

Traveling the Back Roads

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I've often said that I could be very content just photographing here in the United States. While travel overseas and around the world has its own measure of intrigue, I'm quite content exploring right here at home. I know that I haven't even begun to scratch the surface of what our country has to offer in the way of diversity of landscape and wildlife.

I spent many years photographing right here in New England, choosing to be near my young children. As they grew physically, I grew photographically. I've been leading photo tours here in New England since the early 90s, which has allowed me to show folks my "backyard." Now we travel to many of the national parks and wildlife refuges around the country.

One of the many benefits of traveling like this is the opportunity to see some of the most beautiful landscapes to be photographed anywhere. Let's use the national parks for example. I think that when we travel to these parks, most of us have in mind at least photographing the parks main attractions, the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone in Yellowstone, Half Dome in Yosemite, Otter Cliffs in Acadia and so on. Well, I'm no different than you; I want to photograph those locations as well. However, when you finished with the clichés, you may well find some of your best photography by **Traveling the Back Roads** in and around these national parks.

I tend to be just a bit curious; I want to know where a particular road goes and what hides around the next corner. In a very competitive market, it also helps to have different shots of the parks, but I have to be honest here, I don't photograph for the money, I do it because I love to. Yes I need to make money just like everyone, but if money were the motivation, I would have given up a long time ago.

Well, what are some things that we can do to help us discover and explore some of these Back Roads? Whether or not you are familiar with the particular park you're planning to visit, my first recommendation to you is to do your homework.

1. **Location Homework.** Learn as much about the destination as you can. In today's world, the computer in many ways has made our life a little easier. I can go online and find virtually any location on this earth, and find out something worthwhile. Let's say we are planning a trip to Zion National Park this spring. I will do one of two things. First, check out the National Park service, www.zionpark.com. You should easily be able to find lodging information, park fees, maps and, most important, weather information. Understanding the weather and topography of the area around the park could make the difference between success and total disaster. I'll explain that in detail in a minute. Then I may go online or purchase a topographical map of the area from someone like DeLorme at www.delorme.com or www.topo.com for National Geographic topo information. Don't forget, there are also several government agencies on the web that give you free access to mapping locations.
2. **Why Weather?** If you remember anything from this article, remember weather and topography. First, there is the obvious preparation for the type of climate you may expect to experience. Temperature and weather may fluctuate, so of course, you want to dress properly. In a place like Zion, for example, in early spring and late fall, temperatures may start out in the twenties and end up in the sixties by mid afternoon. When exploring the back roads in and around Zion remember this: If it rains, all those nice little dirt roads you're exploring will turn to a substance resembling grease. There are even signs posted warning you about the danger of trying to traverse these back roads, even with four wheel drive. Keep in mind that you will be on small narrow and steep roads climbing from an elevation of 3,500 feet to close to 8,000 in some places, which isn't a problem, nor necessarily even dangerous with dry roads, but don't get caught out in the rain. In a dry climate, it's the combination of sudden rain and very hard packed dry and dusty dirt roads that spell disaster.
3. **Why Topography?** Thanks to topo maps you can get a feel for the type of terrain you can expect to find as well. If you don't live in a mountainous region and find yourself at 6,000 to 8,000 feet, you are in for a real shock. The air is thin, so breathing is much more difficult, and even a short hike from your vehicle carrying your camera gear can be very tiring. Also, you don't want to get lost! Today we are blessed with navigational tools such as the GPS (Global Positioning Systems) devices that know where we are even when we don't. Keep track of where you are by using the GPS or your topo map, and don't overlook the value of a compass, even the one in your SUV, did I say SUV? Yes, I would also recommend renting a four wheel drive of some sort just for the added ground clearance and traction, if for nothing else.
4. **Tips from the Locals.** Perhaps my favorite method before exploring and traveling the back roads is to talk to the people who live there. For example, the person who runs the lodge where I stay outside the park, enjoys both photography and mountain biking. Over the past few years he



has been a photographic gold mine, showing me how to access BLM land where he mountain bikes, to back roads that border the national park. He was also quick to warn me that it had rained the day before I arrived, so I should stay away from the mesas for a few days until things dry out. One day we were photographing on a dirt road up in the lower Kolob Plateau area when an old pickup truck pulled up along side of us with two men inside, both looking very much like a couple of old prospectors straight out of an episode of Gunsmoke. They asked us if we'd seen the Golden Eagle perched in a tree about a mile back up the road. I was too embarrassed to say that 'Old Eagle Eyes' had just come from there. We hopped in the SUV, headed back up the road and sure enough there it was. We got a few 'record' shots before it flew off.



5. **Photographic Homework.** If you have taken the time to prepare for a trip in and around the park, make sure that you have also done your photographic homework as well. After you arrive, I recommend looking at photographic books, postcards and calendars on the area. If you see something you like, ask around, someone will usually know where the shot was taken. This is about as close as you'll come to pre-visualizing the potential for a great photograph before you actually get to do it in person. Notice that I didn't say copy the image. Every photographer should have his or her own visual approach to any given composition. Also, before your travel, the book [National Park Photography](#) by Tim Fitzharris put out by AAA, serves to excite and stimulate the 'mind's eye' as to the potential for great photography in the national parks, and provides many tips on great shooting locations as well.



By all means take the time to photograph the parks, after all they weren't made national parks because there were ugly! After you've done that, spend some time **Traveling the Back Roads** exploring the beauty beyond the park boundaries. I know that for me it has given me a very special appreciation for this beautiful country we live in.

About the photos - The images to the right are thumbnail links to larger images with descriptions, which are presented in a slide show format. All images were taken outside the park boundary. Equipment used: Nikon D100 digital camera, Nikkor 18-35, Tokina 24-200, and Nikkor 80-400VR, all on a tripod. Moose's 81A warming polarizer and LEE grad ND filters when needed.

About the Author

Gary W. Stanley is a nationally known professional nature and landscape photographer based in New England. Gary leads popular photo tours and seminars throughout North America. He is a contributing editor for [Nature Photographers Online Magazine](#), and a popular speaker at the annual New England Camera Club Council conference held each year at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Gary is a skilled photographer with unique artistic vision, and his ability to teach his skills is equally impressive.



Gary has numerous photo and writing credits including national magazine articles and covers. Gary recently concluded a photo assignment shooting an icing research project on Mt. Washington for NASA. Much of Gary's landscape and nature photography can be seen in New England calendars and post cards. Gary's work has been featured in *Outdoor Photographer*, *Popular Photography*, and *American Photography* magazines.

Gary is also part of the well-known Fuji Professional Talent team of speakers who lecture on behalf of Fuji Professional films at various seminars around the country.

Visit Gary's web site at www.light-chasers.com.

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