

# Quang-Tuan Luong:



*Sentinel Rock rising above the fog, Yosemite (California) National Park*

THE NATIONAL PARKS PROJECT,  
THE 57 U.S. NATIONAL PARKS PHOTOGRAPHED IN THE 5x7 FORMAT  
*By Kerry Thalmann*



*Cholla Cactus Garden, Joshua Tree (California) National Park*

THE FORMATION OF THE US NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM HAS BEEN called “the best idea America ever had.” With the Yellowstone Act of 1872, the United States government created the world’s first National Park “for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” From the very beginning, photography has played a significant role in the preservation of our nation’s natural treasures. It was the photographs of William Henry Jackson that convinced Congress that the natural wonders of Yellowstone were indeed real—not just the tall-tales of a few mountain men and fur trappers—and worthy of protection. Our National Park system has grown to include 57 National Parks. This includes the familiar crown jewels of Yellowstone (Wyoming, Idaho, Montana), Yosemite (California) and the Grand Canyon (Arizona), remote undeveloped and seldom visited parks such as Gates of the Arctic (Alaska), Kobuk Valley (Alaska) and the national park of American Samoa, and recent additions Black Canyon of the Gunnison (Colorado), Great Sand Dunes (Colorado) and Cuyahoga Valley (Ohio).

For the last ten years, Quang-Tuan Luong has pursued documenting each of the 57 National Parks with an unprecedented level of depth and detail using a 5x7 large format camera. Although multi-photographer

compilations covering all of the parks have been published, in September 2002, he became the first person to have photographed all 57 US National Parks with a large format camera.

The motivation for Tuan’s self-assigned, self-financed National Parks Project was to create “a unique ensemble, reflecting the diversity of a continent: deserts and rainforests, Tropics and Arctic.”

“A single photographer working on the project can bring to bear his own personal vision, and put each of the parks in a bigger context, therefore being more perceptive to what makes a particular place unique,” he said. “While the most popular parks like Yosemite or Yellowstone have been over-photographed, there is surprisingly little photographic coverage of the less accessible or less known parks. Even within the well-known parks, the coverage is mostly photographs taken from near the road. I always try to spend at least some time in the backcountry. I also found that many of the places had not been photographed with a consistent vision, and wanted to document those places with the highest level of quality as my personal contribution to their celebration and preservation.”

With a background in mountaineering, Tuan was uniquely prepared for the physical, logistical and artis-



*Seawall and Moat, Fort Jefferson, Dry Tortugas National Park*



*Icebergs, Muir Inlet, Glacier Bay (Alaska) National Park*



*The Maidens, Gates of the Arctic (Alaska) National Park*

tic challenge of tackling a project of this magnitude.

“After spending so many years in the wilderness of high mountains, making difficult ascents, I was drawn to the natural diversity, as I noticed that each environment gave rise to distinct new emotions. I thrive on looking for new experiences. Besides that quest, there was also the intellectual curiosity of finding out what makes each place special and unique in the larger picture of things. Once I had to limit my climbing activities for health reasons, I was eager to find a different outlet for the wilderness skills I developed during more than a decade of intense mountaineering, one that could be combined with my training as a researcher. I enjoyed the challenges of planning, accessing, and photographing remote locations.”

So, after spending over a decade visiting and photographing all the US National Parks, does the photographer have any personal favorites?

“Frankly, it’s difficult to say, because they are so different. If I was to pick a few parks, they would be: Yosemite—beautiful in all seasons and all scales, its deservedly famous views with cliffs and waterfalls are among the most spectacular in America, offers a lifetime of climbing and hiking; Capitol Reef (Utah)—lit-

tle known park has more variety than any other park on the Colorado Plateau, which itself is probably the most unique area in America; Acadia (Maine)—one of the smallest parks, in addition to the eastern fall colors on hillsides, the coastline is dramatic; Denali (Alaska)—vast and wild, with the most magnificent mountain range in North America.”

The choice of the 5x7 format for this project had both advantages, in terms of image quality, and disadvantages, in terms of travel and logistics.

“My format of choice, 5x7, has an aspect ratio that I find ideally suitable for landscapes. It yields transparencies that are large enough to enjoy on the light table. Looking at them that way, I often see details that escaped my bare eye when standing at the scene, and this brings back wonderful visual memories.”

A week-long backpacking trip into remote Gates of the Arctic National Park (an 8.4 million acre wilderness that’s nearly four times the size of Yellowstone, and more than twice the size of the state of Connecticut) required Tuan to carry a backpack weighing 50 percent of his body weight over many miles of trail-less wilderness terrain.

Although many large format photographers prefer the



Oho'o Stream, Haleakala (Hawaii) National Park

traditional black and white medium, Tuan prefers shooting in color.

"I work exclusively in color, for I find it a crucial part of the visual experience. Like many landscape photographers, I have used Fuji Velvia, extensively, for its vivid colors that seem good at matching the memories of a scene. However, these days, I use exclusively Fuji Astia. This film provides me with a more natural palette. Interestingly, I find that while in smaller formats, this film, because of its less saturated palette, does not match the colors that the mind perceived in a natural landscape, in a 5x7 transparency, the precise rendition of the textures, identical or better than what can be observed at the scene, is just right to recreate the visual experience of being there. Technically, Fuji Astia has three important advantages, first it holds almost one full stop of contrast more than Velvia, making it in particular easier to retain shadow detail in full light or sky detail in overcast conditions, second, the full additional shutter speed is very useful for freezing the motion of vegetation, and third, the reciprocity failure corrections are not necessary until 30s exposures, while Velvia de-

nitively needs them starting from 10s."

Although he has reached his goal of visiting and photographing all 57 US National Parks, Quang-Tuan Luong plans to return to many of the parks to continue to expand his portfolio of 5x7 images. ▲

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*Kerry Thalmann is a large format photographer who has done extensive backcountry travel and photographed "about half" of the US National Parks. He also had the pleasure of spending several days hiking, camping and photographing in Mount Rainier National Park (Washington) with Quang-Tuan Luong. "I outweigh Tuan by about 80 pounds, yet he carried a heavier pack up and down miles of steep mountain trails without complaint. Until I met Tuan, I thought I was a hard working photographer. After spending time on the trail with Tuan, I truly appreciate the effort and dedication he has poured into his Parks Project. I salute and applaud his accomplishment and congratulate him on reaching his goal of photographing all 57 US National Parks in the 5x7 format." To view some of Kerry Thalmann's National Park images, please visit his web site at: [www.thalmann.com](http://www.thalmann.com).*