

Worth the Wait...

by Photographer Raymond Klass

All too often, I see photographers packing up their equipment while there's still ample light to create images. Though I suppose I'll never know the true reason, it isn't too far fetched to believe that these photographers pack up because they've think they've gotten "the shot" – and maybe they have, but perhaps there's something better on its way... The point is that you'll never know if you and your camera leave the location prematurely.

I had a serendipitous experience while shooting in the remote Hovenweep National Monument, located on the Utah and Colorado border, not terribly far from Mesa Verde. I had set up camp in the nearby park service campground, and decided to head out in the late afternoon for some golden light on the ancient ruins.



My evening began like many others – with some nice rays illuminating the ancient stone structures. As I worked the scene from various angles, I noticed an approaching storm on the horizon. It was decision time – should I wait and see what develops, or pack up my equipment and return to camp? I decided that since the storm seemed a long way off, I would wait a few minutes and leave before I was in any real danger from mesa-top lightning bolts.



Looking back, the decision to stay was the right one. As I waited and watched the approaching clouds, something fantastic happened. I was first graced with an intense rainbow positioned directly behind the ruins. After the rainbow faded, and as the light was dwindling, I noticed a few lightning strikes in the far distance. I decided once again to stay and try to capture a shot with the lightning and the structure.

It wasn't dark enough for me to simply leave the shutter open and wait for a lightning strike, so I was forced to be creative in my solution. I placed my largest memory card in the camera and set my shutter speed to the slowest setting the conditions would allow. I figured the longer the time the shutter would be open, the better chance I would have to capture a bolt of lightning. I then placed my camera on "Continuous Motor Drive" and locked my cable release down – the same way you would for a Bulb exposure. This resulted in the camera taking long exposures one after another, until either the card or the camera's buffer filled.

What do you know, 2 cards and over 400 shots later – I got one image of the ruins and a lightning strike, just before dark, and just before the storm got too close for me to safely be there. I can only imagine how my experience would have been different if I had decided to return to camp at the first hint of an oncoming storm. Yet, I often see other photographers leave at the first sign of changing conditions.

This was the case once again during a workshop at Acadia National Park's Bass Harbor Lighthouse. When my group arrived, there were about a dozen other photographers at this icon location. From the very start, it seemed like we wouldn't have anything but cloudy conditions. The other photographers left about 30 minutes before sunset. To my surprise, we were left alone with a beautiful scene that developed and lasted about 2 minutes. I can only imagine what those photographers would be thinking if they knew what happened right after they left.

Early on in my career, I made a commitment to myself – to never let a shot go untaken because I was feeling tired, or the light didn't look promising, or the conditions didn't seem favorable. I haven't always been rewarded with a nice shot – often times I end up with nothing, or worse yet, wet from the rain that really did come. The key here is that I always maintain a positive attitude, and appreciate the location and the moment that I am in. And then sometimes, my patience is rewarded, and I'm reminded why I stay.

