



Take these tips back to the places you think you've worn out and you'll find that there are infinite possibilities for discovery and images

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES KAY

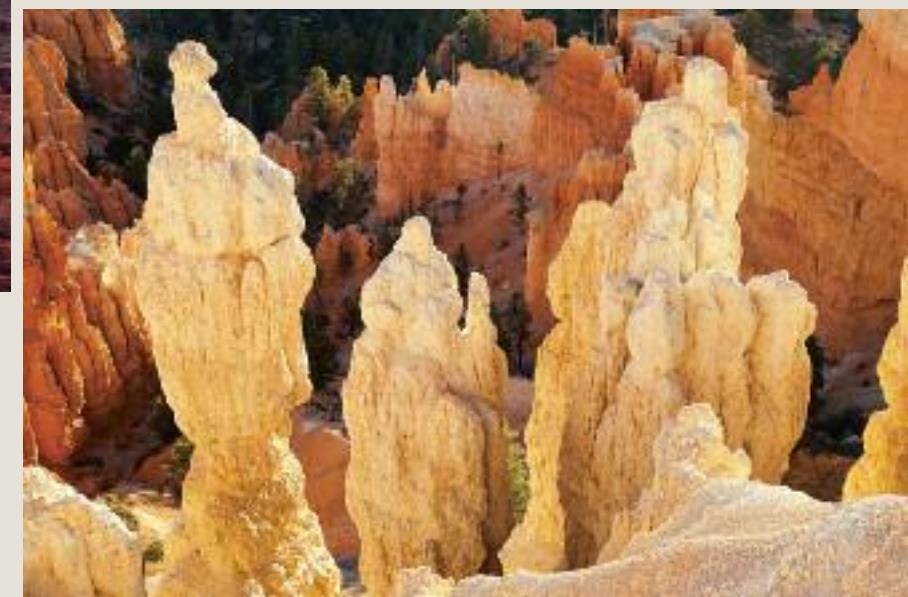
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WITHOUT REPRISÉ

RBeginning in the early 1990s, I set out to explore and photograph every nook and cranny of the canyon country across southern Utah, from the volcanic highlands of the Aquarius Plateau to the remote backcountry of the Dirty Devil Canyons. Mesmerized by this remarkable landscape, I devised a plan to get to know it as well as, if not better than, anyone ever had. My grand strategy involved using kayaks to explore the navigable rivers, ropes and rappelling gear to investigate inaccessible slot canyons, backpacks to reach far-flung vantage points and airplanes for aerial views. I bounced along enough miles of rocky, washboard-covered roads to loosen every filling in my mouth and every bolt in my truck several times over. I stuck my head out the window of those small planes so often that I should, by all accounts, have a permanent Don King hairdo. After countless trips over a 10-year period, I began to feel that I had explored and photographed this region so extensively that there wasn't much left for me to accomplish.

I discovered early on in my career that my most satisfying photographic experiences always occurred when exploring new terrain as opposed to revisiting old, familiar places in an attempt to improve upon previous versions of photographs I had captured there. So, after my intense decade devoted to southern Utah, I began to seek out locations further afield and turned my attention to the lofty summits of the northern Rocky Mountains. With the same focused determination, I scoured maps and planned photo expeditions for the next 10 years to Glacier, Banff, Jasper, Yoho, Kootenay, Assiniboine and countless other obscure national parks and wild areas throughout that vast region.

During this period, I still traveled south occasionally to photograph southern Utah landscapes, but found that I had lost much of that sense of excitement and discovery that drew me to the region in the first place. I found myself struggling to come up with dramatic new images.





OPENING SPREAD, TOP AND BOTTOM: View south over Indian Creek Canyon, Utah, from Needles Overlook on Hatch Point showing the North and South Sixshooter Peaks; Hoodoos and pinnacles below Inspiration Point, Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah. **ABOVE:** The Castle rises above autumn cottonwood trees along Sulphur Creek, Capitol Reef National Park, Utah. **RIGHT:** Grosvenor Arch, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah

MORE On The Web

Go to the Your Favorite Places gallery at www.outdoorphotographer.com to see how other OP readers have photographed some of your familiar locales. You just might get a few new ideas.

