

# 129

# photograph<sup>™</sup> america newsletter

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Where, when, and how  
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photography in America

Number 129 - January 2014



Windstone Arch - N 36° 24' 44.8" W 114° 33' 14.3"

## RETURN TO THE VALLEY OF FIRE

Since I photographed the Valley of Fire, Nevada's largest state park, for Newsletter #45, in 1997, I have been returning for more photo explorations every time I drive through southern Nevada. I realized the fantastical rock formations and spectacular red sandstone landscapes needed more coverage. Park rangers have been helpful with information about remote and seldom-visited features of the park. Chatting with photographers on the trails often helps me find new locations. I've been recording GPS coordinates to mark new discoveries. Here are some locations that you will want to visit on your next trip to the Valley of Fire.

Fifty-five miles northeast of Las Vegas on Interstate 15 at Exit 75, Route 169 heads southeast and passes a gas station in Crystal, Nevada. The route continues for 14 miles to climb over the Muddy Mountains on the way to the West Entrance Gate into the park.

As I started down the other side of the mountain pass into the park, a large desert bighorn grazed at the edge of the road. I was watching for the perfect spot to shoot distant clouds framed in the V-shaped notch in the Muddy Mountains, above the west entrance to the park. I slowed and pulled off the road just a few feet from him. This “happy accident” occurred in the perfect location. My camera was ready with the right lens.

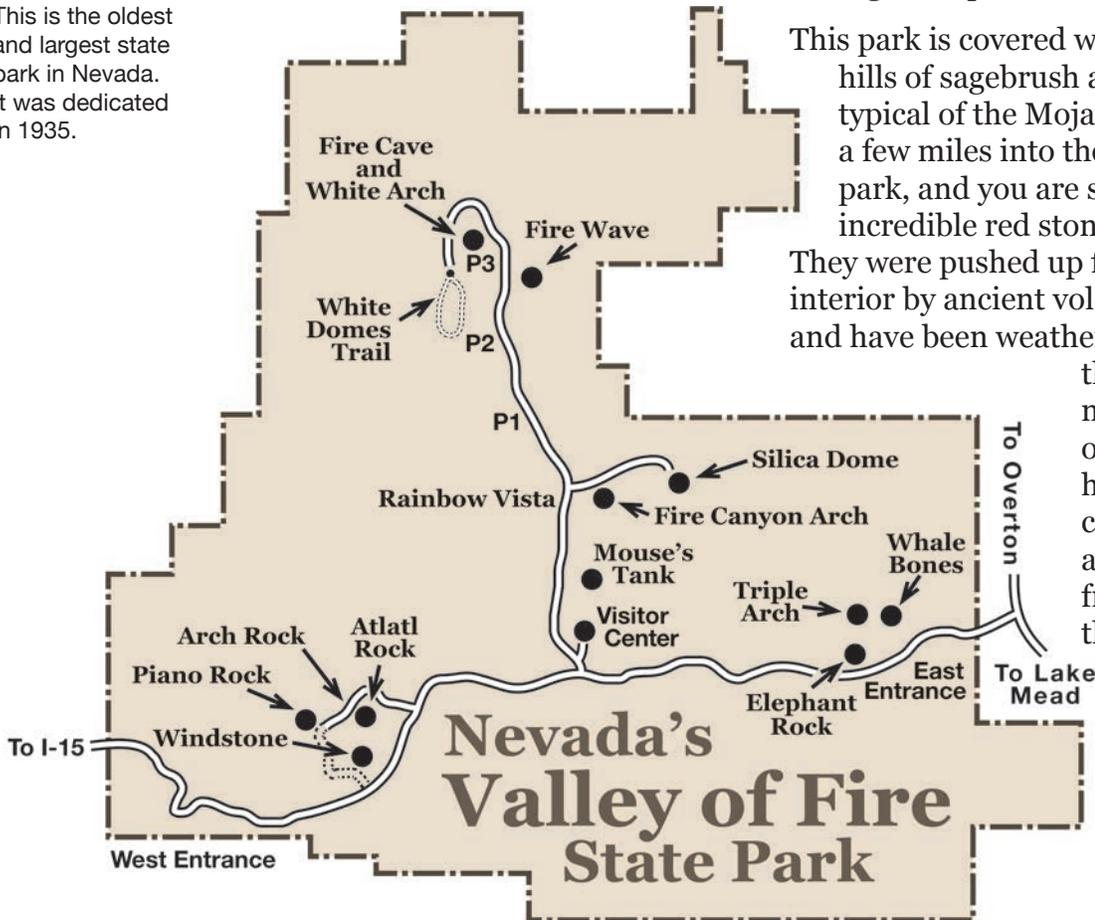
I reset the focus and started shooting. Wildlife grazing the roadsides in parks are used to passing cars. Roll down your windows and stay in your car if you stop for a photograph. Getting out usually



spooks them. Crank up your ISO, choose a larger aperture, and switch from manual to auto focus and shoot through an open window.

