

Sunset in the Chisos Mountains

A Behind-the-Scenes Story

TJ Avery 27-March-2008

1. Preface

My wife and I recently discussed future photography book projects that I might create, and she asked what sort of text, if any, I would use to accompany the images. She went on to say that she'd be interested in more of a behind-the-scenes take on the photos than anything else.

I liked her idea very much, much more than accompanying photos with bland text stating technical specs about the shot (camera X, lens Y, blah, blah).

Since the development of a serious photography book project for me is a ways off, I thought I'd create a series of articles detailing the situation and circumstances behind some of my favorite photos.

So, here it goes. My goal is to share my experience with details that are (hopefully) helpful to you. I will also include a lessons-learned section where I describe the most important part of my photographic process (specific to the image in question) which is to learn from my experience in the field and from the photos I took.

2. The Photo

First, let's get the obvious technical and dry stuff out of the way ☺



Southwest Rim Looking Towards Blue Creek Canyon at Sunset
Chisos Mountains, Big Bend National Park, Sept. 2007

This photo is a combination of multiple exposures shot with a Canon 5D and 17-40mm f/4L lens (no filter). It was shot at 25mm, f/11, ISO 100, and four exposures ranging from 1.3 to 1/125 seconds. Mirror lock-up was engaged and a 2-second self-timer was used. I used a very small Giottos GB-1140 tripod with a Bogen/Manfrotto 488RC2 ballhead.

The tripod is very light in terms of weight and capacity. It was the lightest tripod I owned at the time, so I opted to take it to save weight on this 2-night backpacking trip. Set low, so that it's reasonably stiff, I made due by using a right-angle viewfinder (i.e. I didn't have to lie on the ground to see through the camera's viewfinder).

3. The Event

In September of 2007, I hiked up into the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend National Park with my sister for two nights of backcountry camping. It was the first time either of us had hiked deep into those mountains.

On the first evening, about an hour before sunset, we reached our campsite in the rain. The low clouds had been darkening and closing in all afternoon, and the weather outlook was not good. We set up camp in a light rain, got soaked, and started to feel that our hiking trip was going to be a miserable experience.

We had been hiking for eight hours with heavy packs. Our muscles ached and throbbed with pain, we were physically exhausted, and now our clothes and shoes were wet. Taking photos was the last thing on my mind.



Dark, dreary, evening. I took this just to document the weather, thinking it'd be my last photo of the day.

About 15 or 20 minutes before sunset, the sun reached a small clearing in the sky just above the western horizon (you can kind of see that clearing in the photo above – upper right). In an instant, the light went from cold, dark gray to brilliant gold. Everything lit up. The fog and clouds surrounding us glowed. Droplets of water clinging to the trees sparkled. We were enveloped by a warm light and a sense of something greater.

My whole mood and mindset changed instantly. I suddenly forgot about the rain, the cold, my tired body, camping and hiking in that wet mess, and just about everything else except for the incredible natural beauty in front of my eyes.

My problem was that I had no decent place close by to observe and shoot this magnificent event. I had only seen the immediate area around our campsite and there were no great views off the rim. It was closed in by thick trees and bushes.

I quickly made the decision to take the risk of finding a completely new and unseen spot in time to shoot the sunset. I pulled my camera from the safety of plastic bags inside my pack, grabbed the tripod, and set off running.

I didn't know where or how far I needed to go. I only knew that I would know *the spot* when I saw it, the light was running out fast, and I had to hurry. I paralleled the rim for a few hundred yards desperately searching for a decent clearing in the thick trees and bushes. I managed to get my socks and shoes wet because of the thick, rain-soaked grass. I also received a healthy dose of cactus spines in my shins too. The rain let up a little, but the air was still wet.

After a few hundred yards of difficult running, I finally gained a clear area with a nice, open rock ledge. I ran up to the first Agave plant I saw, plunked the tripod down, mounted the camera, and banged off a few shots.

As I was clawing and scrambling my way out to that rock ledge, the light faded from brilliant gold to hues of orange and red. Despite the physical difficulties, I floated around not feeling much of the immediate physical world.

I was completely stunned and awestruck by the scene in front of me. An almost involuntary scream of joy escaped my lungs and tears filled my eyes. As my voice echoed down through the canyon, I began to think how lucky I was to be there experiencing it. I was thankful to be alive and thankful that my sister was there to experience it too. She made it to the ledge too, and we both gaped at the sight.

