

Photo Destination: Death Valley National Park

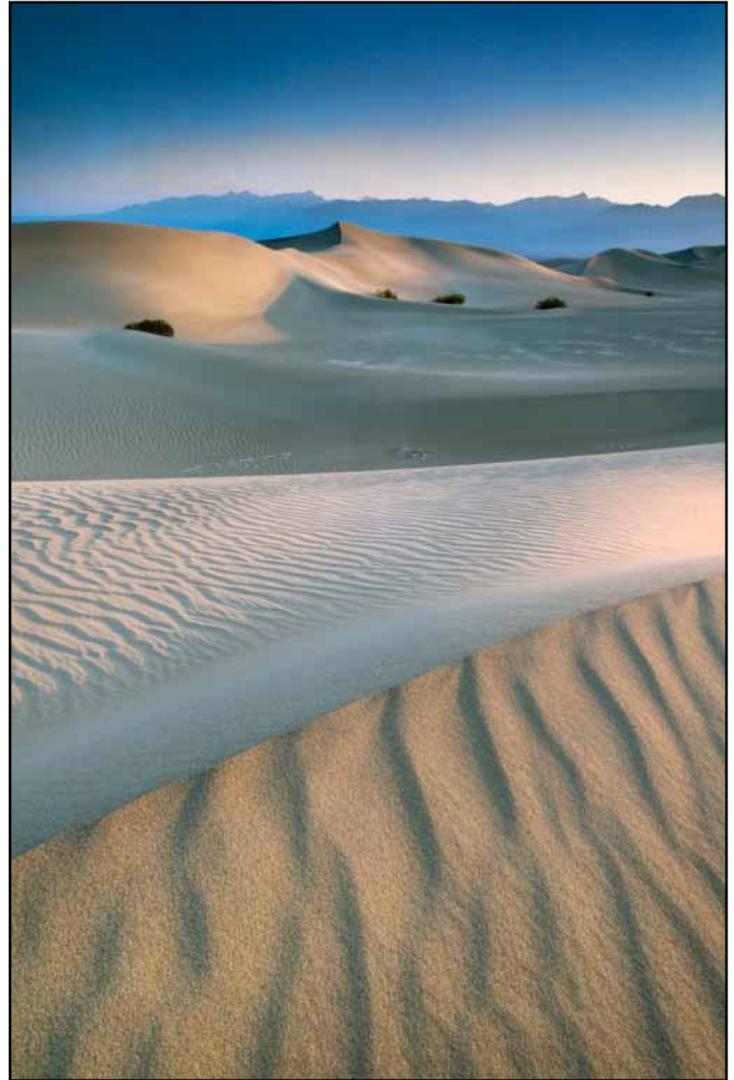
by Photographer Raymond Klass

Though Death Valley is one of the most extreme parks in our National Park Service, it is also one of the most overlooked destinations for photography. It is our largest national park outside of Alaska, and at just over 3 million acres, there is a lot to see. Located within a short drive of Las Vegas, Nevada, Death Valley is a great destination to visit during the winter, as their temperatures rarely drop below 50 degrees Fahrenheit, and typically hover around 75 degrees Fahrenheit during the day.

During the winter, the park is much more heavily visited than during the summer, when temperatures regularly reach over 120 degrees Fahrenheit, and over night temperatures may dip down only to 105 degrees Fahrenheit. If you visit during the peak months, don't expect to be the only photographer there. During the middle of July, when I visited, there were very few other photographers, which made sunrises on the beautiful sand dunes less crowded.

To get the most out of Death Valley National park, you'll want to arrive equipped with a high clearance SUV or 4-wheel drive truck. Many of the backcountry areas allow off-road travel, but require these types of vehicles because of the difficult terrain. It is also best to travel with a friend, as something as simple as a breakdown can become deadly in the extreme climate of Death Valley. Cell phones often get weak or no signal throughout the park.

One of the most unique events held at the park each year is a special race called the Death Valley Ultra-Marathon. This is a 148 mile race from Badwater (the lowest place in the U.S. at 288 feet below sea level) to Mount Whitney (the highest peak in the continental U.S.). Though runners don't go all the way to the top of Mount Whitney, this 2 day continuous road race takes place in the hottest days of summer and is perhaps the most grueling race anywhere. I was lucky enough to be there to photograph and observe the race – it was a sizzling 127 degrees out.





Start your visit there by stopping at one of the many visitor centers. You'll want to pick up a map and check current weather conditions. The most accessible and logical place to start is the Furnace Creek Visitor Center area. From here, you'll want to travel South on Route 178. This stretch of road is packed with many of the "must-sees" of the park.

I would recommend making a day of exploring the locations along this stretch of road. Begin with the furthest South – Badwater. This is a perfect example of the salt flats Death Valley is know so well for. Small pools of salt water can be seen from the boardwalk, and depending on the light, nice images can be made of these pools.

From here, head north, stopping along the way to drive the Artists Drive loop road – there are amazing cliffs and bluffs with color sand all along this winding stretch of road. It is a great place to explore from the car, especially if it is a very hot day.





From here, the junction of Route's 178 and 190 is just to the north, from this intersection, take Route 190 East, and stop after a few miles at Zabriskie Point. This is one of the most magnificent landscape areas in the park. It's beautiful canyon walls and slopes are decorated with streaked sand and rock, and the overview, after hiking up the short paved slope gives is amazing. This is a great place for sunset, just make sure to get there at least an hour before if you want to photograph the last bits of daylight, as the sun dips below the surrounding mountains about a half hour before the "official" sunset time. Make sure you stay around for a while, as things often get good after the sun has dipped below the hills. I found there to be good opportunities for night photography here as well.

Lastly, no trip to Death Valley would be complete without a stop by the sand dunes just outside of Stovepipe Wells Village. These dunes that you can see quite easily from the road are filled with great details and patterns. Scout out a place to park along the road and hike in during the day. Visit there early in the morning – I got there about an hour before sunrise, and was rewarded with good shooting both before and after the sun has risen. Expect there to be lots of photographers here in the winter, though often in the summer you may find it empty. Give yourself extra time to walk through the dunes, as distances can be deceptive, and walking on sand is not as easy as a well-groomed trail.

Death Valley is a park of extremes. It is one of the most inhospitable, and also one of the most unique places to visit with your camera. Plan to spend at least 2 days, as the park is immense, and if you visit during the winter, temperatures will be quite pleasant. If you enjoy photographing landscapes, patterns, or abstractions, this ia a park you will truly enjoy.