This park is covered with low rolling hills of sagebrush and creosote typical of the Mojave Desert. Drive a few miles into the interior of the park, and you are surrounded by incredible red stone formations. They were pushed up from the earth's interior by ancient volcanic eruptions and have been weathering away since then. Whole mountains are full of Swiss cheese holes. Caves, caverns, and arches can be seen from the road through the park.

This is the oldest and largest state park in Nevada. It was dedicated in 1935.



Many more wonders of nature are hidden away, far from park roads. There are few official trails through the Valley of Fire. If you park your car safely and legally off the pavement, you can explore anywhere you wish. The Scenic Drive to White Dome is closed at sunset. There are many other places in the park to photograph at sunset.

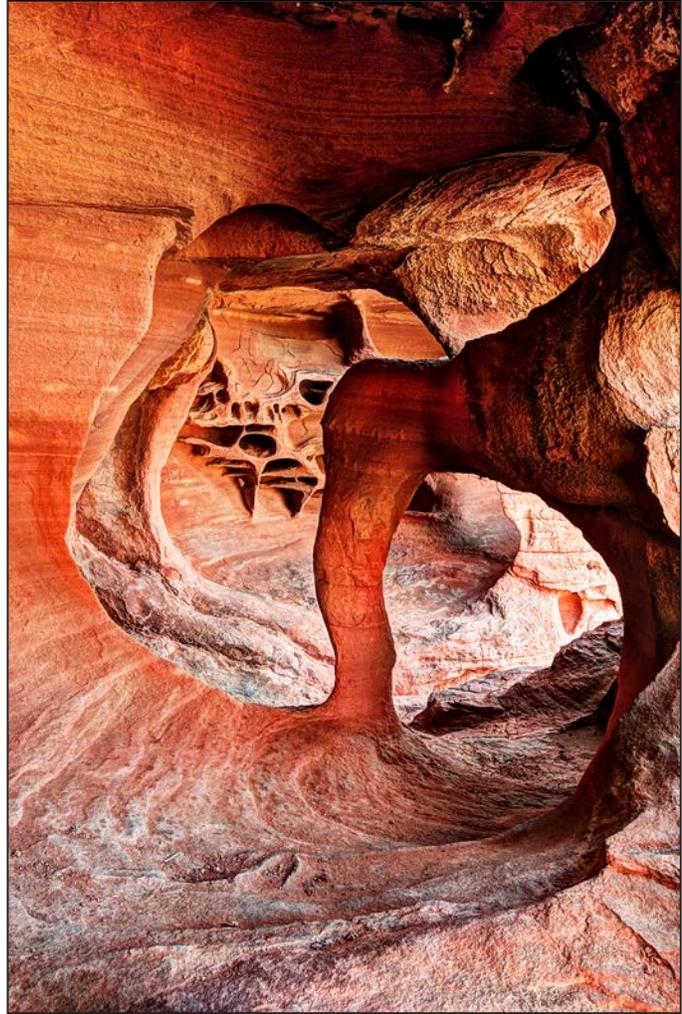
### The Atlatl Scenic Loop Road

Check your odometer reading at the West Entrance Gate and then in 0.9 miles watch for the left turn onto an unpaved graded gravel road with a Scenic Loop Road sign. There are two campgrounds and several natural arches located along this road. Beyond the campground gate, this road is paved.

Reset your trip odometer as you leave the paved road and drive 0.1 mile on a graded gravel road suitable for any vehicle. At the point where this road makes its first bend to the right and starts to dip into a wash, pull off to the right side and stop. There are no signs and no trails. You won't see the Windstone Arch from the road because the small arch is hidden inside a cavern carved into a large mound of rocks shown below. A ground level opening is 150 feet from the right side of the road.



Find this rock formation and follow the arrow to the flat-topped opening.



