



Spring Canyon, Waterpocket Fold, Capitol Reef National Park. With a virtually unlimited number of deep canyons to choose from along the 100-mile length of the Waterpocket Fold and few crowds to jostle with, Capitol Reef is an easy place to find solitude and discover new compositions far from the cliché shots in most of Utah's other national parks.

► Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM, Gitzo Mountaineer tripod, Acrotech Ultimate ballhead.



# PHOTOGRAPHY

## CLOSE TO HOME

While we wait for the pandemic to subside and travel to resume, take the opportunity to revisit and find new perspectives on favorite nearby locations

Text & Photography By James Kay

If someone had told you 18 months ago that you soon wouldn't be able to travel to any of your favorite overseas photo locations and all the workshops you were signed up for would soon be canceled, you probably would have scratched your head trying to figure out what kind of calamity could possibly shut down all international airline travel. Perhaps worldwide volcanic eruptions filling the skies with ash or the laws of physics and aerodynamics suddenly being revoked? If you spent enough time mulling it over, however, the word "pandemic" might have crept into your mind. We've all seen those horror films about a deadly virus sweeping the globe and laying waste to its human inhabitants, but wasn't that something that only happened in the movies?

As events began to unfold, we all discovered that we were now cast members in our very own horror show about the most challenging worldwide pandemic since the Spanish Flu of 1918. We stared in disbelief as toilet paper flew off the racks and bottles of hand sanitizer—if you could find one—sold for \$50 each as long lines of people in surgical masks queued up outside grocery stores ready to do battle to claim the last bottle. We learned new terms such as "essential workers," and I, as a photography

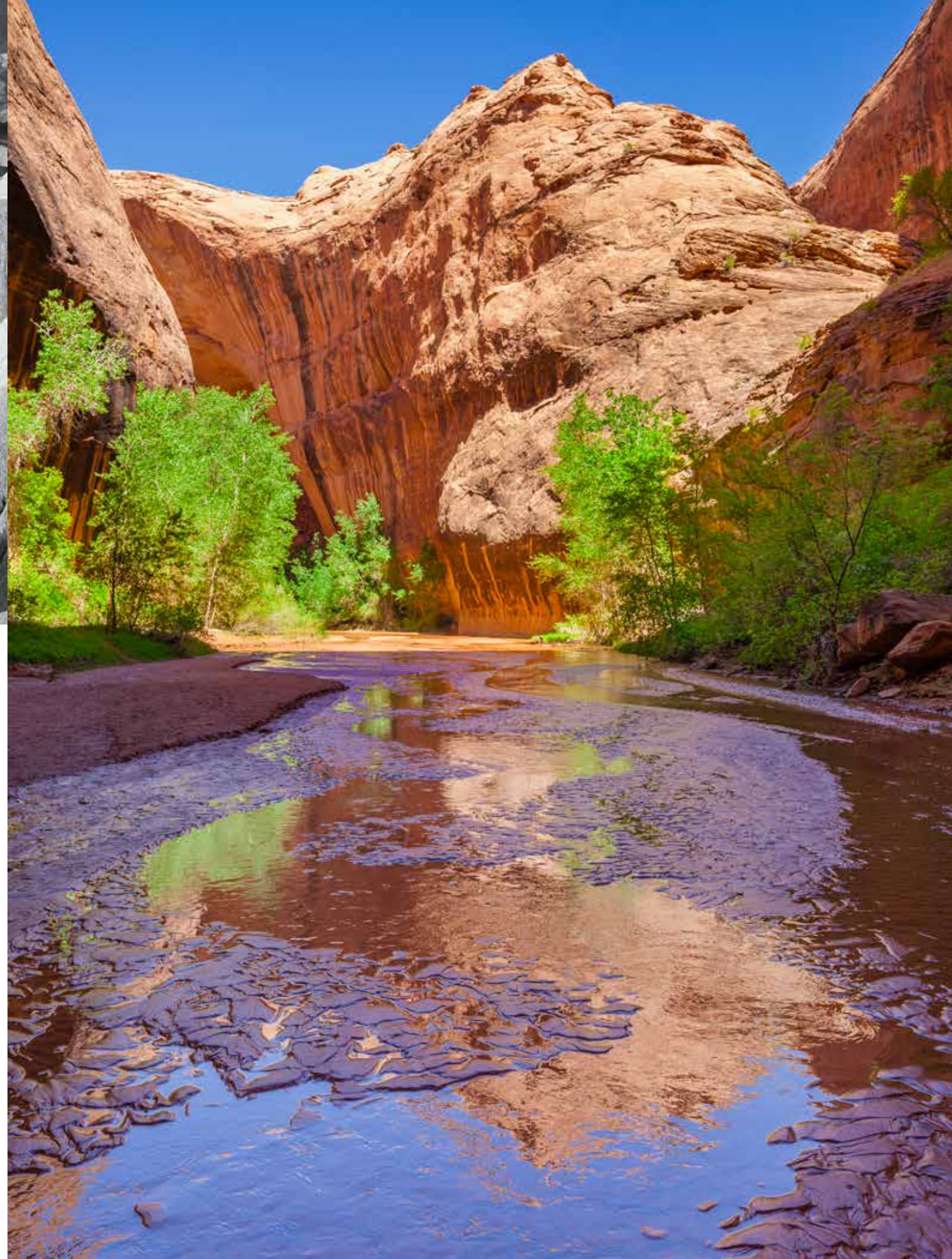
workshop leader, discovered that I wasn't among their ranks.

