

Perspective

at 13,000 Feet

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I want to share an exhilarating experience I had just before finishing this book that enabled me to view life through the lens (literally) of time and perspective.

I had been on top of a few mountains throughout my life, and those moments had affected me with thoughts like, "I am so small in relation to the world!" I felt like my "problems" always shrank when I looked out from a high peak. I had been on top of the Grossglockner (12,500 ft.), the tallest mountain in the German Alps, and once we took a cable car to the summit of Mont Blanc in France (15,200'). But those were short stints at the summit—go up, look around and within an hour, return to normal "human" altitude.

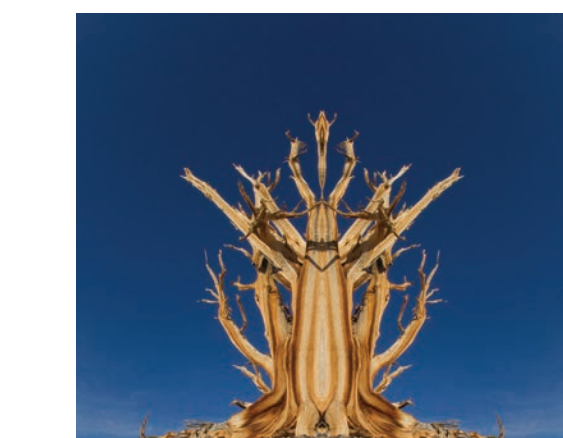


In September of my 80th year, it was to be different.

I had been in contact with a photographer in California who leads photo tours into the White Mountains of California, specifically into a remote area called Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest. Bristlecone is a relatively unknown, sparsely visited and, as I found out, somewhat inaccessible area atop a mountain range, east of Yosemite National Park.

I had had a tough year, health-wise and psychologically, starting in the autumn of 2010. I had an accident (October 2010), which resulted in a dislocated right hip, broken ribs and back fractures in four places. In the spring of 2011, my other hip needed to be replaced. Neck and shoulder pains were constantly with me. Was my age catching up with me? I certainly didn't like it when my doctor reminded me, "You're 80 years old, man...what do you expect?!"

So perhaps I was testing myself when I decided to "spit in the face of fate," and sign up for a five-day (September 2011) photo adventure in that Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest. It was a chance to photograph 5000- to 6000-year-old trees at elevations of 11,000-13,000 feet. It sounded so exciting and challenging. And you all know how I love photography!



The bottom line: IT WAS AN ABSOLUTELY GLORIOUS TRIP.



Second thoughts crept in when Lloyd Chambers (the photographer/guide) gave me more details: Once we got up to the forests (three hours away from any motel /hotel type civilization) we would be driving up and down a winding gravel mountain road twice a day. Since the best light to photograph up there was at sun up (5:30-7:00 a.m.) and at dusk,

it would be necessary to "stay up there." He then calmly told me to bring a warm sleeping bag, an air mattress, food for four or five days and lots of water. (It gets extremely dry at that altitude; you have to drink a minimum of three liters of water a day.) And the kicker: "Be sure you rent a four-wheel drive vehicle large enough to sleep in, and tough enough to manage the rough terrain."

This kind of a trip was definitely a first for me. I had never slept in a car before, and I knew I would miss my fresh scrambled eggs in the morning.

But, I decided to go for it. REI had plenty of heat-water-and-pour-it-into-this-package type foods. (Some actually tasted pretty good.) I packed up my gear and flew off to my mobile California "camp."

I lived in a Ford Explorer for five days, and I will (mostly) spare you the details. In retrospect, it was without a doubt the best thing I could have done for both my mind and my body.

However, I wasn't always seeing it that way at the time...



Bottom left: Lloyd Chambers and me. Lloyd's website, diglloyd.com, offers a wealth of information on digital photography.



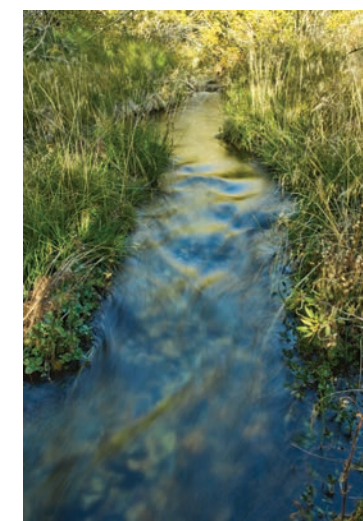
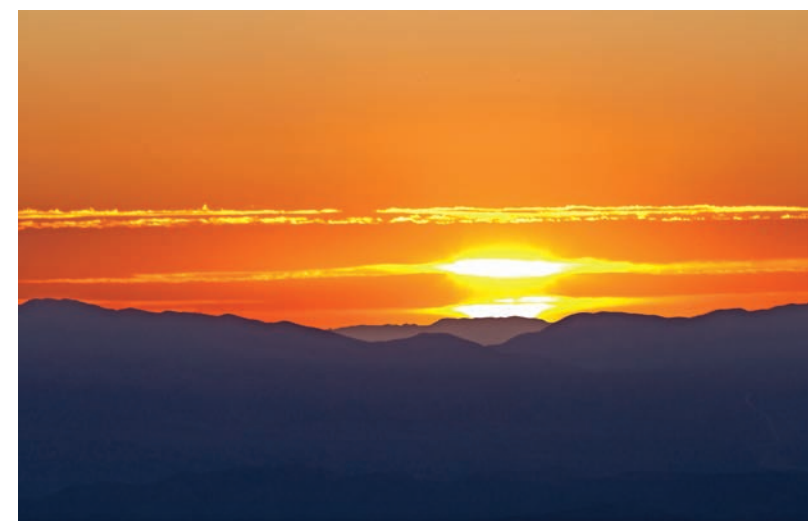


Above: 6 a.m. panorama, looking east toward the Sierra Nevada.



I was huffing and puffing, at times gasping hard for air when I had to hike up even the small slopes. Twice a day I had to slather myself with strong sunscreen, the sun is very powerful up that high. I basically wore and slept in the same double set of winter underwear for days. Taking pictures in those conditions was hard work!

But I had never in my life seen landscapes like the Bristlecone Pine Forest. I spent days doing nothing but changing lenses and shooting, shooting, shooting.



Below: Tufa formations in the alkaline lake water of California's Mono lake. Photographed on the way to Bristlecone Pine Forest.



The weather was hot during the day, but it got down to 35 degrees in the car at night. I slept in my dual underwear, in a down coat, in my sleeping bag—and was still cold.



But, I slept very well! At 5:00 a.m. we were up catching the first rays of the spectacular sunrises over the Eastern Sierra.

During the day (we never stopped it seems), we would find pristine little creeks running through amazing small canyons, interesting rock formations (you know me and rocks), and more and more phenomenal trees.

The sensation of standing in front of one of those 5000-year-old Bristlecone Pines was absolutely awe-inspiring. I can hardly describe it.

Think of it...5000 years old...that would be 3000 years before Christ! The first Greek temples “only” date back to about 800 BC. Incredibly, those trees were “born” during the Bronze Age. Their wood felt like iron to the touch. They are strong and resilient and have witnessed much.



It's a different kind of “religious” feeling that overcomes one in the presence of those ancient trees. A timelessness perhaps?

And, next to those gnarly old Bristlecones, I actually started to feel very, very young again.