Windstone Arch - N 36° 24' 44.8" W 114° 33' 14.3"

I first saw a photograph of Windstone Arch in Laurent Martres' book "Photographing the Southwest." It was the cover photo on several books by David Muench. The location was a secret until it was recently published on the Internet. The entrance to this small dark cavern opens toward the southwest and is best photographed in the early morning to avoid contrast problems with large hot spots of direct sunlight washing out the interior. Overcast morning light is best here.

The ceiling is very low and you'll probably bump your head on the way in. You need to crawl into the opening and then turn to the right to see the classic image. Your tripod legs must be fully collapsed. A vertical format will crop

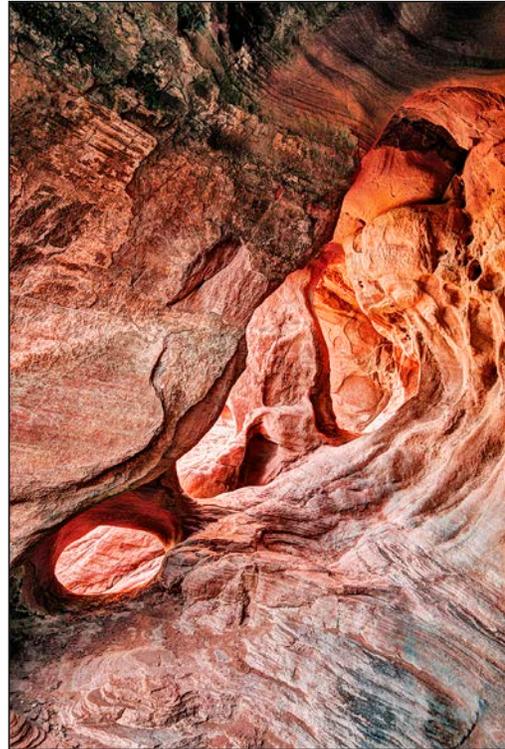
off the washed-out openings on the right side of this composition. For this trip, I packed gardener's rubber knee pads and wore a thick woolen ski cap to protect my head in spots like this.

My photograph, like most in this newsletter, was made with multiple exposures, usually 3 or 5 images bracketed in increments of one stop, and later combined in Photoshop using Photomatix Pro. Called HDR, High Density Range, this technique is often the only way to successfully photograph a very contrasty subject. An 18 mm focal length lens framed the composition that was shot at *f*-22 to sharply cover the depth of field I needed. With the ISO set at 200, exposures ranged from 2 seconds to 1/8 second. I shot this image in both horizontal and vertical formats. This location calls for a square format if you have the right camera.

You can crawl into the other opening at the far end of this cavern and shoot back in the opposite direction. I like the pattern of pockets and depressions on the far wall, an extra bit of mystery that is revealed from this angle.

### Three Fins

Located just north of the trail to the Windstone Arch and thirty feet from the gravel loop road is another formation worth exploring. Three large vertical rock fins support a deep overhanging layer of red stone. The fins are free standing. You can walk behind them to photograph from either direction. No crawling is needed here, and you won't hit your head. A vertical format including a lower portal in the center fin is a unique feature of a location that is close to the road and only a short walk to the underground Windstone Arch.

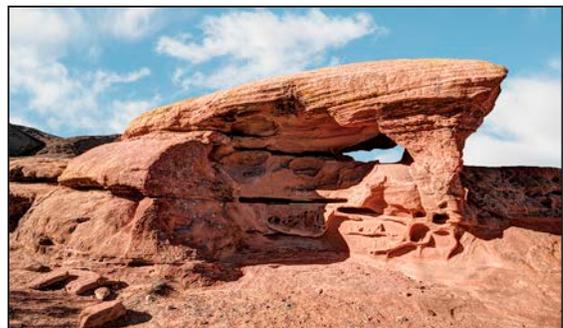


Three Fins - N 36° 24' 44.1" W 114° 33' 15.3"

Only a few of the park's most popular features have official names. Most are not on park maps, so they have no official names. You can find some names on the Internet or make up your own names (like Three Fins) for geological formations.

### The Piano

The only formation on the outside of this loop road is located near the campground exit gates. Looking just like an oversized grand piano, it is easy to spot from the road and only a short walk through the sagebrush. Move in close with your wide-angle lens to avoid shooting through the brush.



The strange formations in the Valley of Fire are probably composed of the same stone as Little Finland, located fourteen miles east, on the other side of the Overton Arm of Lake Mead.



