineering photographer Galen Rowell and prolific national parks photographer David Muench also inspired him. It's easy to see how he became the product of these world-class influences.

"What I learned from studying Ansel Adams was that the landscape is not a fixed subject," Luong says, "but something as transient as the light that makes it visible. When I began to study his books to learn more about photography, I understood his contributions to the environmental movement and how important it was to continue those efforts. This provided an added motivation besides just trying to please myself."

Luong the scientist was charged with remaining impartial, but as a photographer he relishes not just imparting facts, but also imbuing his work with his personal vision.

"The main difference resides in the exploration of emotions and the self," Luong says. "There is simply no place for those in science. It is all about objectivity. Although my approach to photography has been fairly 'scientific,' those aspects have allowed me to exercise a different creative muscle.

"My photography is partly based on research," he continues. "I try to gain a good understanding of the places where I work. I look for interrelations and work

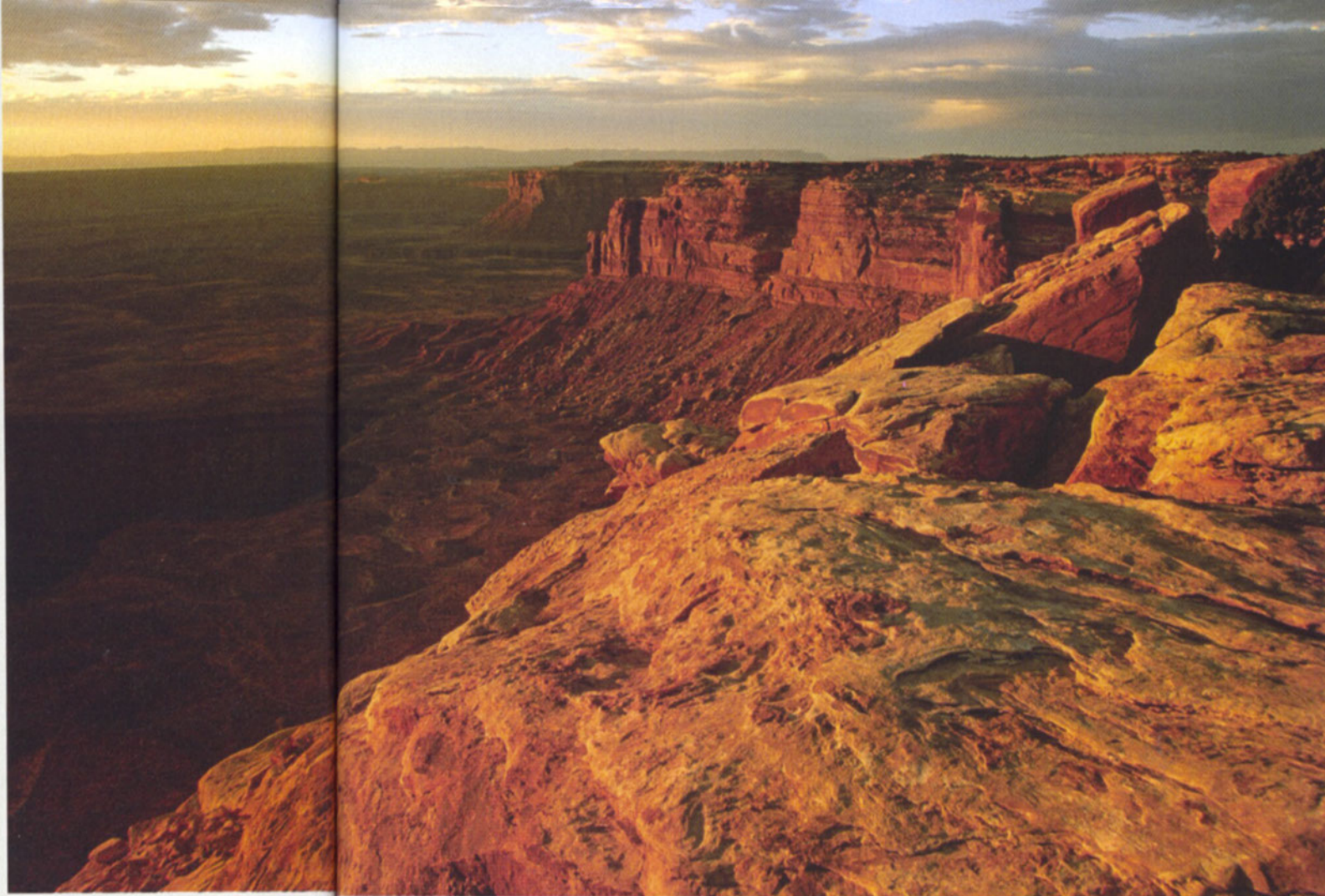
in a systematic way. My goal is not to make a pretty or even 'awesome' picture. Instead, I try to create photographs with some interesting content that can reveal some truths and teach something about the world we live in. It happens that for the picture to work it also needs to stand on its own as an image."

