

**Every Picture Has a Story**  
**Bisti Wilderness & Canyon de Chelly**  
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**Another Planet Right Here on Earth - Bisti Wilderness**



**Eroded Sandstone Formations**

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Canon 1Ds Mark II with 24-105mm lens at f/22*

As we hiked through this desolate area called the Bisti Badlands, the feeling of isolation was overwhelming; I sensed that almost nothing could survive here. A wandering lizard ran in front of us as we walked, then a stray raven flew over us croaking into the echo of emptiness looking for a morsel of food. In this inhospitable land where we walked, hardly a critter can subsist. Otherworldly is the best description I can provide for this unique habitat right here on our own planet earth. It's a remote area of eroded badlands, which creates a moon-like landscape. This is an area where any science fiction filmmaker would choose to make a movie without the cost of building an intricate set. We were hiking in the Bisti Wilderness, aka the Bisti Badlands. The word bisti is a Navajo word meaning badlands, and they probably named this area because it was an awful place for grazing livestock. It covers around 4000 acres in New Mexico and, as a protected area, is managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

My friend, Joe Zinn, and I decided to take this trip because I had seen some unique photos of the interesting shapes of eroded sandstone from this area. Joe had been here before and wanted to re-visit to find places to shoot other than where he had already photographed. We arrived in the afternoon and hiked about 2 miles to find the area Joe had visited; there we shot for about two hours. There are no maps, directions or points to guide you to these odd formations; you are on your own here. I told Joe about the photos I had seen from an area called the "Cracked Eggs" but we had no idea where they were located. We hiked out of our first photographic hideaway and found other interesting formations along the way. We noticed a few people about 200 yards away. For a split second my vision played tricks on me because in the mix with the weird moonscape, I thought they were wearing space suits.



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### **Cracked Eggs at Sunset**

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As we approached I noticed some odd formations on the ground, but I was focused on the photographer who was shooting them. I asked him if he knew where the cracked eggs were and he said casually, "You're standing in them." The photos I had seen previous to this visit were deceiving because I could not tell if these were large formations taken from a high cliff or if they had been taken on ground level. It turns out they were taken from ground level and we started shooting these bizarre egg-like creations as dark clouds and lightening storms were forming all around us. We had about 20 minutes before the sun would set. This was a bittersweet set of circumstances for a landscape photographer. Sweet, because we could capture some very interesting light at sunset and maybe some lightening photos. But bitter because we had to hike back 2 miles in the dark with no cover and the threat of rain and lightening in this desert could end up in disaster. I had my GPS with me and marked where our trucks were, but with Joe's sense of direction we didn't need one.

It began with a very light wind and rain as the sun was setting. The moisture in the air started to light up in reds and yellows over the mountains just 50 yards from us. It was as if we could touch the light. This was something I have never experienced before and I actually felt like I was on another planet. We knew this would change in seconds and all of us scrambled silently to capture this strange landscape and light. I was able to capture three or four photos before the light changed and then the wind and lightening picked up dramatically, in the calm before the storm, so to speak. At that moment, we still only felt a very light rain. As the sun set and the light became too dark to shoot, Joe and I looked at each other with anticipation to leave before the weather got worse.

The hike back was very bizarre as the wind picked up to about 35 to 40 mph and lightening struck all around us. Anticipating the worst, we scrambled back in the dark as fast as we could, falling into some unseen holes and jumping over crevasses created by previous rainstorms. Joe led the way and there was no conversation between us, just the concentration on our footsteps dodging the difficult terrain and focusing on the direction we had to go. I would check my GPS every once in a while to see if Joe was leading in the right direction and he was. My night vision is poor and, believe it or not, I was glad for the lightening strikes because it helped me spot my next steps. I had not brought my headlamp thinking we would be back before dark.

Luckily the storm never came close enough to harm us. It was as if we were in a protective zone all the way back as we raced safely to our trucks. When we opened the doors to put our gear away, I saw Joe with a flashlight. I yelled through the wind, "You didn't have that light with you all this time, did you!?" He said 'yes' but he didn't want to use it because it would hamper

his vision of the landmarks he used to get us back. Go figure! I guess some of the best GPSs are the two-legged kind.