N 36° 28' 19.9" W 114° 31' 28.9"

## Arch Rock

One of the few signs along the Loop Road points to Arch Rock (the official name). It sits atop a twenty-foot mound of red sandstone. One of the better tripod locations for this photograph is in the middle of the road. Walk around the formation and shoot it from the other side. You can't climb on the red mound. Find an angle from ground level that shows sky through the opening of this arch or it will merge into the background.

## Atlatl Rock

A short walk from a parking area along the Atlatl Scenic Loop Road leads to a long and winding staircase. At the top of 84 metal stairs is a wide platform with a good view of many petroglyphs, chipped into the dark surface of a huge balancing rock. Depicted in these rock art images are many animals and human figures with throwing sticks used to propel spears. These petroglyphs are estimated to be 4,000 years old.

Back on the main road, watch for the left turn to the park's visitor center. A ranger is usually on duty to answer your questions. A gift shop has maps, trail guides, souvenirs, snacks and cold drinks. The park's 11-mile round-trip Scenic Drive into the center of the most unusual geological attractions starts near the Visitor Center.

## White Domes Scenic Byway

Thousands of examples of Indian rock art can be photographed along the trail down Petroglyph Canyon to Mouse's Tank. Most of these petroglyphs are on canyon walls that were blackened with desert varnish. Thousands of years ago, ancient artists chipped through the black layer of dried minerals leached from wet stone on canyon walls. Depictions of bighorn sheep, elk, snakes and human figures are mixed in with geometric patterns of unknown significance. You can tightly frame small



petroglyph details from the ground with a 300 mm or longer telephoto lens. For best results, use a tripod, a cable release and lock up your camera's mirror (if it has a mirror). A polarizing filter will reduce glare on the smooth black canyon walls. Some panels are signed with hand prints. At the end of this trail is a natural rainwater collection pool that was used by a Paiute Indian called Little Mouse who was hiding here from the law in the 1890's.

The view of Fire Canyon in late afternoon light is worth the thirty-minute walk down the Fire Canyon Wash Trail. The viewpoint is found only at the end of the narrow canyon. At the trailhead is Rainbow Vista, one of the best high spots for panoramic photos of a wonderland of brightly colored desert formations stretching for miles.

The trails to Mouse's Tank and the Fire Canyon Wash Overlook are level, sandy and easy trails for the family.

## Fire Canyon Arch

For the best view of Fire Canyon, make a right turn off the Scenic Byway onto the road to the Silica Dome Vista.



Fire Canyon Arch - N 36° 27' 04.8" W 114° 30' 38.9"



To explore the many viewpoints above Fire Canyon, I used to pack my bike in the back of my 4x4 when I was heading to the Valley of Fire. The road has recently been paved.

To find this dramatic natural arch located high on the edge of Fire Canyon, reset your trip odometer at the junction of the Scenic Byway and the Silica Dome Road. Drive 0.1 miles east and stop at a point at least a hundred feet short of a sign with a pair of binoculars and an arrow pointing to the right.

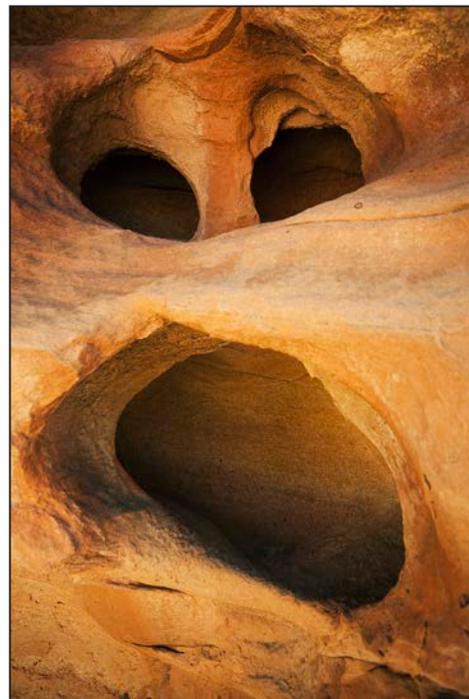
Park off the pavement and look several hundred feet to the right (south) where a large light-colored dome with an almost vertical wall rises above the sagebrush on the left side of the dome. Aim for the bottom of that steeply sloping wall as you start your ten-minute walk to the arch. To avoid the sandy wash along the base of the wall, follow the middle of a wide, straight slick rock pathway that gradually climbs for 300 feet to a spot where the pathway levels off and then begins to descend.

