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Stargazing at David Kinch's new restaurant The Bywater p46

QT Luong

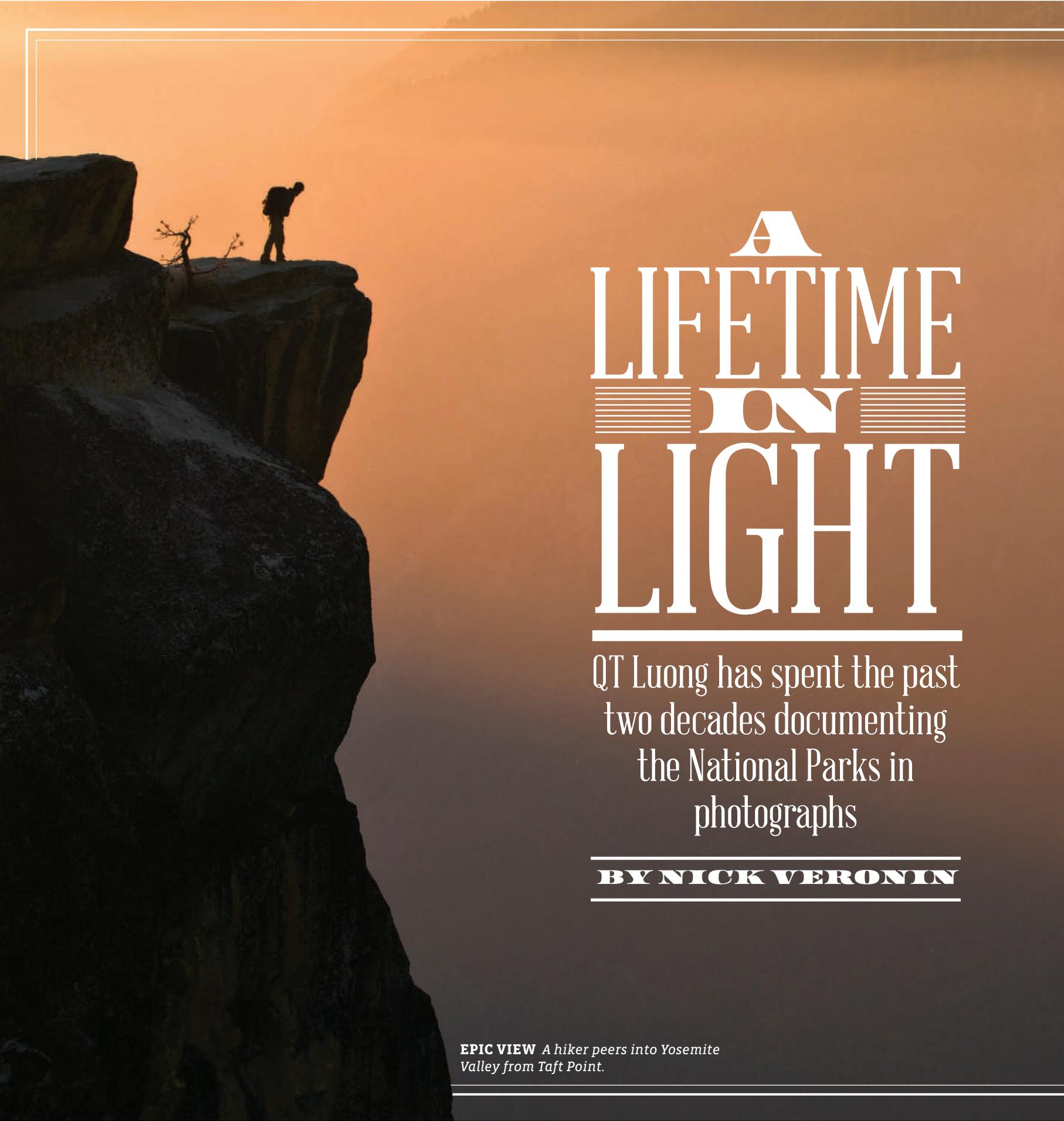


STAMP OF APPROVAL

A San Jose photographer's
stunning tribute to
America's national parks

P10

JUNE 1-7, 2016 | VOL. 32, NO.11 | SILICON VALLEY, CA | FREE



A LIFETIME ON LIGHT

QT Luong has spent the past two decades documenting the National Parks in photographs

BY NICK VERONIN

EPIC VIEW *A hiker peers into Yosemite Valley from Taft Point.*



FROM THE CRAGGY peak of Denali to the humid marshes of the Everglades, and from the lush greenery of Acadia to the parched alkali plains of Death Valley, the National Park System comprises 84 million acres of land and 4.5 million acres of lakes, ocean and reservoirs.

First established in 1916 and expanded over the last century, there are now 59 National Parks—and San Jose resident QT Luong has photographed every single one.

The National Parks Service will celebrate its centennial on Aug. 25. In commemoration of the milestone, the United States Postal Service is releasing a series of National Park stamps—one of which features a picture, taken by Luong, of the Little Missouri River bending through the badlands of Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota. The stamp will be unveiled in a ceremony in New York City on June 2.

