

PHOTO ESSAY

PRISTINE

NAVIN
SAKHUJA

I have always been fascinated by the astonishing power and beauty of nature. It is this fascination with the unknown, the unexplored and the untouched which draws me repeatedly to these pristine and desolate parts of the planet. I am always looking for the planet as it was before we gnawed away at it and changed it to what it looks like today. I can only try and describe what I saw, although I know I cannot do justice to the amazing spectacles to which I was witness. This photo essay covers three different visits over the last 10 years, the only common thread being 'Pristine'.

Millions and millions of years ago, in the vast desert landscape that is now known as Arizona, nature began to brew a breathtakingly beautiful experiment. Each time the thunder rolled in and the skies opened up to create a thunderstorm, large amounts of rain soaked into the sand and percolated deep down into the massive sandstone bedrock. The water and the sand combined to create a sandpaper-like effect, and began to abrade and carve up the rock. Over the passage of millennia, as the Earth calmly turned upon its axis, every little thunderstorm over the wide desert expanse generated its own slurry of sand and water, which weathered and ate up the rock below, just a little bit more. The depressions in the rock turned into hollows, which turned into caves, which in turn turned into gigantic stone chambers.

Unseen by human or animal eye, untouched by human or animal caress, the miracle under the ground gradually expanded into a massive maze of subterranean canyons, some as deep as 300 feet, but still completely shut off from the surface. It was as if the desert did not want to share its secret with anyone.

Autumn 2017, Volume 44, Number 2

Sooner or later, though, the desert had to give in—and it did, to the intense rays of the Sun, which gave no quarter or mercy as it beat down upon the enormous sandy expanse. But once the Sun had set over the horizon, the desert claimed the land back, cooling down as quickly as it had heated up during the day. This daily trauma of extreme heat and cold upon the already weathered bedrock caused it to expand and contract in deference to the changing temperature, resulting in long, narrow cracks on the roofs of the canyons.

Meanwhile, the water, as it made its way beneath the surface, had been carrying a variety of minerals and compounds, such as iron oxide, hematite, goethite and limonite, and suffused the pores of the quartz sand.

Today, nearly 200 million years later, these grand canyons, also known as slot canyons because of the thin cracks in the canyon roof which allows in slivers of the blazing Arizona sunlight, are widely accepted to be amongst the most beautiful, natural architectural features in the world.

Slot canyons, typically, are much deeper than they are wide. Some are so narrow that you can touch both walls with your arms outstretched. Others are much wider, like large rooms that suddenly change in shape and size as you twist and turn round the next corner. You have no idea what to expect beyond a few yards. Nature retains her equal ability to surprise and mesmerise.



Iceland, on the other hand, is quite the opposite. It is the youngest part of our planet and this is how it must have been when the earth first burst open and created itself, opening up vistas of Jules Verne-like journeys to the very centre of the planet. The harmony of the elements is constantly disrupted on a daily basis, and nothing is what has been the season, or even the day, before—the sights and sounds of spewing ash, colliding icebergs, a layered floor of black, regurgitated lava, an icy wind that brooks no argument.

At latitude 64°N, just a couple of degrees south of the Arctic Circle, Iceland is unique, a destination without comparison, neither relenting nor accommodating the visitor, just demanding respect for being what it is—one of the toughest but most interesting places in the world to photograph. If you do not like to shoot in a blizzard,

with winds charging at you at 75 km per hour, with or without continuously falling snow, you can leave.

Most people would not catch a flight to Iceland in November, in the heart of a full-blown winter that does not seem to distinguish between night and day. And yet there is a certain kind of light, between the enormous storm systems—I was witness to one magnificent display of fire and ice—and large, dark masses of clouds that glower threateningly from the sky.

Beneath my feet, the beach too is black. The lava from a nearby volcano has solidified into a vast, endless plain of black igneous rock. What vegetation there must have been during the summer has shrivelled up and died, unable to bear the long, hard stare of the season. Occasionally, a seal shows up on the edge of the water or on the black rock-beach. A few birds fly around, as if daring the elements, then withdraw and disappear.