My wife, Susie, and I were lucky enough to watch the pandemic unfold in slow motion from halfway around the world in the safe harbor of New Zealand. We flew to Christchurch to conduct our summer workshop on January 18, 2020, within hours of the first verified case being reported here in the U.S. On February 3, New Zealand banned all flights from China, and the number of visitors plummeted. For the next two months, with virtually zero local cases, everyone was going about their business, as usual, as we watched the rest of the world melt down around us. As New Zealand began to see cases pop up as the pandemic intensified, we caught one of the last flights out of the country on March 26, the day it went into full nationwide lockdown. At the Auckland airport, our voices echoed along empty corridors, and we were the only two people in sight at the United security check in LAX.

We arrived home to empty streets and stripped store shelves and began canceling our workshops for the remainder of the year. Once the dust settled and we began to adjust to our new normal, which included lots of free time on our hands, I started thinking about how we

could get back out into the world safely. In our rural location, it made no sense to hide at home, pacing the floor, waiting for herd immunity to kick in. The world was still out there, and all we needed to do was devise a way to experience it without exposing ourselves to the virus or transmitting it to others. The goal was simple: avoid airplanes, hotels, restaurants and crowds in general and travel by road in a totally self-contained manner.

We soon discovered that the location where we built our home was an ideal place to ride out a pandemic. We were surrounded by mountains and could start hiking from our front door without another person in sight. In addition to the beautiful mountains around us, we originally chose to live in northern Utah precisely for the easy access it provided to most of the American West's choice photography locations. If I began driving in the morning, I could set up my tripod at sunset in Glacier National Park, Grand Teton, Yellowstone, the Colorado Rockies, the Grand Canyon or any of Utah's five national parks. This makes my life as a photographer rather convenient, but even if you don't live in a location that presents so many varied choices, everyone lives within a short walk or a day's drive of photo-worthy destinations.



## Photography Near Home

With our dance cards now completely open, I began to sketch out an itinerary for both day trips and extended photo excursions, all within a four- to six-hour drive to places I knew wouldn't be over-run with people. Once supplied with food and other provisions, I'd be more at risk of catching the virus simply by staying home and going to the grocery store.

I've been fully occupied for the last eight years with our workshop travel schedule, so I haven't had many opportunities to explore and photograph new locations in the West. The pandemic was providing me a chance to both explore these new areas and revisit familiar places, many of which I hadn't photographed in over a decade.

With virus cases ramping up in summer, we initially stuck close to home in Utah's Wasatch and Uinta Mountains, where we could spend the day in the backcountry with few people in sight. We climbed a number of peaks, including Twin Peaks and Mount Timpanogos, with

**Above:** The soft, eroded shales of the Blue Hills provide a wonderful foreground for the sandstone formations of Capitol Reef National Park in the distance. A long lens compressed the scene, and converting it to black and white provided the most dramatic result. The vast landscapes of the Capitol Reef region, with its tremendous diversity of geologic formations, provide unlimited vantage points for unique compositions.

► *Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Canon EF 70-200mm f/4L USM, Gitzo Mountaineer tripod, Acratech Ultimate ball head.*