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LARGE FORMAT Luong captured the bone-dry beauty of Joshua Tree National Park (above) using his large format field camera. The image used on the stamp (below) was taken with a digital camera.



‘Even the parks that are well known, there are still views to discover’

The image is masterfully composed, as Luong traces the line of the river as it snakes along in the shadow of ragged bluffs. The earthen brown and dark green of the rising hills is reflected in the waters below, and a repetitive zig-zagging pattern draws the eyes up from the stream to the top of the frame before leading the viewer back down again.

Luong says that he first took a wider angle shot of the area, before zooming in on the feature. “You see the river leading toward a hill and then you see a pattern of horizontal lines,” he explains. “That was really the centerpiece of what attracted me

to the viewing of that place.”

Over the course of his career as a photographer, Luong has trained his eye to catch these kinds of details. And as he has pushed himself further into more remote corners of the National Parks, he has been rewarded with unexpected and beautiful scenery.

As far as Luong knows, he is the only professional photographer to have taken photos at all 59 of the country’s National Parks. It’s a claim corroborated by the Ken Burns documentary, *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*, for which Luong was interviewed on camera.



HIGH DEFINITION Both of these images—of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park (above) and Denali National Park (below)—were taken by Luong using his large format camera. They have as much visual information as can be seen with the naked eye.



Luong says every National Park he's photographed features an amazing amount of variation—in the landscape, wildlife and overall feel of the terrain. "Even the parks that are well known, there are still views to discover," he says.

Just as it took the National Park Service a century to grow to the size it is today, it has taken Luong close to half of his life to visit and document the parks. His journey began back in February of 1993.

Born in 1964 to Vietnamese parents living in France, Luong grew up a self-described "city boy." A smart young man—he completed his initial

post-secondary and doctorate work in science at the University of Paris, where he earned a PhD—Luong was also adventurous. In his spare time, he enjoyed mountain climbing and skiing in the French Alps.

His work in the sciences brought him to UC Berkeley in 1993. He says he chose the school for one simple reason. He was a rock climber and Cal was close to Yosemite. It was on his first trip to the park that Luong encountered a problem to which any amateur photographer can relate.

He was attempting to capture the view from a breathtaking vista: Half

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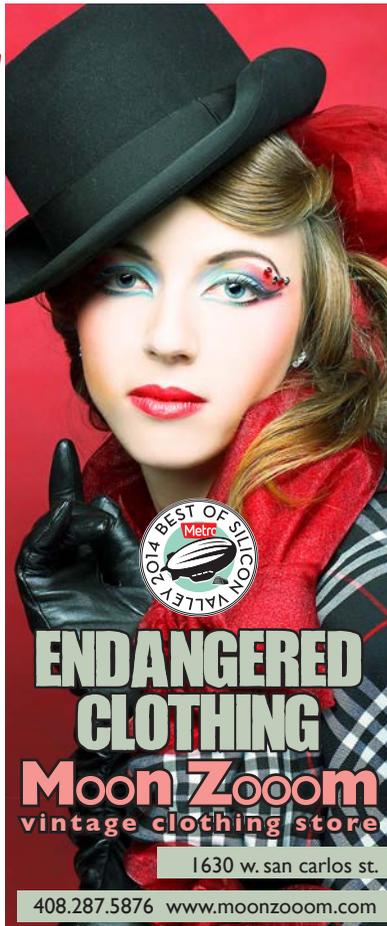
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ACROSS THE SKY The Milky Way fills the night sky at Arches National Park.

Dome standing sentinel over the green valley, a rainbow stretching across the sky. In that moment Luong understood—for the first time, and in a visceral way—the power and overwhelming beauty of the National Park system.

"It was love at first sight," Luong wrote of Yosemite in a recent blog post.

He pointed his camera at the landscape, depressed the shutter button and hoped for the best. When he had his photos developed, he was disappointed. On that crisp, winter day in 1993, Luong was less an artist and more of a rock climber and outdoorsman with a budding interest in photography. Today, he is a professional photographer who

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

QT Luong has photographed extensively in every single National Park.





HAVE FAITH Old Faithful erupts by the light of the moon.

only climbs occasionally with his children at a local climbing gym.

It's not enough to simply point and shoot, Luong says, recalling the moment. In the interest of "doing justice to the feeling of being there," he would return to the same spot over and over again for 20 years. Each time he returned, Luong was armed with better photography equipment—including his prized large format field camera—and an increasingly refined skillset, honed across two decades of shooting at the edge of active volcanoes and freezing dunes, on top of mountains and in the midst of vast prairies.

Finally, two decades after that fateful February day, Luong says he got a shot

he felt was worthy of publication.

Sitting at the dining room table in his home, tucked away in a hilly neighborhood in Silver Creek, he gestures to a large photographic print hanging on the wall behind him. "That's the picture," he says. On the table before him rests a dummy version of his forthcoming book, *Treasured Lands*, which collects all of Luong's photographs—several from every National Park in the country.

He picks up the tome, beaming. "It will be more comprehensive than any other book," he says of the 456-page work. "It's my contribution to the Centennial. I hope that it will inspire people to discover areas of the parks that are out of the way." 

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