Though it's the variety of America's national parks that has driven his photographic pursuits, Luong quickly realized that Yosemite, the park that first intrigued him, is special. It's the place where it all began, and the park he returns to year after year.

"Yosemite is my favorite park," says Luong. "I actually like the fact that so many great photographs have been made there before. Rather than hindering me, this creates a benchmark against which I can measure my own images and progress, and see if I can do something new. A lot of photographers do not go beyond the established trails and overlooks. Those overlooks concentrate all the photographic activity. Often, finding new perspectives is just a matter of walking a short distance from the designated viewpoints. For example, my nighttime Lower Yosemite falls image, where you see Upper Yosemite falls above, isn't commonly shot despite the interesting alignment. It is only about a 10-minute walk from the bridge where most shoot. Carleton Watkins photographed many times from that particular viewpoint; I assume that during the 19th century there was no paved trail and bridge and, therefore, he would roam all around the place and happen naturally over this excellent view."

Well-covered photographic ground remains quite fertile. Simple changes of weather and light can transform a place in an instant. Such synchronicity led to one of Luong's most beloved images, a popular scene from Yosemite's Tunnel View at sunset.

"Adams himself photographed many times from this viewpoint," Luong says, "as he felt that it would yield different images. No matter how hard I looked, I could not find a viewpoint that captured the essence of the valley better, so it has become a favorite of mine. I felt that Adams 'owned' the view so much that I consider most of my images made there an homage. Usually, I seek to photograph something I have not photographed before, but in this case I sought to make a photograph



QT Luong On Photographing In The National Parks

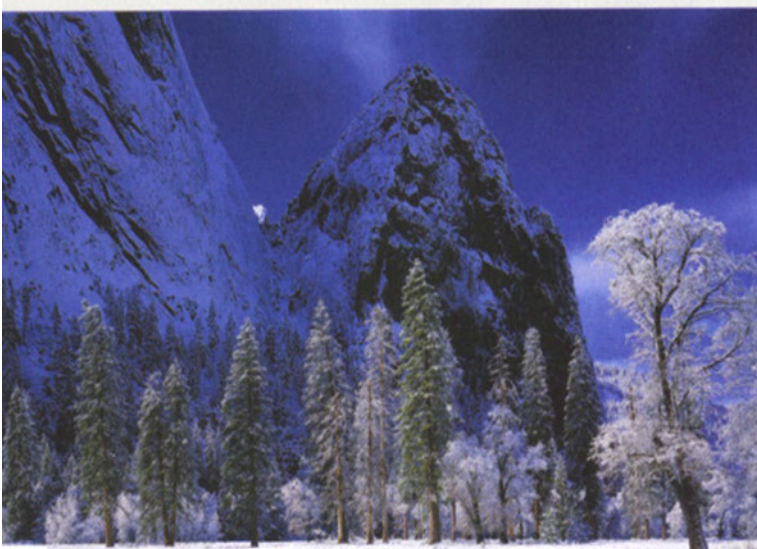
I like to use best-of lists for many things. It makes it easier to make decisions—in this case, where to go—helps me discover things I wouldn't have thought about otherwise, and at the same time, focus explorations on areas that others have found worthwhile.

The national parks represent the list of the greatest natural sights in America as nominated by the Congress. It was also a practical list for me: The goal was attainable—the count is reasonable, the infrastructure excellent—yet the sites were varied enough to encompass something representative of all the nature of America. I also greatly admire the very idea of the national parks, so I wanted to, modestly, help spread the word about them. I liked the fact, if my images hopefully inspired folks to visit themselves, thanks to the NPS, that would be something that most would be able to do.

When I return to a park, I try not only new locations, but also different seasons, which is why I've done so many park visits. I'd rather stay two days in three different seasons than a continuous week. For some places, like Yellowstone, the experience is so different, it's like visiting a different park. That gives me more chances to create different images.