The beach is connected to a glacier through an isthmus. In slow motion, chunks of ice break off from the mother glacier and flow into the sea. The white ice floes glide and bob on the water, like gargantuan ice monsters, but the inky, black sea has soon got the better of them and thrown them back on the black beach.

I feel suspended in this nether world—just my camera and I. The camera is perched on what should be an admirably stable tripod, but seems to flounder when confronted with a four-foot bed of capricious snow that shifts with the rhythm of the strong winds above and the swirling sea-water below.



The Namib was everything, and more. It probably does not get more pristine or desolate or stark than this. Three years ago I was in Iceland, in a part of the world that lays claim to being only 16 million years young. In contrast, the Namib Desert is the oldest desert in the world, anywhere between 55 and 80 million years old—so old that it is home to the largest number of uniquely endemic species, and so dry that tyre tracks left by jeeps and trucks have remained practically fresh after several decades.

In all my life I have never seen anything as raw, as untamed, and as stunning. The Namib stretches for more than 2,000 km along the Atlantic coasts of Angola, Namibia and South Africa, over

undulating seas of sand, gravel plains and rocky mountain outcrops. The ‘roaring dunes’—so called because they create a perfect storm of sand and air, begetting thereby a rumble that is as loud as a low-flying plane—are also distinctive to the Namib.

Everything changes as you move from the temperate coast, inward, where the desert is a scorching thermometer by day and a plummeting barometre by night. Large parts of the desert are often smothered in a fog that results from the offshore clash of the cold Benguela current and warm, tropical streams of air that drift downward from the equator. But what is a deathtrap for ships on the Skeleton Coast—more than a thousand wrecks still litter the edge of the lonesome Namib Desert—is a precious source of moisture, an indispensable fount for desert life.

And when you look up at the night sky, it is true that you can see the entire Milky Way. More than one astronomer is believed to have become a poet with the sand dunes as witness and, gazing at the sky till the night disappears, truthfully pointed out that the number of stars up above are several times more numerous than the grains of sand beneath one’s feet.

So you can watch the new day begin, from the vantage point of an endless dune, as I did. Some of the dunes are so vast, as much as 32 km long and 300 m high, and so perfectly balanced at an angle of 34 degrees (any more sand and the dune starts to fall under its own weight) that it is possible to see infinity unfolding in front of you like an endless roll of film. In this big picture called Life, the Namib puts the smallness of the self into perfect perspective.

I also gratefully seized the opportunity to go up in a hot air balloon just before sunrise. Imagine the sight of a technicolour dawn, racing against an endless expanse of sand, from the purple of night to the rose of day and all the permutations of colour in-between. I saw the oryx graze and an occasional desert fox scurry across. I was witness to a sand storm, which raged across the dunes and expended its rage on the mountainous outcrop, while the golden rays of first light infiltrated the horizon.

The fact that I am a full-time eye surgeon, driven by a passion for photography, is a matter for endless questioning. Is it that I see things ‘differently’ because of my intimate knowledge of the eye? Can I, perhaps, calculate the quality of the refracting light as it falls

upon the camera lens so much better because I perfectly understand what it does to the sinews of the retina?

The answer is, no. I love my work and I am passionate about my art. I do not pretend to ask myself whether it is ophthalmology that drives my passion for photography, or the other way round, because I believe both are deeply related in the sense that they require total commitment. It might be that my medical background demands of me the kind of precision and attention to detail that is requisite for the art of photography. It might be that my training in the science of the eye allows me to create new dimensions with the camera that did not exist before.

The truth is that while ophthalmology and photography are all about perceiving light in the best way possible, there are several ways of seeing. Over the years, as I have wielded the camera, I know I have imbued my photographs with my own core. The eye looks through the lens, of course, but it is the mind which impels the finger to trigger the shutter.

I know that the perfect photograph has never been taken and the perfect eye surgery has never been performed. To have the opportunity to attempt both—I believe I am twice blessed.

Every time I venture forth to some remote, untouched part of our planet, I think I have come very close to my own personal quest of taking the perfect photo. I can never click my camera fast enough—I have often thought I saw God in some of these places at least a few times.

I know I always leave a little bit of my soul behind.