I went on to shoot several variations of the same scene, changing my tripod and camera position slightly between shots, but the first photo of this article (the photo that I love the most) is the very first scene I shot on that rock ledge.

4. Post Analysis

For the longest time after, I kept thinking of this photo as just a lucky shot. I believed that I probably couldn't have done better even if I had been given the time to scout and prepare for the photo and I wasn't physically and mentally exhausted from the hike (which always puts a drain on my creative, photographic efforts).

I just scrambled up there, plunked my gear down, and banged off some shots. It took me all of a few seconds to find that composition (after a 5 - 10 minute dash from our campsite to locate a bare, rock ledge). Wow, what luck!

In a matter of seconds, I sized up the scene and created a composition that was well balanced, had nice repetitions (repeating inverted U-shapes and repeating spikey-shapes), balanced the sun with the bright cloud shrouding the left mountain peak, and framed the canyon so that the viewer's eye dives right into the photo and stays there.

Was it luck, or was it something else?

The more I thought about those events that led up to taking the photo, the more I realized something. The phrase, "chance favors the prepared", popped into my mind repeatedly.

The truth is that the creation of that photo started months before it happened. The trip was planned long in advance, and I did a lot of research and study on the area. I looked at a lot of photos and put a lot of thought into those mountains and what they mean.

I **pre-visualized** many scenes. Although I didn't sketch any of them out, they were burned into my mind. I contemplated heavily on the subject of the great Chisos Mountains.

So, when the time came to perform and actually take a meaningful photo, all of that mental work kicked in. Despite seeing that rock ledge and the area around it for the first time in my life, my mind was already familiar with it, in general, from the countless rock ledges and grand Big Bend South Rim overlooks that I'd seen in photos and pondered in my mind.

I did not know that particular rock ledge existed when standing in my soggy campsite and being bathed in amazing golden sunlight, but I took the risk of finding it (before the magnificent light ended) because I knew it was highly likely that it did exist. From the countless photos I'd studied of the South Rim and my observations during the hike in, taking that risk was quite acceptable.

It was luck that the sunset was as grand as it was, that's for sure. But I was there for it, camera in hand, and prepared. It also helped that I experienced that sunset from, in general, a very dramatic and scenic location.

5. Lessons Learned

- Luck has little to do with it. If you think some photos are pure luck, and that the photographer was damn lucky to have come away with such a spectacular shot, you might be wrong. Sure, there are happy accidents, but chances are that magnificent photographs are often the result of just a little bit of luck and a whole lot of:
 - Pre-shoot planning
 - Photo pre-visualization and contemplation of what the landscape means

- Being out at the right time of day
 - Being in a nice location when such grand events occur
 - Having gear in hand ready to go
 - Shooting the same scene or area repeatedly over time (something that I didn't have going for me, as this was my first trip deep and high into the Chisos)
- Judging the sky better & Scouting potential photo locations. When I took the first photo that evening (the *dark, dreary, evening* snapshot), I noticed the clear bands of sky on the western horizon. I even commented to my sister that if the sun dipped into those clear bands, we'd be in for one hell of a light show. The potential was there, but I didn't prepare for taking photos.

I've seen many, many potentially grand sunrises and sunsets that turned out total duds - the clouds looked right but stayed gray. Those experiences, combined with my fatigued and soggy condition, kept me from taking the chance that it might be a grand sunset and setting off ahead of time to scout a good location to photograph. I was only focused on eating, crawling into my tent, and putting my tired body to rest.

In retrospect, given that we were surrounded by low clouds and fog (yet still in a good enough clearing in the clouds to see the western horizon) and everything was wet, I should have taken the chance that the sunlight would break through and we'd experience some amazing light in some dramatic weather conditions and scenery. I should have picked up the camera and set off scouting right then.

The irony is that I did well and managed to come away with the best photo I've ever taken (at least in my judgment), and if I had scouted around ahead of time, I might not have been on that rock ledge at that right time. Who knows? But in general, I still believe that it's much better to scout around and be familiar with your surroundings when the magic happens. And it can never hurt taking a risk that the sunset (or sunrise) will be a grand light show no matter how the clouds look.

- Prepare for your trip, research your destination, and pre-visualize several photos. This works very well, I think! Sure, it takes a lot of work, but it's worth it if you're serious about your photography.
- No matter what the immediate future looks like, always be prepared for something amazing. You never know what's going to happen. Dark, cloudy, stormy skies can yield to dramatic light in a matter of minutes. Stay out late with your camera and give it a chance.