—QT Luong

QT Luong counts Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, David Muench and Galen Rowell as key influences. For his equipment, he has added DSLRs to his large-format film workflow. He explains, "In the past, I have carried the large format to remote places, but for those situations, nowadays I enjoy the much lighter digital kit. I guess after trying to combine the spirit of adventure of Rowell with the perfectionism and techniques of Adams and Porter, I now work with the large format mostly roadside, just like Adams. Adams and Porter used smaller-format cameras in their later years. We're lucky that relatively small digital cameras produce much better results than their 35mm counterparts." **OPENING SPREAD:** Tunnel View, Yosemite National Park, Calif. **LEFT:** Cathedral Rocks, Yosemite National Park, Calif. **ABOVE:** Cliffs near Muley Point at sunset, Utah.





ABOVE: Crater Lake with low clouds colored by sunset, Crater Lake National Park, Oregon.

that Adams has not made before, yet using his most often repeated composition.

"There is something missing in Adams' series," he continues, "and that is color, which I think is an essential component for setting up mood and atmosphere. So I sought to make a photograph in which color would be an integral part. Since the Yosemite granite walls are gray, the most color contrast would be found at sunset between the yellow/orange illuminated cliff tops and the valley bottom, which would turn blue because of the open shade conditions. Most evenings, the valley bottom would be too dark, but if there was some fog in the bottom, that would lighten it up and enhance the blue tint. One evening, I noticed the fog forming and a hole in the western horizon. I rushed to Tunnel View and here was the image, almost a decade and maybe a hundred visits after my initial one."

Because Luong has spent so much time photographing in the national parks, these days he has switched from 5x7 film to digital SLRs, and the goal is creating a comprehensive record of each

park—he can't shy away from the iconic locations and vantage points. Not only does he not avoid them, but he appreciates why they're popular.

"Although they are iconic because of the ease of access," he says, "there are often other good reasons for them to reach that status, and it's something I want to find out for myself. Even if the images are too derivative to stand on their own, they can help tell a story in conjunction with other images, not to mention generate a few stock sales. But to me, the most important reason for shooting those 'same old shots' is that once I've done them I can move on. I'm constantly trying to create photographs that I haven't made before. To me, this seems more natural than always trying to create photographs that haven't been made before at all. If you spend enough time to get to know a subject, you'll do something more original without needing to be a particularly original person yourself."

Yosemite remains Luong's favorite, but it's the diversity of the national parks that first started him on his journey, and

which keeps him exploring to this day. He marvels at the similarities he finds in vastly different landscapes—like two very similar views of Death Valley and Denali. The scientist remains well skilled at analyzing structures and spotting patterns.

"These are two very contrasted environments," he explains. "It is an illustration of the diversity that drew me to the parks. One is a photograph of one of the coldest mountains on earth and the highest point in North America. The other is one of the hottest deserts on earth and the lowest point in North America. And, yet, notice how the layout of the mountains and valley is similar down to the appearance of the Badwater salt pan and the northeast fork of Kahiltna Glacier. I emphasized this similarity by the way I framed the Death Valley image, and also by the choice of the time, as many would choose to photograph earlier or later in the day when the light may be 'better,' but the salt pan would be in the shade of the high mountains. The first was made Galen Rowell-style in an extreme location with a tiny point-

and-shoot because extreme cold caused problems with my SLR. The second was made Ansel Adams-style only 10 minutes from a parking lot and well-visited overlook with large-format film."

Luong likens his national parks project to deciphering an interconnected giant puzzle. And although it required years of hard work, thinking of it as an academic study misses the point. At its simplest, it offered an opportunity for an outdoorsman to spend more time in some of the most ruggedly beautiful landscapes in the world. At its most profound, it allowed an artist to help us to understand the importance of our interconnected natural world in hopes that we will be moved to protect it. It is, at its core, a work of love.

"I am very interested in facts," Luong says, "but intellectual interest alone would not have been enough to sustain the project. Facts are about trying to understand the natural world. They are important because deeper love stems from understanding, but eventually it is love that matters the most. This is where the conservation part of the effort comes into play. I am trying to help the viewer feel the same emotional response as I felt myself when I experienced the land. This goes beyond just facts. I am hoping that they will feel moved enough to care for the natural world and want to help preserve it. Trying to elicit the emotional response is the artistic component. I am trying to teach and delight at the same time. Both are equally important." **OR**



Go to www.terrageria.com to see more of **QT Luong's** remarkable landscape photography.

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