

A scenic landscape photograph featuring a calm body of water in the foreground, reflecting the sky. The sky is a mix of orange, pink, and purple hues, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. In the background, there are several layers of mountains, with the closest ones in dark silhouette and the distant ones appearing in lighter shades of blue. The overall mood is peaceful and majestic.

# TREASURED LANDS







# TREASURED LANDS

A PHOTOGRAPHIC ODYSSEY THROUGH AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS

SECOND EXPANDED EDITION

QT LUONG

*Foreword by* DAYTON DUNCAN



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# FOREWORD

DAYTON DUNCAN

From the start, photography and national parks have been intertwined. In fact, a good argument can be made that without photography, national parks as we know them might not even exist.

In 1864, in the midst of the Civil War, Congress first took up the notion of permanently protecting magnificent parts of the American landscape from private development—an idea that no nation in human history had previously considered. The proposal before the lawmakers was whether to set aside the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias and entrust them to the State of California, on the condition that they be preserved forever, for the enjoyment of everyone.

No one voting on the measure had ever been to Yosemite or the Mariposa Grove in person. But the stunning photographs Carleton E. Watkins had taken of the exquisite waterfalls and enormous trees had made their way to the East Coast, where they were displayed in New York City exhibits and in some private collections. Now, they were hanging in the Sergeant at Arms office near the Senate Chamber. Anyone wondering if this place was worthy of special treatment need only look at Watkins’s photos to be convinced. The Yosemite Grant became law with President Abraham Lincoln’s signature.

Eight years later, Congress took up another bill—this one dealing with the headwaters of the Yellowstone River, in the Wyoming Territory. For decades, fantastical rumors had filtered east about a place where steaming water shot hundreds of feet into the air amidst cauldrons of boiling mud. Few people believed the tales—until the photographs of William Henry Jackson proved beyond any doubt that they were true. On March 1, 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed the bill creating Yellowstone Park. Because there was no state to entrust it to, this law kept the federal government in charge—and the world’s first “national” park was created.

Move forward in time. By 1916, there were about a dozen national parks, but they were in bad shape. Three different federal departments held some responsibility for overseeing them, which meant no one was in charge. In his campaign to change that, Stephen Mather, a marketing genius and park

enthusiast, skillfully used photographs to sell the idea of a new agency to protect what he called an “empire of grandeur.”

His friend, Gilbert Grosvenor, president of the National Geographic Society, devoted an entire issue of the organization’s magazine to the scenic wonders of the parks. With his own money, Mather published a book, filled with glossy photos of many of the national parks and national monuments in the country—the first such picture book ever made. It was so popular, 2.7 million copies were eventually sold. Copies of it and *National Geographic* were on every congressman’s desk when they voted to create the National Park Service, which came into being on August 25, 1916.

Mather, the Park Service’s first director, and Horace Albright, the second director, understood the power of photographs to generate public support for the park idea and to entice people to come and visit the places in person. George A. Grant was hired as the service’s first official photographer, and over a career of 25 years traveled from park to park, shooting somewhere between 30,000 and 40,000 images. His photographs—appearing in newspapers, magazines, and books, with a credit line of “Courtesy of the National Park Service”—reached millions of people who never knew his name.

That was not the case with Ansel Adams, perhaps the most famous of all photographers of the American landscape. In 1938, he sent his first book of images, *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail*, to Harold Ickes, the Secretary of the Interior, who took it to the White House to show President Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt was so impressed, he appropriated the book for himself—and then pushed to make the region Adams had so lovingly photographed Kings Canyon National Park.

Adams was then dispatched—with a special Park Service pass and a stipend of \$22.22 a day—to photograph every national park for display in the nation’s capital city. (He reached them all—a little more than two dozen at the time—except for the Everglades.) World War II was raging, and to those who questioned the notion of devoting so much time to such a project, Adams had a simple reply. His photographs, he said, were an “emotional presentation of what we are fighting for.”

From Watkins and Jackson to Grant and Adams, the lineage of photographers and the national parks is, therefore, both long and distinguished.

When Ken Burns and I set out to make our historical documentary series for PBS, *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*, we knew that we would be drawing on their work (and that of other photographers) to tell our story.

What we hadn’t anticipated was meeting Tuan Luong.

Early in our project, we stumbled upon Tuan’s website, which featured some of his remarkable color photographs of the parks. It was a fortuitous discovery, because as we began planning our own film trips to the parks, Tuan’s magnificent photographs helped us decide which places we wanted to bring our cinematographer.

