

Alabama Hills

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01/2005

The Eastern side of the Sierra Nevada Mountain range in California provides an incredible wealth of photographic opportunities. Starting in the north and working south you have Lake Tahoe, Mono Lake, the Mammoth Lakes region, Convict Lake, Bishop, the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest, the Alabama Hills, and finally Death Valley National Park. Probably the least known portion of this range is the Alabama Hills and it will be the focus of this article.

These hills derive their name from Southern prospectors who were sympathetic to the Confederate cause and named these hills after the warship "Alabama". Today the 30,000 acres are managed by the Bureau of Land Management and designated the "Alabama Hills Recreation lands". You may not have known it watching television but you have seen this area in the many western movies filmed in the hills as are many car commercials. You can explore this area by driving along the Movie Road.



To get to the Alabama Hills you must travel on Route 395 to Lone Pine and turn onto the Whitney Portal Road heading west towards the mountains. You will want to arrive before sunrise so that you can catch the warm glow of the sun off the mountains. A good rule to follow for sunrise photography is to scout a location during the day so that you know where to go the next morning when it is dark. Unfortunately, during this trip I did not have a chance to do so but had researched this location on the web and knew the spot to photograph a very interesting arch.



Travelling west on the Whitney Portal Road you will make a right onto the Movie Road. Follow this dirt road and bear right into a parking lot. Walk towards the western side of the parking lot along the trail down and over to the other side of the gully. You will then bear a bit towards the right moving towards a rock formation that quite frankly looks like a nipple. The Arch is to the right of this formation. Look carefully as it does blend in with the rock formations. Be ready as the sun starts to rise as the arch will initially be in shadow and have your wide angle lens ready! Stay low so as not to create a shadow yourself!

One thing to keep in mind when taking shots is to use your neutral density filter! The difference between the foreground hills which may well be in shadow that the looming mountains will have a greater range than film can handle. Another useful filter is a warming filter to add a little punch to the light. Finally, be careful with a polarizing filter and back off from the maximum polarization otherwise your sky will be way too dark. Of course, shoot all your shots using a steady tripod!

After taking shots of the arch the rock formations and the warm light on the mountain range will make for many interesting compositions. Frankly, you can't go wrong stopping and taking shots of the many rock formations.

Back track to the Whitney Portal Road and turn right (west), to wind your way up to the top of the mountain (about 13 miles total from Lone Pine). There are a number of pullouts from which you can take photographs of Mt. Whitney (at 14,494 feet, it is the highest peak in the lower 48 states). At the end of the road you'll find a campground and Whitney Creek. Be sure to visit the tiny Whitney Portal store as they make a killer breakfast!



So if you are in the Eastern Sierra's, try to spend at least one morning shooting in the Alabama Hills and Mount Whitney.