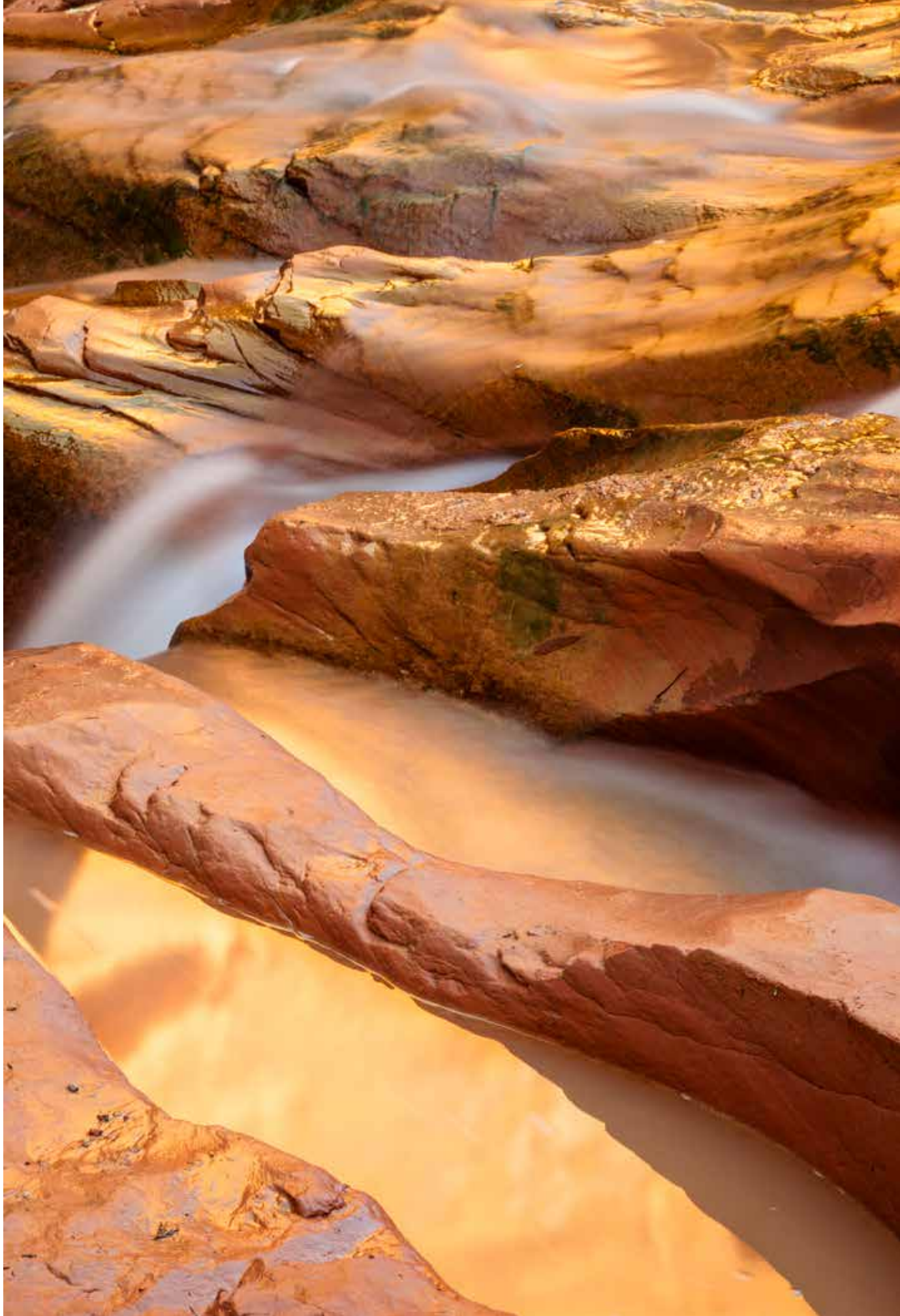
**Opposite:** Coyote Gulch, Escalante Canyons. Without the small, perennial stream that flows through this canyon, there would be far fewer new opportunities for photography. Even though I've walked this stretch of canyon many times, the constantly changing patterns along the sandy streambed always create new compositions.

► *Canon EOS 5D Mark III, Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM, Gitzo Mountaineer tripod, Acratech Ultimate ball head.*

their stellar wildflower displays. The last time I photographed these flower-filled meadows was more than 20 years ago.

As summer slid into autumn, we traveled north to the Wind River and Teton Range in Wyoming as the pandemic crowds of July and August began to thin out. The last time I photographed fall colors in the Tetons was in the 1990s, so we

both relished the chance to revisit one of our favorite locations on Earth at the ideal time of year. We arrived late in the day, trolled the campgrounds and actually found an available site, where we established a base camp for the next two weeks. Completely self-contained with all the food and provisions we'd need, we were able to avoid crowds in hotels, restaurants



**Above:** When traveling through a visually stunning region such as Canyonlands National Park, with all that tremendous, monumental scenery around you, it's always a good idea to simply look down at what's right under your feet. The constantly shifting muddy patterns along the water's edge provide an endless variety of compositions.

► Canon EOS 5D Mark III, Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM, Gitzo Mountaineer tripod, Acrotech Ultimate ball head.

**Opposite:** This small waterfall along Coyote Gulch in the Escalante Canyons provides an almost unlimited number of angles and compositions to choose from, with its variety of different levels, pools and pour-offs. As many times as I've returned here, I always come away with new angles and compositions.