We also realized we needed to meet this person, whose love of the parks and artistic skill were so evident in his photos. Tuan, we discovered, is a living, breathing testament to the power of “America’s best idea.” Born in France to Vietnamese parents, he came to the United States to pursue his academic studies, and his life was transformed when he encountered the national parks. In much the same way that Yosemite provided John Muir with both an artistic inspiration and a deep connection to his adopted land, the parks brought the best out of Tuan, who recognized in their beauty and importance something many native-born Americans too often take for granted.

His dedication—it’s tempting to use the word “obsession”—to his self-imposed, self-directed, self-funded odyssey to bring his large-format camera to every single national park astonished us. The scope of it, which has taken him 20-some years to complete, in a way equaled—perhaps even dwarfed—that of Watkins, Jackson, Grant, and Adams.

Traveling on his own, with no government agency or corporate underwriter supporting him, he simply followed his heart and set about his work. It was never easy, as some of the anecdotes recounted in this book demonstrate. After climbing a mountain, the perfect shot of sunrise demanded he spend the night on a summit without a sleeping bag, as his overnight gear was left at base camp, 4,000 feet below. He routinely descended wilderness trails alone in the deep of night after capturing sunset at various summits. He had a too-close encounter

with a brown bear in Alaska, and he had to abandon his photography gear. He ran out of gas in a small boat in the middle of 25,000-acre Kabetogama Lake. He kayaked for miles in Alaska’s Glacier Bay to get the shots he wanted. Flash floods in Big Bend, on the Rio Grande, threatened to end everything.

His shot of Crater Lake in the winter—one of my personal favorites—required snowshoeing in deep snow, packing heavy equipment, to collect. And what a payoff for us, thanks to his perseverance. His stunning shot of the Racetrack in Death Valley reminds me—*rebukes* me—that I still haven’t made the journey to that remote part of the park to see it myself.

During our own journeys for our film, we invited Tuan along on a few occasions. We, too, recognize that the best light for shooting is at dawn and dusk, so we were in the company of a kindred spirit, for whom long hours spent in the pursuit of capturing *the* shot is part of the bargain. Patience, too, helps—since, as Ken likes to say, “God is our lighting director, and He can’t be directed.” We were thrilled that Tuan not only agreed to be interviewed for our documentary, but that he also permitted us to use some of his photographs in our companion book to the film.

This book is his. It is the culmination of his own odyssey to do what I don’t believe anyone else has done to date: to chronicle America’s national parks—every one of them, in considerable detail, using a large-format camera for the iconic shots, in an era of digital images taken from devices you can carry in your pocket. It is a chronicle of firsts and lasts—it is the first time all 59 parks have been photographed with a large-format camera, and likely the last, as the world embraces digital technology. It will be a benchmark for future park lovers and historians, in the ranks of his storied predecessors.

In addition, Tuan offers some stories behind the shots, as well as some valuable advice on how to see the same things with your own eyes—the best times to visit, what to expect, what to avoid, how to get there, how to capture your own memorable photographs. He is a skilled and incredibly generous guide. I think you’ll enjoy going on this journey with him. And I hope it will inspire you to embark on your own parks odyssey.



# INTRODUCTION

QT LUONG

In February 1993, I visited Yosemite for the first time. It was love at first sight. That visit marks the start of my 20-year affair with the national parks.

Growing up in France, mountaineering provided me with my only experiences of wilderness. My time on the mountain was exhilarating and compelled me to adopt photography as a means to share with those who couldn't see for themselves the beauty of the high peaks of the Alps. Eventually, I came to the United States for what was to be a short academic stay. I did not know much about the geography of this country, but I chose the University of California at Berkeley because I had heard from other climbers that nearby Yosemite had tall cliffs. At that time, I was not aware of the significance of the national parks, nor did I anticipate that they would change the course of my life.

Shortly after I arrived, the mountains beckoned and I headed to Alaska to climb Denali. The sheer scale and pristine beauty of the north far exceeded anything I had witnessed in the mountains of Europe. Later, I toured Death Valley. After standing on the highest point of North America, I was now looking at its lowest. I had never seen such wide-open spaces and deserts before, and the geological surprises concealed within this arid land mesmerized me. I realized how much diversity the national parks encompass—they present every ecosystem a vast continent has to offer, and it was all new to me.