When you reach that level spot, look to your left and you will see the Fire Canyon Arch at the end of the ridgeline on the left side of the slick

rock pathway you followed. You'll be less than a hundred feet from the arch. Find the easiest route to the arch and move closer to try a wide-angle lens and then back off with a telephoto. Stay low and shoot upward to see sky through the opening. It's a small arch that a child would have trouble squeezing through. Its dramatic position at the end of a sweeping monolith backlights the arch at midday. Late afternoon light illuminates the arch straight on and fills the deep recesses behind the arch.

With a low camera angle, your composition should include the deep red stone platform below the arch. With the right lens and the right camera position, you can photograph any of the countless tiny arches scattered across this park with no visual clue as to their real size.

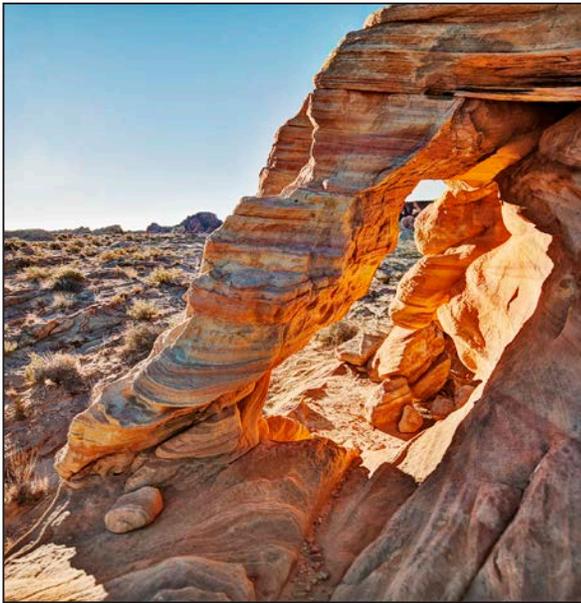
Look two hundred feet in the direction this arch is pointing and you'll see a low stone wall carved by the erosion of wind and water producing a variety of bizarre abstract sculptures like the photo below.



Back in your car, continue to the end of the Silica Dome Road. The best spot for a photograph of the dramatically angled red and white Mesozoic sandstone cliffs is from the edge of the road before you reach the turnaround at the end of the pavement. Park at the turn-around, and walk back down the road. You will know when you've reached the best tripod spot. Late afternoon light is best here.

by concrete blocks. In a hundred feet, bear to the right at the formation you are heading toward and circle around to the back side where you'll find an arch atop the ridge resembling a bird with a straight beak. You can photograph this arch in the direct light of the morning sun or arrive here in the late afternoon to photograph a silhouette against a cloud-filled sky.

West of Parking Area #1



East of Parking Area #2



### Parking Area #1

Natural stone arches can be found in many park locations. Stop at the Scenic Road's Parking Area #1 and walk toward the first low stone ridge to the west. Circle that formation in either direction and beyond it you'll find a smaller formation with multiple openings. Depending on the time of day, you can shoot these arches from either side (above). An overcast sky works best here. There are many more small arches hidden away in the low hills west of this arch.

### Parking Area #2

After parking at the Scenic Road's Parking Area #2, cross the road and walk the old jeep road that's been closed

### Parking Area #3

Across the road from the Scenic Road's #3 Parking Area is a sign pointing the way to the Fire Wave. It's a twenty-minute walk down to the Fire Wave and a twenty-five minute walk back to your car. The trail descends a long sandy downhill slope then circles to the right, around a huge red monolith called the Rock of Gibraltar. This trail is marked with tall plastic stakes with yellow reflectors. Follow the trail markers and, in 20 minutes, you will arrive at the top of a red and white striped dome looking down on two smaller domes that resemble candy canes. Their stripes swirl and dip into the saddle between the domes. Make your way to the edge of the space between the domes and shoot upward with a wide-angle lens to

Cell phone service is only available in a few spots in the Valley of Fire. Pack a compass or a hand-held GPS receiver to avoid getting lost.

capture the full effect. For the ultimate effect, make the hike to the Fire Wave after a rain has saturated this red and white sandstone. A sky full of dramatic rain clouds in the afternoon can add the finishing touch to this image.