## Canyon de Chelly

After leaving the Bisti Wilderness we headed for Canyon de Chelly. This beautiful canyon in the fall makes for some wonderful photography. We wanted to see if the leaves had changed early this year. When we arrived the leaves were just about 10 to 12 days from peak color. We did some shooting and saw the potential to return later in the month. About the third week in October is prime time for fall color photography in Canyon de Chelly. When I called the National Park Service a week later they said the color was just about to peak; we left for the canyon the next day.

Joe and I were obsessed with shooting an arch called The Window because the photos we had seen from there were extraordinary. In order to drive into the lower canyon you must hire a Navajo guide or take a guided tour in 4 wheel drive trucks from the town. The Navajo people still live, farm and raise cattle in the canyon and it is their land. We decided to use my truck and hire a private guide for two days from 5 AM until dark. We planned on leaving Chinle, the town closest to the canyon, at 5AM so we could get to the window before sunrise. I heard from others that it was a rather steep hike to get to the window but everyone has a different perception of what "difficult" is and you never really know until you get there and do it yourself. The guide we hired was 34 years old and has made this hike many times. He knew exactly where to go. It was about a 40-minute drive in the dark to get there. When we arrived we got out of the truck with a 36-degree chill in the air and were surrounded by the peaceful silence of the canyon. The stars were incredibly bright and they seemed so close we could touch them. Having dressed ourselves with fleece and our backpacks, the guide showed us the trail; I was amazed at how steep it looked. But it was not a long hike so we started on our way up. Here I am in the dark again, but this time I played smart and used my headlamp. Joe and the guide had a flashlight as well. I thought, "Eighteen pounds in my backpack and a tripod should really give my legs a workout . . ." Oh yeah. That it did.

We were at about 5700 feet in elevation and had to hike about 500 feet up. After every eight to ten steps it felt like my heart was going to plunge from my chest and we all had to rest a minute before we started again. The trail was plenty steep and made up of loose rocks, but as long as we took our time and watched our footing, the hike wasn't that bad. Then we hit two huge boulders right before we got to the window. The guide said there were footholds and I looked at them, but there was no way to grab onto anything else because the boulder was slick and it went straight up with no handholds. My will to get this photo was stronger than my common sense.



**The Window**

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Canon 1Ds Mark II with 16-35mm lens at f/22*

I got past the two monsters by crawling up like a lizard, except I was a human and didn't have that kind of dexterity. When we finally reached our destination we were standing in a cave where the Anasazi people used to live. The window was directly in front of us.

There was even an ancient corn bin made of rock sitting in the corner. This was prime real estate in this magical canyon and when viewing all of the surroundings we could understand why these ancients were so spiritual. They had no choice. The view was blissful.

At this point it was very apparent as to how high we had climbed. A chilling thought came to me: how the heck was I going to get down? But I had to focus on the moment, not the future. The light was almost right and Joe and I started shooting away after taking in this magnificent view. We had arrived in perfect time. The cottonwoods down below were in an array of beautiful yellow and green colors and the arch that created the window was massive. I felt so insignificant compared to the landscape around me; it reminded me of looking at the stars and planets at night and thinking how trivial we are as humans. It was humbling.

We photographed for about 2 hours taking every angle we could and enjoyed living with the history of the Anasazi's for a while before we had to leave. I wore down the butt of my pants sliding on the slick rock rather than taking the loose rock trail. My legs really got a workout but I kind of liked that because I've been a runner all my life.

Back at the truck we ran to catch backlit cottonwoods and more rock formations, ending two full days of outstanding photography with a glorious sunset at Spider Rock, an 800-foot sandstone spire that rises from the canyon floor.



Tom Vezo is an award winning professional wildlife and nature photographer who travels worldwide to capture his images in the natural environment. His work is widely published in the United States and Europe in many books, calendars, magazines and advertisements. With three books to his credit, his newest, *Wings of Spring - Courtship, Nesting and Fledging*, written by Chuck Hagner, editor of *Birder's World* magazine, was released in February, 2006. It won the 2006 National Outdoor Book Award in the category of photographic design and artistic merit. In July 2008 he will lead a Galapagos photo tour through *Distinctive Journeys*. For further information on Tom's books or his Galapagos tour, please visit his website at [www.tomvezo.com](http://www.tomvezo.com).

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