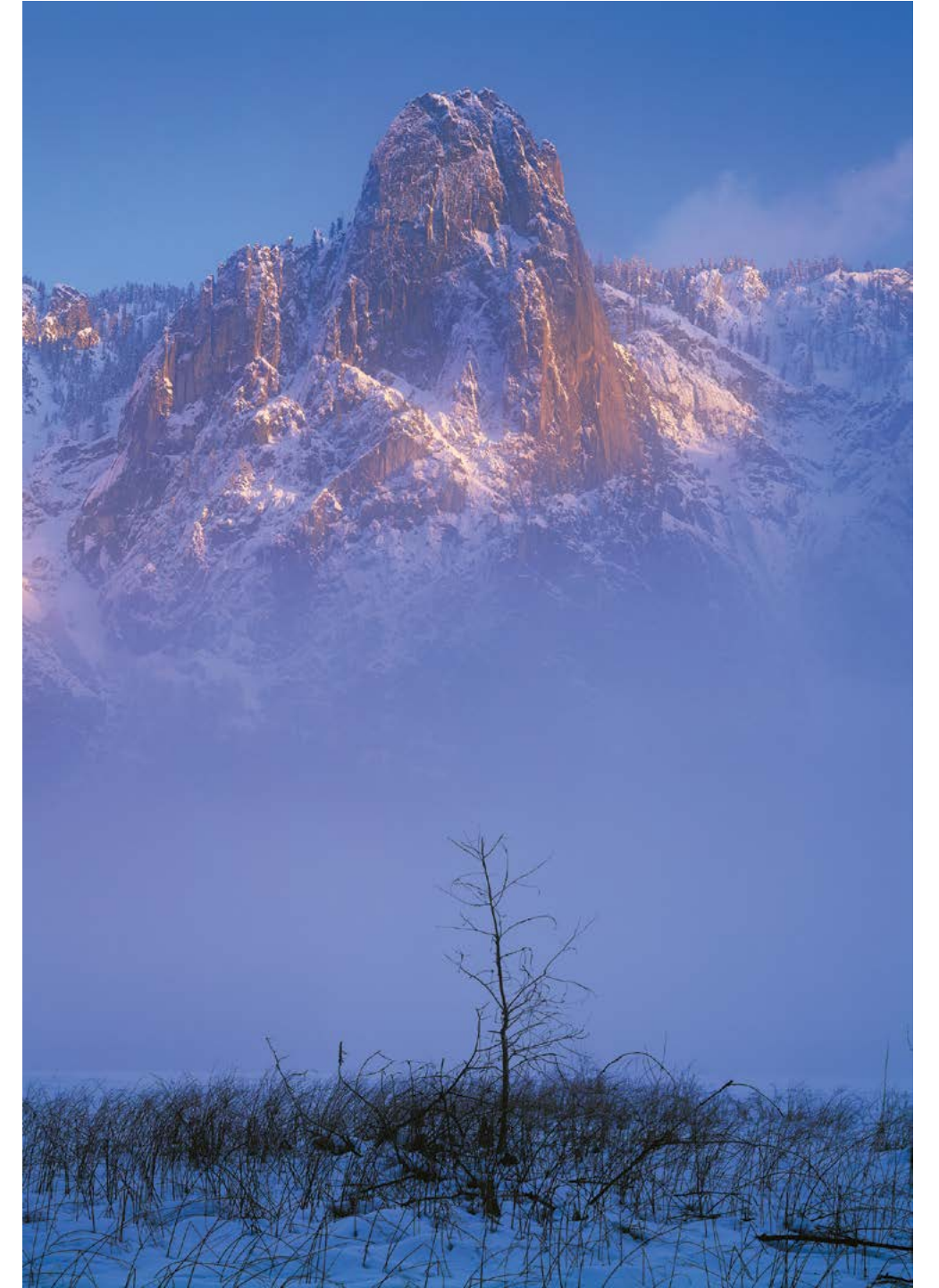
Exactly a century ago, in *National Park Portfolio* (1916), the first-ever photography book about the national parks, Stephen Mather wrote: “Each park will be found to be highly individual. The whole will be a revelation.” Those few words summarize perfectly what fascinated me so much about the parks and motivated me to visit more of them. Each park represents a unique environment, yet collectively they are all interrelated, interconnected like a giant jigsaw puzzle.

Not far from where I lived on the West Coast, Ansel Adams and others had established a rich tradition of American landscape photography. Wanting to approach my craft from the level of the prints I had admired in local museums and galleries, I learned to use a large-format camera in the

summer of 1993. After I returned from Death Valley and inspected one of my first 5x7-inch transparencies on a light table, I was astonished to see more details than I noticed standing at the scene. I realized that a viewer could have a close look at the landscape through the visually complex, detail-laden images, which would enable them to vicariously stand where I stood when I took the photo.