The Fire Wave - N 36° 28' 57.7" W 114° 31' 20.2"



## Fire Wave

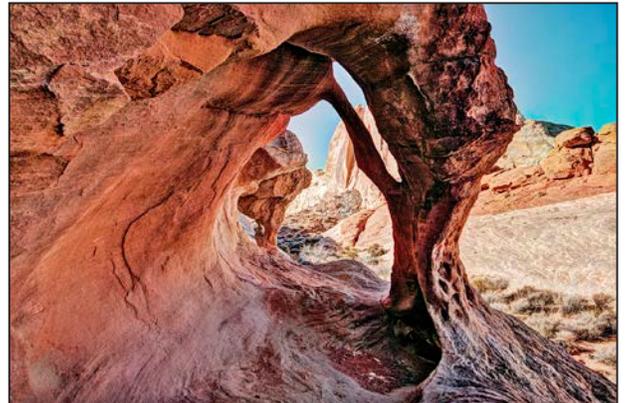
It's as fascinating as The Wave in Coyote Buttes but is a lot easier to reach. You can also reach the Fire Wave by driving a half-mile south from Parking Area #3 and following Kaolin Wash to the east from the bottom of the wash where the road crosses it. The wash passes the bottom of the Fire Wave. Since you must park in the authorized parking areas and signs discourage walking on the shoulder of the road, you may need a two-car shuttle.

## More Arches

On the west side of Parking Area #3 is a trail down a ravine that leads to several more arches. Park at the far right end of the parking lot and pull out your gear. Along with the mandatory tripod, you'll need your shortest wide-angle lens, like a 10 mm and a zoom lens in the 24-120 mm range. These arches face the west and should be photographed in the morning. During my midwinter

trip, I was out there at 7:00 am and found both arches in the shade. Only an overcast day with a sky filled with dramatic clouds would be better.

Lock up your car and walk fifteen feet to the west, away from the pavement. Follow the footprints in the sand down the ravine. In three hundred feet, at a point where the ravine begins to widen, you will see the first point where another ravine leaves the one you've been following and heads to the right. At that point, you can see a large white formation in the distance on the right side of the trail. Look carefully and you can see the arch called Fire Cave on the left side of the same trail. A few feet off the main trail, this side trail descends steeply for thirty feet then levels off.



Fire Cave Arch - N 36° 29' 10.6" W 114° 31' 47.5"

## Fire Cave

In a few more minutes, you'll reach the Fire Cave. Look at it from several angles and you'll see the thin and delicate arch standing behind a thicker column that's actually supporting the top of this cavern. You will find many possible camera locations. I moved in very close with a 10 mm lens and was able to fill the space between the columns with the white canyon wall in the distance. At the far end of the cave is a third arch, another sturdy support beneath overhanging layers of red sandstone.

You can't see the Fire Wave from the road and, in midwinter, you probably will not see many people on the trail to the Fire Wave.

My tripod legs were fully extended and sitting on the ground. My camera was as close to the edge of the cavern as I could get without touching it. Never touch anything as delicate as this formation. Do not try crawling through narrow openings and do not bump anything with your tripod.

While you are standing beside the Fire Cave, turn and look in the other direction across the ravine. That canyon wall is white and on the other side of that wall is the next arch you'll want to find and photograph.

up the sandy bottom of this ravine, you will go past the arch where you will find an easy stair step route up and unto the slick rock.

It's hard to get low enough to include much sky in this opening. I was lying on my stomach with my camera on a GorillaPod. Then I backed off and tried a 120 mm lens from a spot on the edge of the wash.

## White Dome Canyon Loop

In the heart of the Valley of Fire, at the end of the Scenic Drive, 5.5 miles from the Visitor Center, is a large parking lot, restrooms and covered picnic tables. Here is the trailhead to the 1.2-mile White Domes Loop Trail.

I like to make this hike around the 1.2-mile loop trail in a counter clockwise direction. Park your car and walk in the opposite direction,

The Park's Visitor Center sells cold drinks and basic snacks.

Pack a lunch for your day hikes and carry plenty of water, especially in the summer.

There is a reason they call this place "The Valley of Fire."

White Arch - N 36° 29' 09.3" W 114° 31' 50.0"



## White Arch

The next arch, called Thunderstorm on some maps, is nearby. When you are ready to move on, continue downstream to a point where the canyon ends and a high sandy bank covered with sagebrush begins. Turn right here and climb the sand dune. At the top of the dune, head to the right again and make your way up another parallel ravine. You can walk down the other side of the sand dune and head upstream, or you can stay high and walk up the sandstone ridge. By staying on the sandstone, you will walk through this white arch in 50 feet. If you walk

the way you came in, away from the trailhead marker. Walk past the picnic tables and you will soon see another trail along the road you drove in on. Follow that trail as it enters a narrow opening in the canyon wall. This is the other end of the loop trail. This route avoids a long climb up a sandy wash and a longer descent down many narrow stone steps to the far end of the loop trail. The narrow slot canyon at the far end of the Loop Trail can be reached by going in either direction. Go counter clockwise, and return the same way from the narrows, to avoid a great elevation change.