It was as if I had worn the place out. I had a brief burst of creative excitement from 2003-2007 when the water level of Lake Powell dropped precipitously because of a drought, revealing scores of new canyons to explore, but once the waters began to rise again, I turned my attention back to locations far from the mesas, rivers and serpentine canyons of Utah.

My relationship with the canyon country changed during the last several years, however, when I began to create itineraries for a series of new field workshops in the region. For each workshop, I had to create a plan for five consecutive days of photography that would make the most of my students' time in the field. From my years exploring the region, I knew of countless locations where the light was great, say, at 7 p.m. on October 25, or 9 a.m. on March 2, or 5:30 p.m. in December, but I had to come up with a variety of locations within one specific area that all flowed together into a workable sequence and had ideal lighting conditions at each location at the specific time of day we were there. As I searched for places that fit this format, I had to cast the net far and wide; I couldn't simply rely on the vantage points I already knew. It was this process of looking deeper into the landscape that provided the motivation I needed to revisit this familiar ground and see it in a completely new light.

So, I cleared the decks and started looking at these places as if for the first time. I soon discovered that, while I thought I knew them well, I had barely scratched the surface. I began seeing things I never noticed before. One particular canyon in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument comes to mind. I had photographed it once in the mid-1990s





LEFT: The Henry Mountains and South Caineville Mesa above the hills of the Blue Gate Shale Formation west of Hanksville, Utah.

and found it less than remarkable, but I captured a couple of reasonable images and I hadn't returned until 2012. As I wandered within its water-sculpted walls for the second time, I was amazed. I spent the entire day framing one compelling composition after another. It was as if I had been blind during that first visit. How could I have missed these things? That's when I realized not only just how much my eye had improved during those intervening years, but how there are literally infinite photo possibilities everywhere; it was an absurd notion to think I could "wear out" a place.

To varying degrees, we all tend to be creatures of habit. In all aspects of life, we'll discover situations that work well and repeat them simply because they have provided benefit in the past. It's really about risk avoidance; if we've found a dramatic vantage point that provided great photographic results previously, we're afraid we might return empty-handed if we forego that location to explore the next ridge or canyon nearby, especially if our time is limited. The thing we often forget is that there's also a very good chance we'll find something even better. That's how all those iconic locations were discovered in the first place. It's all about how to avoid falling into the rut and how to dig ourselves out

if we do. Here are my favorite tips to help you shake those cobwebs loose:

1 Return at a different time of year to a familiar location to take advantage of different lighting angles. This is especially true in narrow canyons, where a slight change in sun angle can create a completely new composition.

2 Revisit a familiar place with a new camera format in mind. If you've only captured it in color before, look for compositions that work in black-and-white, or look for wide views and stitch multiple images together to create panoramas. You'll see the land in a new way when thinking in a new format.

3 Slow down and open your eyes. I discovered a great shot recently about 75 feet away from a road I've driven down scores of times. It was shockingly obvious, but I was either not paying attention or too locked into a schedule to investigate.

4 Create a project to photograph a familiar national park from new vantage points only. This project could be an e-book, a new gallery on your website or a collection of prints for your wall. Give yourself a deadline and create a schedule over several weeks or months.

5 Avoid the trap of returning to familiar vantage points over and over again in the hope that previous images

can be improved. Dig out those old maps and scour them for new vantage points just over the ridge.

6 Revisit a favorite place you haven't photographed in 10 or more years. You'll discover just how much you've learned during the intervening time as you see things you never saw before.

7 If you've only visited an area in blue-sky weather, wait for stormy conditions to sweep in. Nothing alters a familiar scene more than different sky conditions.

The bottom line is, if we've become very familiar with a place, it's probably because we're extremely fond of it. By learning to view it from a new perspective, our relationship with it, and our photographs of it, will only be enhanced. **OP**



You can see more of James Kay's photographs and sign up for his workshops at www.jameskay.com.