This notion inspired me to embark on a project that I thought was both original and compelling: photograph each of America's national parks with a large-format camera, because only large-format photography would do justice to the grandeur of the parks. To pursue this, I settled in the San Francisco Bay Area and eventually left my career as a computer scientist to become a full-time photographer. By the summer of 2002, I had photographed the then 58 national parks. Each national park, even the ones close to one another, provided a unique experience, not only because of the diversity of their environments but also because of the ways in which one must explore them. While my outdoor proficiency was rooted in mountaineering, I had to learn the skills dictated by each park's terrain, from scuba diving to kayaking to canyoneering. In order to find new ways of photographing the landscape, such as shooting the starry sky at night, I also added one of the first full-frame digital cameras to my kit. It entirely replaced the 35mm film camera that I carried to capture images unsuitable for large-format photography, but did not change my commitment to truthfulness and clarity. My quest to visit each national park was a twenty-year odyssey filled with the excitement commensurate with venturing—often alone—into the wilderness.

Traveling to many corners of the world has only increased my appreciation for our national parks and confirmed that they are the greatest treasures of the nation. One may think that their status guarantees they will be preserved and protected for future generations, but that's not a given. Even as the National Park Service celebrates its centennial this year, the agency faces a staggering budget deficit. Its mission can be successful only as long as citizens care about the land, which is often brought about by a personal connection attained through a visit that raises awareness. Exploring the national parks







has brought me much joy, and the act of photography was an extension of that love, a desire to share with others in a tangible way the elation that comes with being in such special places. I measure its success by how much these photographs inspire viewers to visit the places for themselves, for the happiness the parks bring through a deep connection with nature, and how the experience is likely to transform visitors into advocates for conservation. Most photographers understand that there is nothing more important than respecting the environment we seek to capture so that future generations will find it as beautiful as we did.

The Organic Act of 1916, which created the National Park Service, set forth two goals: to conserve the natural scenery and to provide these lands for the enjoyment of future generations. The agency has done an outstanding job at meeting both of these objectives, although they can be contradictory. I am eternally grateful to those who set these treasured lands apart, and to the men and women who protect them while making them approachable. During my long journey, I felt privileged to be able to experience such accessible yet untouched wilderness, a truly rare combination. If my photographs inspire viewers to visit these areas, the National Park Service made it possible.

My hope is that this book will not only inspire you to go out and discover new places, but also provide you with enough information so that you can stand at the very places these photographs originated. You will see that even in the most crowded locations, even Yellowstone’s Old Faithful, it is possible to have an uncommon and solitary experience. Iconic attractions deserve a visit, but the parks are full of surprises as well—especially if you are willing to venture off the beaten path. This book pays as much attention to the lesser-known gems, such as California’s Lassen Volcanic National Park, as it does to the well-known parks, and within each park, it covers many corners, some quite obscure.

Also included are notes on photography for those who would like to capture the moment or simply want to understand how the photographs were made. Photography has the power to help you connect with nature and with yourself. The pursuit of photography can give you the motivation to

immerse yourself in the national parks and lead you to experiences that you may not have had otherwise. This could mean venturing northward to the Arctic Circle in winter to see the northern lights or venturing out of the lodge on a rainy day, where the luminosity of the forest in rainfall will astound you. While looking for a terrestrial shape to frame the Milky Way, you may enjoy the quiet solitude of the park trail at night, normally bustling by day. Even if you are a night owl like me, the anticipation of a sunrise might persuade you to get out of bed at 4 AM and hike to an overlook. And when the cosmic event eventually unfolds, you will be lost in the moment, subject to an intense concentration, free from the distractions of everyday life. Few activities, save perhaps technical climbing, have brought me the same sense of focus and flow. In that state of heightened awareness, the world reveals more of its wonders to you—the more you look, the more you will see. While the natural beauty of the national parks is unmistakable, photographing it enables you to make observations you may have otherwise missed.

My odyssey through the national parks has been ostensibly driven by the desire to make photographs, but my primary motivation was to explore and engage with the earth. The journey is the destination, but the photograph you take away from that destination has the power to inspire others to embark on their own journey. I hope that this book will do that for you.

*Owners of this book can receive an electronic version of the travel and photography notes outlined throughout this book for a nominal fee. In time, more detailed photography guides to selected national parks will also become available. To access the electronic version, visit [TreasuredLandsBook.com/ebooks](https://TreasuredLandsBook.com/ebooks)*