There are several easy-to-spot noteworthy arches along the White Dome Trail. Check out the possible camera angles from both sides of the arches you find. Side canyons along this route are also worth exploring.



The Narrows entrance on the west side of the White Domes is in morning shade, the best light for photography here.

### The Narrows

At the far end of the loop, the trail bears left and enters a slot canyon called the Narrows. Red and white striped stones create a very photogenic entryway to the Narrows.

Before entering the Narrows, take a right turn and walk up the dry wash of the stream that has carved the narrows. Around the first bend is a trail marker for the Prospect Trail, a 5.5-mile hiking and equestrian trail that heads south to a marked parking lot on the paved highway near the Petrified Log Trail. The Prospect Trail is an ambitious 11-mile round trip that needs a two-car shuttle.

For a less strenuous hike, you can fill an afternoon of photography in the Narrows and then return to the parking lot the way you came in.

### The East Gate

Elephant Arch is located near the park's East Entry Gate parking lot. You can see it from the road. It's a ten-minute walk from the parking lot. Observe the signs and follow the official trail that avoids foot traffic on the roadway. For the best angle, set up your tripod on the uphill side of the formation and shoot toward the road. Lower your tripod and shoot upwards to avoid including the pavement in your photo.

### Triple Arch

Looking north from the parking lot at the East Entry Gate is a flat sage-covered valley that is a mile across. In the distance, a long rocky ridge runs the length of the valley with peaks rising hundreds of feet above red stone cliffs. You can see two large coves in the ridgeline. In the center of the cove on the left is a dark red dome topped with tilted layers of pock marked stone. It is on a sandy rise but still close to the level of the flat valley.



Triple Arch - N 36° 26' 25.4" N 114° 27' 41.5"

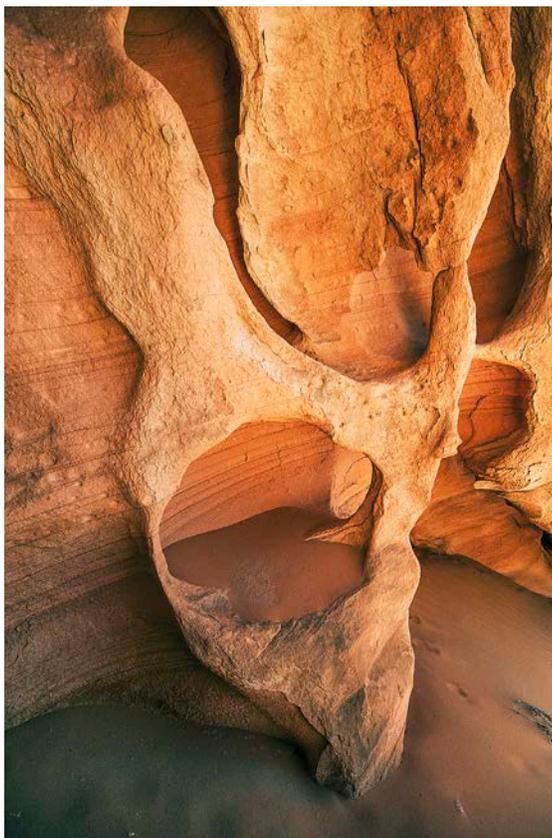
One of the most unusual arches I found during this return to the Valley of Fire sits on the slopes above and to the left of that dome. Impossible to see from the parking lot and difficult to

find without some searching, this arch is worth the effort. This photograph frames two arches, an arch with a double opening and second single arch sitting thirty feet to the east. These two arches are called Pretzel Arch on some maps.

From the parking lot, start walking straight ahead for 0.8 miles toward the dome. The valley floor appears flat and level from a distance. Several shallow washes that bisect the plain are easy to cross. There is no trail and only a few footprints along this route. Wide gaps in the sagebrush make it easy to follow an almost straight line northward. The only hazard is the occasional cholla cactus. Do not bump into one of these nasty desert bushes. If you find one stuck to your pants leg, do not grab it! Use the pocket comb that should be stored away for this desert emergency in the side pocket of your camera bag. I also carry a very small pair of needle nose pliers and a pair of tweezers in a zip-up bag with a comb.

