

Book Review



Into The Great White Sands

Fancy poring over dramatic, rare sandy landscapes? This book about White Sands in New Mexico should be next on your to-buy list. **David Hay** has the review

This new book about the White Sands National Monument comprises a superb collection of photographs by Craig Varjabedian along with three essays about the area by Jeanetta Calhoun Mish, Dennis Ditmanson and Jim Eckles.

Content

There is a magical element to be found in photographs of the white sands. One moment, the gypsum dunes look white-hot, as you would expect in a desert. The area seems parched, with an occasional yucca clinging onto life in the dry wilderness. Turn the page and the next image looks like frozen snowdrifts, smoking away in the breeze. This dichotomy extends to the sense of scale. An aerial image of ATV tracks criss-crossing the dunes turns out to be a

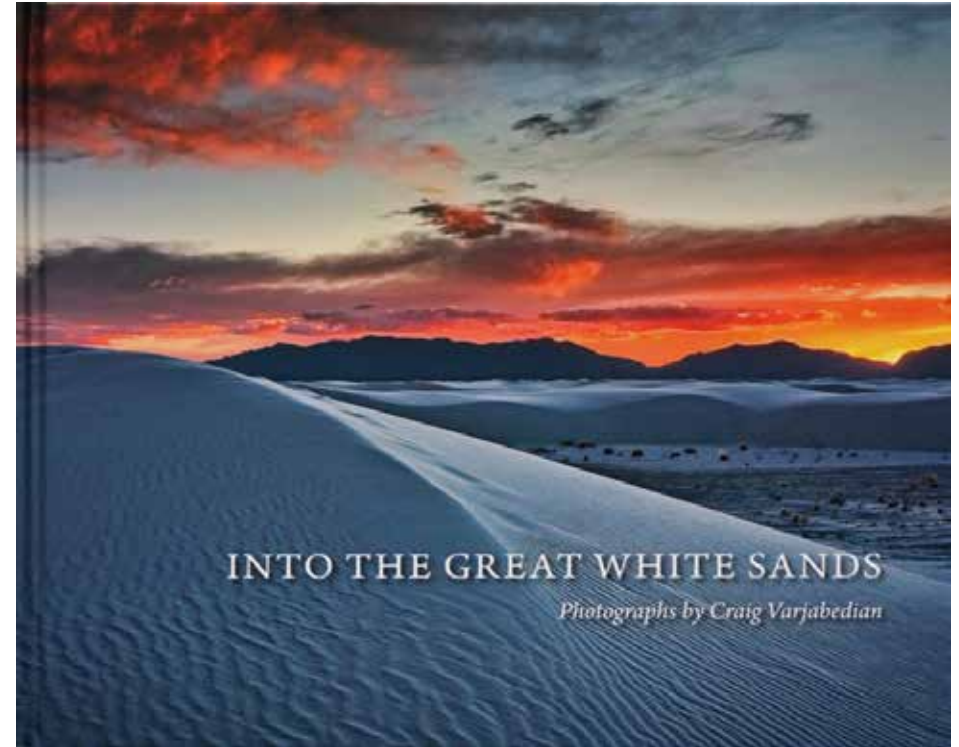
macro picture of beetle footprints in the sand.

As well as pure landscape photographs, the book contains images of human activity and there is a small section of photographs of the adjacent White Sands Missile Range. One of the most striking images in this section features a Space Shuttle Runway, now abandoned and being steadily erased by the desert. Although man-made activity can despoil a beautiful area, nature will triumph in the long term by returning the landscape to the original form.

On page 94 there is a photograph of the Von Braun V-2 Gantry Crane. Anyone with an interest in composition should study this image closely. The individual elements of this picture have been positioned with absolute precision to form a very striking image.

For the photographer, putting together this collection of images was clearly a labour of love. The peace and tranquility of this area allowed him to recharge his batteries over repeated visits.

“Back about thirty years ago I came to this place for the first time in search of beautiful moments – confluences of light,



shadow, atmosphere and feeling that I might capture with my camera. My wife says that I keep returning to white sands to find my smile. I think she is right”, says the photographer.

The striking thing about photographing White Sands is that, just like snow, the sand takes on the colour of the sky above. From dawn to dusk, it cycles through a range of colours reflecting the sky like a mirror.

“From the beautiful predawn light to the almost psychedelic sunsets – throughout the day in fact – the light at White Sands seldom disappoints and, of course, no two days are ever the same. Just as a day could begin with a beautiful sunrise, it might end >>

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119 pages
Published by University of New Mexico Press
£28.44 (online)
310 x 250mm
Hardback

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» with a hellacious storm – both beautiful in their own way.”

The photographer obviously felt the need to capture the ‘essence’ of the place and not just produce record shots.

“For me, a good photograph must be an open-ended conversation; it must contain an invitation to the viewer to wander and to linger and to stay awhile. If it’s merely a record of having been somewhere, no matter how well composed or beautiful the image, I am left empty.”

Layout

The photographs are all presented in landscape format and they are all in colour, except for a single black and white image. The images are given room to breathe by the broad white page borders. Many of the photographs that are printed on opposing pages have a clear stylistic link to one-another. Some of the more individual images are given the luxury of an empty page opposite them.

The book is well printed and does the

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images justice, and it is solidly bound in a sturdy hardback cover.

Technique

Many of the images in the book are HDR images from bracketed sets processed with Aurora HDR software. Although this may ring alarm bells with some of our more conservative readers, who have experienced many hyper-real, over-saturated images in the past, there is no cause for alarm. The images are, without exception, beautifully presented with subtle, accurate colours. The technique of exposure blending has allowed both the detail in the foreground and the



sky to be perfectly recorded in a natural way.

As the photographer says... “You have to know the technical side of photography as well as you know how to brush your teeth and then somehow be able to push that all aside and become a child again, filled with wonder and amazement!”

The photographer used a Nikon D810 with Nikon lenses from 24 to 200mm, along with a Sigma 150-600mm lens to take the photographs in this book.

Conclusion

This is an excellent collection of top quality images of a beautiful, charismatic location taken by a photographer that clearly loves the place. The additional essays give the reader a more complete understanding of the history of the White Sands National Monument. If you have been there and want a pictorial memento, or are thinking of visiting this location to take some great landscape photographs, this book is a must-buy. ↩



CRAIG VARJABEDIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

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