

Sunrise
at
White Sands National Monument,
New Mexico

by

Alain Briot

Sunrise at White Sands National Monument

White Sands National Monument, December 2nd 2001,

6 am

It is pitch black outside and we are waiting in our truck for the ranger to open the gate to White Sands National Monument so we can hurry in and hopefully find a great location for photographing the white dunes at sunrise. The day before we paid \$50 for the privilege of being here at this time since normally gates are closed from 8 pm to 7 am.

6:01 am

It is still pitch black but we are now driving towards an unknown location in the dunes. The ranger, right on time, opened the gate and let us in. Several places look promising but we move on, not sure how far to go and at the same time aware time is precious. The sun will rise at 7:00 no matter whether we are ready or not.

6:20 am

We are now hiking in the dunes, headlamps on, hoping that our steps will take us to the ideal location. We stopped impulsively along the road partly because it looked promising and partly because we had to stop somewhere. The good news is that this area looks good. There is vegetation -grasses and yuccas mostly- which is one of the elements I am looking for. The other elements I don't have to worry too much about: I want sand, and there's no shortage of it. I want mountains in the background and they won't go anywhere. I want warm sunrise light and the sky is filled with stars indicating that no clouds will obstruct the sun when it rises.

6:30 am

We have split our group -consisting of myself, Michael Reichman, Chris Sanderson and Steve Kossack- and are now hiking in different directions. We took this decision to avoid walking into each other's potential photographs, that is disturbing the sand with footprints only to realize later that this specific patch of sand would have made a great foreground.

6:35 am

After walking past several potential locations I have reached the top of a dune on which grows a single young Yucca. The shape of this Yucca intrigues me. The sand patterns are very nice and behind it the dunes and the mountains are clearly visible. I could go on and gamble on finding something better but I don't want to take a chance. I put down my Lowe Pro backpack, set up my Linhof Master Technica 4x5 and get to work.

6:45 am

I have just exposed my first sheet of Provia 4x5. The sun is not up yet but the glow of dawn is upon the dunes suffusing the air with soft purple light.



6:50 am

The light intensity continues to increase as the sun gets closer and closer to breaking over the horizon. The sand is now pink while the Western sky exhibits a gradual transition from pink to blue. In front of me I can see mauve and purples in areas facing away from where the sun will rise.

7:01 am

The sun just appeared. I am on a West-facing dune which will stay in the shade a few minutes longer. The light intensity increases as I am working and I have to make light readings constantly so as to not overexpose my film.

7:05 am

The sun rising in the Eastern sky has reached the small Yucca in front of me. Behind it the dunes are still in the shade. I wait patiently until the Yucca is entirely lit and get back to work capturing on film this new natural event. The sky is now a soft pink and the distant dunes are purple. The Yucca is bathed in warm direct light while the dune around it, lit only by diffused light, is soft blue.



7:10 am

The sun just crested over the dunes sending rays of light upon the sand ripples behind me and giving them a three dimensional quality. I consider moving my camera to take advantage of the new opportunities offered by this change in lighting but realize that doing so would prevent me from capturing what is happening right now. I leave my set up as it is -75mm Super Angulon with my tripod low to the ground- and continue to expose holder after holder.

7:15 am

The sun, following its upward motion, is now illuminating the sand ripples right in front of the small Yucca metaphorically creating a path of light leading the eye toward the Yucca, the dunes behind it, and the Mountains in the background. The dunes are now dark blue while the Yucca continues to glow in their midst.



7:20 am

The sand ripples, now almost completely illuminated by the sun, are creating a dazzling effect. The background dunes are almost pure white already while the sky is now light blue. I continue to expose as direct sunlight fills more and more of the scene in front of me.



7:25 am

It now feels like noon here, there being so much more light than when I arrived, and yet I have been here for less than an hour. The sun is now illuminating the dunes almost entirely and everywhere I look I can see sand ripples stretching towards the horizon. I move my camera slightly to the right so as to center the Yucca in the middle of the frame and emphasize the waves of sand.



7:30 am

After packing my gear I start hiking back towards the road, the car, and breakfast. I have exposed 40 double film holders, all the 4x5 films I brought with me, and I never changed my composition except for the last image! As I walk back I realize that my photographs can be used to show how a scene is transformed by light alone. It has been a beautiful morning.

Alain Briot
Chinle, Arizona
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