It's a 35-minute walk to the dark red dome. Pass it on the left side and you will start to gradually climb slopes of soft red sand. Take it slow and easy for another 200 feet while looking to the left. When you are high enough up from the base of the ridge, you will see the opening of an arch, not far from your route. Bear left and pass below the opening while you are looking for the scene in the photo below. When you spot the larger double arch, move around to the far side where you'll find a level spot with enough space to position your tripod while you find the angle that will frame the distant, higher opening in the larger opening of the double arch—an arch framing another arch.

After capturing this remote treasure, I slowly worked my way down the sandy slopes and headed south, along the base of tall rocky cliffs. They stretch for a half-mile and are filled with more arches and other discoveries.

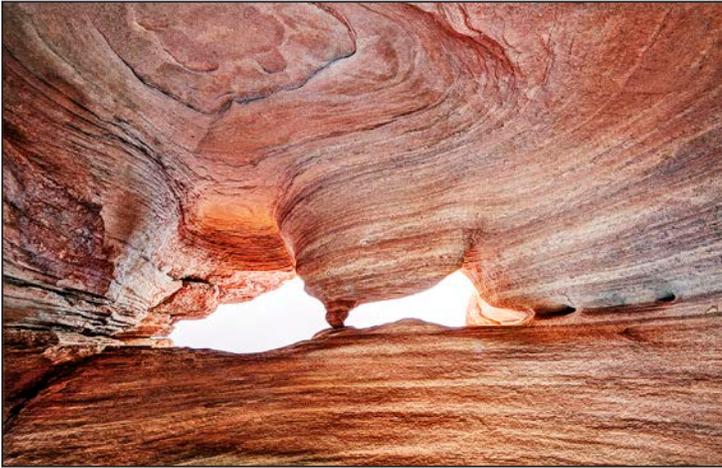


Whale Bone Wall - N 36° 26' 14.8" W 114° 27' 20.7"

## Whale Bone Wall

Along the cliffs, I spotted something at the bottom of a pink stone canyon wall. Patterns of strange looping ridges forming oval shapes protruded from the sandstone wall. They looked like the bones of an ancient sea creature. They were patterns eroded from ancient layers of petrified sand dunes. The wall was in shade with sunlight bouncing up from the red sand floor to add a warm glow to the canyon wall. It was a 25-minute walk back through the sagebrush to my car. The low winter sun was on the horizon.

Turn right after leaving the East Entrance to the park and follow NV 167, the scenic route to Las Vegas.



The Valley of Fire is filled with strange geological curiosities. I found this image two hundred feet to the southwest of Parking Area #3. When you park in that lot on the Scenic Road to the White Domes, look off toward the left and you'll see a block of white stone standing alone on the rim of the canyon. I crawled into the ground-level opening at its base with a wide-angle lens on my camera attached to a table-top tripod and photographed these swirling red patterns climbing the walls around a stalactite rising from the center of this chamber measuring only 12 inches high. Bring your close-up gear too.

The park's East Entrance is on the Lake Mead side of the park where Route 169 turns north and loops back to Interstate 15, through Overton and Logandale, Nevada, the nearest towns. There are no services inside the park. The campgrounds may be closed in cold weather. Nine miles north of the park's eastern entrance, the small town of Overton, Nevada, has two restaurants, two motels, a grocery store and a gas station. Overton is a lonely place in the middle of winter. Boaters on Lake Mead keep the place busy the rest of the year.

Have a great trip and send me an e-mail !



My life-long career in photography began at San Jose State University in 1957. After college, I enlisted in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, serving as a photographer and darkroom technician. In Germany, my skills and experience with equipment and lab work were developed and polished. I took the opportunity to photograph the beauty of nature in the Black Forest. Returning to California in 1965, I produced industrial and military training films for Raytheon Electronics and began showing my color nature prints. From 1969 through 1981, my photography was exhibited and sold in West Coast galleries. During the early 1980's, I taught color darkroom workshops, then expanded to include field trips. Former customers, who had purchased my framed photographs, wanted to learn photography. My Pacific Image Photography Workshops offered adventures to the Pacific Coast, the Southwest deserts, national parks, Hawaii, New England, Canada, England, and the South Pacific. The workshops evolved into writing and sharing my adventures with others. Photograph America Newsletter provides information on where, when, and how to discover the best nature photography in North America.

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