► Canon EOS 5D Mark III, Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM, Gitzo Mountaineer tripod, Acrotech Ultimate ball head.

and stores. A couple days after we arrived, the horrific wildfire smoke that had smothered the West for the previous six weeks finally blew out and was replaced by a fresh dusting of snow on the peaks with autumn colors below.

Once the trees shed their leaves in the mountains, we turned our attention to the sweeping vistas and narrow canyons of southern Utah, with October's warm days and cool, crisp nights. Even during normal

times, as long as you steer clear of Moab, Arches and Zion—which had been teeming with visitors since April—you can always avoid the mobs in Capitol Reef National Park, the Maze district of Canyonlands, the Escalante Canyons and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

#### **A Fresh Look At The Familiar**

Over the past 30 years, I've spent more time photographing southern Utah and

am more familiar with its sliced and diced geography than any other region on the planet. When returning to a familiar haunt, my goal is always to try to see it with fresh eyes and to avoid simply gravitating to those exact spots that I've photographed before. Sure, if spectacular sky conditions present themselves, and I know the perfect viewpoint for a great composition, I'll take advantage of it. But with thousands of miles of canyons and overlooks to choose from, you can always find new terrain to explore.

When trying to re-imagine a familiar place, one strategy is to visit during a different season than you have in the past or during a stormy period, which transforms any familiar landscape into something new and exciting. Dramatic sky conditions always play a crucial role in creating compelling landscape images. Avoid weather patterns dominated by high-pressure systems with blank blue skies, which always look the same. Instead, wait for a storm cycle with waves of clouds interspersed with sun, rain and

shafts of sunlight beaming through those clouds. Bad weather may keep you pinned down much of the time, but short breaks between storms can provide sky conditions for powerful compositions. This is precisely how I've captured many of my most memorable images over the years.

If you usually process your images in color, another way to see familiar locations with fresh eyes is to begin searching for black-and-white compositions. Once you understand what to look for, black-and-white photography will provide you with an entirely new motivation to revisit all your old photo spots to see them from a completely different point of view. Lighting conditions and compositions that may be mundane in color have the potential to provide dramatic results when converted to monochrome. It takes some experience surveying a scene to know that it has the potential to produce a compelling black-and-white conversion. The best way to figure this out is to get on your computer at home to convert some of your favorite past color images. You'll quickly learn which ones work well and which don't. Good monochrome compositions need a wide range of tonalities, from deep black to bright white, and should have simple, clean lines without a lot of clutter. Once you begin to get a feel for it, you'll be ready to know what to look for in the field.

Another approach is to try changing up your camera format. If you've never stitched multiple images together to create a panorama, pick up a nodal rail and leveling head and return to those old familiar locations to see how they look now. Discover that when you start looking around for those long, narrow compositions instead of the familiar 1:1.5 ratio, you begin seeing familiar places in a whole new way and find compositions you never saw before. You'll also learn how some locations, such as the Teton Range, suit themselves best to a panorama format.

You could also try shooting video. If that sounds too complicated on your big camera, it's really simple on your iPhone. The latest models include slow motion, time lapse and built-in editing software along with tremendous resolution capabilities. Looking for motion instead of stills will also cause you to see a familiar



**Above:** Needles Overlook above Indian Creek Canyon, Utah. Another example of why you want to wait for a turbulent weather pattern before you head into the field. The summer monsoon season on the Colorado Plateau always presents great opportunities for dynamic compositions, but I certainly couldn't have imagined my luck when I watched this rainbow appear just before sunset.

► Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Canon EF 70-200mm f/4L USM, Gitzo Mountaineer tripod, Acratech Ultimate ball head.

**Opposite:** This is an excellent example of why you want to avoid high-pressure, blank-sky weather patterns when you venture into the field. I've traveled past this scene on the Green River in Canyonlands National Park on many occasions, but until this trip, I never bothered digging out my camera gear. It's these fleeting moments that can result in the most dramatic compositions. Thirty minutes later, the clouds were gone.

► Canon EOS 5D, Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM, Gitzo Mountaineer tripod, Acratech Ultimate ball head.

place in a new way. Video can be addicting, to the point where you may temporarily lose interest in still photography. You may even discover that you're really good at it thanks to all of your experience composing still images over the years. When you start looking, you'll begin seeing a lot of motion out there, most of it associated with the various forms and phases of water, such as waterfalls, rapids, ocean waves, clouds floating by or windblown grasses.

By the time this article is published, the vaccines should be beginning to make a

real dent in the pandemic, but it will likely be many months until our lives return to "normal," with borders slowly opening and everyone jumping on airplanes again. In the meantime, take this opportunity to get to know your old, familiar photo locations from a new point of view. This exercise will make you an even better photographer the next time you travel overseas to an exciting new destination. **OP**

View more of James Kay's images on Instagram @jameskayphoto or sign up for one of his workshops at jameskay.com.

