

Photographer captures the beauty of America's national parks

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Few people visit all of America's national parks from Maine to Alaska, let alone capture their majesty in photographs. Photographer Quang-Tuan Luong is believed to be the only person to have done so, and the remarkable results can be seen in the exhibit "Treasured Lands: The Fifty-Eight U.S. National Parks in Focus" at the National Heritage Museum in Lexington.

Each 34-by-43-inch photo makes you want to linger before it, taking in the richness of detail, light and color. He captures the grand vistas and panoramas you'd expect, but also the small areas of beauty. And he is a poetic, engaging guide in his brief descriptions on the wall text next to each photo.

Born in Paris to Vietnamese parents, Luong came to California after he earned his doctorate in artificial intelligence. He experienced his first national park as a rock climber in Yosemite in the mid-1990s and spent the next 15 years exploring the parks by boat and foot, camping in remote areas with his 75-pound large-format camera.

Luong, who now is a full-time photographer living in San Jose, Calif., appeared in the Ken Burns 2009 documentary "The National Parks: America's Best Idea."

The effect of seeing the photographs as a group is to marvel at the diversity of the American wilderness and to feel grateful for its preservation. That began in 1872 with Yellowstone and expanded in 1917 with the establishment of the National Park Service. The newest parks are Congaree National Park in South Carolina, designated in 2003, and Great Sand Dune National Park and Preserve in Colorado, in 2004.

These photos may inspire you to plan a visit. During National Park Week April 16-24, which includes Earth Day on April 22, all 58 national parks are free, as well as 336 other National Park Service properties.

With Acadia the only national park in New England and only nine others east of the Mississippi River, you'll have to journey far to see most of the others. Yet, wherever you live or travel, some kind of park service property is relatively near. In Massachusetts, 21 National Park Service sites protect history, heritage and natural resources. They include: Adams National Historical Park in Quincy, Boston African American Historic Site, Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area and Cape Cod National Seashore.

On his visit to Acadia, Luong shot a typical Maine scene, but the pink-tinged rocks against the sea are fresh and arresting.

"The first rays to meet the continent highlighted the entire ragged coastline," Luong wrote.

In Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, Luong did not shoot the Blue Ridge Mountains for which the park is known, but instead filled the lens with a dense spread of light green ferns.

"A sense of happiness filled me the moment I stumbled upon a luxurious growth of ferns, the tender green surrounding cheerful pink flowers," he wrote.

The photographs compete for your attention. In Everglades National Park, the still water and sky at sunrise glow orange, punctuated by saw grass and tree silhouettes. It is the epitome of peace.

More dramatic are the photos of the Utah parks – Arches, Bryce, Canyonlands and Capitol Reef – where arches, buttes, pinnacles and spires rise golden, red, orange and peach and where canyons create a maze as far as the eye can see.

"The B.C. amphitheater forms one of the most astonishing landscapes I have ever seen," said Luong, about the view from Sunset Point in Bryce.

In Alaska, he photographed not just the majestic snow-covered peaks and glaciers, but also rare sand dunes. In New Mexico, the neon orange and green interior of caves in Carlsbad Caverns seems surreal.

With his camera, Luong presents in one image what the naked eye would miss. At Big Bend National Park in southwest Texas, he shot as a focal point a giant dusty blue agave with every thorn visible and behind it a range of mountains.

When he calls Inspiration Point in the Channel Islands National Park in California "the most spectacular view on the Pacific coast," you're unlikely to disagree. The narrow craggy island extends like a curved arm into the turbulent blue sea, with a covering of bright yellow coreopsis in the foreground.

In Yosemite, the park that inspired him, Luong photographed the misty valley floor framed by gigantic sunlit mountains under a cover of pink cloud. It's called Tunnel View, yet it feels like the whole world beckoning.

"Treasured Lands" runs through Sept. 10 at The National Heritage Museum on Route 2A, 33 Marrett Road, Lexington. Open 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday and noon to 4:30 p.m. Sunday. Admission and parking are free. For information, call 781-861-6559 or go to nationalheritagemuseum.org.

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