



Seeking Magic Hour

Photographing Badlands National Park



Badlands National Park is a photographer's paradise. Wild pinnacles and buttes rise starkly out of the seemingly endless mixed grass prairie, a virtual sea of 56 species of grasses laid out in fluid mosaics that flow in the breeze towards the horizon. Not at all the "badlands" described by early settlers, the landscape supports a variety of wildlife, including bison, bighorn sheep, deer, pronghorn, coyotes, prairie dogs, snakes, rabbits, chipmunks, and numerous species of birds. The landscape is dynamic - the light changes, the animals move, the tall spires weather and erode. Look closely and you'll see every color of the rainbow painted in delicate brush strokes across this dramatic wilderness.

Magic Hour

Photographers call the time around sunrise and sunset the "magic" hour because the light is soft and casts a warm glow on the landscape. In the Badlands, subtle shades of red, yellow, and buff in the pinnacles and buttes become deeper and richer at these times of day. Look for the colors to become extra saturated after a rainstorm. The long rays of light in the magic hour cast dramatic shadows, adding a three-dimensional quality to photographs.

For sunrises, try the Big Badlands Overlook, the Door Trail, the Norbeck Pass area, the Dillon Pass area, and Panorama Point, just west of Bigfoot Pass. Each of these areas should provide views of the sunrise itself, along with the first rays of light that hit pinnacles facing east.

For sunsets, try Pinnacles Overlook, Conata Basin Overlook, Bigfoot Pass Picnic Area, and the Norbeck Pass area. Walking the Castle Trail (west for sunrise, east for sunset) is a great way to view the changing light on the north side of the Wall and provides a wonderful opportunity to explore and immerse yourself in the environment.

Wide-angle lenses will take in much of the grand vistas before you. Switching to a telephoto lens will enable you to zoom in on the golden pinnacles and capture graphic designs in the cascading ridges. One useful tool for retaining foreground detail while shooting in to a sunrise or sunset is a split neutral density filter. If you don't have one, use the sharp outlines of the pinnacles to create wonderful silhouettes.

Don't forget the "blue light" times of day about a half hour before sunrise and a half hour after sunset, when the sky is a dark blue and the pinnacles are still visible. If the conditions are right, the clouds light up in splendid shades of crimson, salmon, and pink. A full moon rising or setting among the pinnacles and buttes in "blue light" makes for a spectacular shot.

After you've taken your award winning sunrise or sunset shot, check out the Seabed Jungle. The bright yellow and red fossilized soils are good to photograph both morning and afternoon, as these mounds occupy both sides of the road, providing good subjects at either time of day.

Light at Midday

Midday light can often be harsh and unflattering. During this time of day, try finding canyon walls that are lit indirectly by light reflecting across from another brightly-lit wall. A polarizer will help saturate colors, remove harsh lighting, and separate bright white clouds from a deep blue sky. On overcast days with flat light, a warming filter will add a little life to your photos. Another option for mid-day is to focus on the detail shots all around you. Look for patterns in braided, sinuous stream beds, cracks in the sun-baked earth, and horizontal banding in the sedimentary rock. Look for colorful lichens on rocks, zoom in on bright wildflowers, or record animal tracks preserved in dried mud. Look for some of the interesting geological features that fill this area - armored mud balls, clastic dikes, nodules, geodes, toadstools, faults, and fossils imbedded in the rock. Take a close up look at some of the species of grasses in the area. The head of the blue gramma grass looks like an eyebrow, while the "needle and thread" grass looks just like its name suggests. Macro lenses can be effective for detail studies, although normal lenses will work as well. A small light reflector that fits in your camera bag can help redirect or soften harsh overhead light.

Clouds can cast wonderful shadows across the landscape. When they build into threatening storm clouds, this often results in very dramatic lightning with sunlit peaks standing starkly against a dark, foreboding sky. Lightning is frequent in these prairie thunderstorms and a long exposure with a wide-angle lens may pick up these arcs of light. Just remember to keep a safe distance from the storm.

Seasons

Just as the light changes throughout the day, it changes as well through the seasons. Summer storms create dramatic lightning and cause flowers and grasses to bloom. In winter, snow lays a soft blanket of white on the pinnacles and buttes, creating a bold contrast against the rough, dark, weathered rock. The grasses glisten in the low winter sun, every blade coated with frost. Autumn will bring more colorful changes to the landscape. Plan on returning to the Badlands. It will look different every time.

Safety

The Badlands can be a dangerous place to explore, particularly for the photographers who have their eyes glued on their viewfinders! The rock crumbles easily and is very slippery when wet. Make sure that before you move your feet, you move your eyes as well - away from the camera!

Frank Lloyd Wright Invites You . . .

In 1935, architect Frank Lloyd Wright wrote in a letter to South Dakota newspaper editor Robert Lusk: *Let the sculptors come to the Bad Lands. Let painters come Let the truest of artists come . . . He who could interpret this vast gift of nature in terms of human habitation so that Americans on their own continent might glimpse a new and higher civilization certainly, and touch it, and feel as if they lived in it and deserved to call it their own.*

Photography text by 1998 Artist in Residence Mark Dornblaser, professional photographer