

Eastern Sierra Fall Foliage, CA

By Tibor Vari

In mid October of 2004, I was out in San Jose for business when I took four days off to explore the Eastern Sierra Nevada's for some fall foliage photography. Generally, depending on the altitude, mid to late October tends to be the peak foliage in this area. Because I was alone and the drive is almost 6 hours to Lee Vining, I elected to spend one night at Yosemite National Park and rented a room at the Cedar Lodge Motel (www.yosemite-motels.com/cedarlodge), which is 8 miles from the park entrance and 20 minutes from the valley floor.



The next day I got up early to catch a sunrise in Yosemite along the Merced River at Cathedral Beach before going over to Valley View. The omens were not good as the weather was overcast with dull lighting and no colors. So I got some practice using my new Nikon D70 digital camera to shoot some ducks and scenics before starting the drive over the mountains after a late breakfast.

Ascending out of the valley floor of Yosemite, I drove north on Route 41 and then east on Route 120 towards Lee Vining and the Eastern Sierra's. This road generally closes for the winter around November 1st and re-opens sometime around May/June (depending on the amount of snowfall during the winter). One place to stop along the way is Olmstead Point, where you get a wonderful view of Half Dome and Tenaya Lake. Moving further east and just before descending out of the Mountains, you get a tremendous view at Tioga Pass and my first glimpse of Aspens groves in the blazing colors of fall!

At this point you arrive at the tiny town of Lee Vining, gateway to Mono Lake. Nearly 10 more miles south and east of town (Routes. 395 & 120), I arrived at my sunset location at South Tufa Beach. This is the most common location for taking pictures of Mono Lake for both sunrise and sunset. Afterwards, I head south on 395 to Mammoth Lakes and my new base of operations the Econo Lodge (very cheap but a dump). As part of my ritual at night, I prepare all my equipment for the next day with the added new twist of downloading the digital images to the laptop where I can then review and burn a DVD as a backup.



Next morning is a big day as I head back to Mono Lake to catch a sunrise at South Tufa Beach. Within a few minutes of the sun coming up, the warm light is gone so off I go. I drive on Route 395 just north of Mono Lake to Conway Summit (8,138 feet above sea level), for a beautiful panoramic view of Mono Lake, the White Mountains, the Mono Craters, and the mountain ranges to the east. I stop to take some shots of the Aspens which are at the full range of colors.



From here I continue the drive to Bodie (395N to 270E), which is an old abandoned mining community founded in 1859 during the wild rush for gold and silver. At the height of the boom, this community of 10,000 had 65 saloons, two churches and one very notorious reputation. Ultimately, the gold and silver ran out and the place became a ghost town by the 1940s. In 1962, Bodie State Historic Park was established to preserve the town's original structures. Fortunately, for photographers, this is an incredible place to take photographs. Early morning or late afternoon light on the wooden structures makes this a target rich environment!

One must see drive for fall foliage is the June Lake loop drive (Route 158 between Mono lake and Mammoth Lakes), where there are Aspen groves and wonderful lake scenes with mountainous backdrops. The same can be said for the Mammoth Lakes drive as well. One caution is that Mammoth Lakes is a year round resort location packed with tourists and as a result, the place was teeming with people.

South of Mammoth Lakes I did a sunrise at Convict Lake one morning and was well rewarded for my early wake-up call. Note that this is a classic situation where a split graduated neutral density filter comes in handy to balance the highlights at the top of the mountain with the shadows in the foreground.



Traveling south along Route 195 there are a number of roads branching off towards the mountains. Both Rock Creek Road and Pine Creek Road produced wonderful vistas and lots of Aspen Groves in various colors depending on the altitude. I would stop at the bridges to take shots of the trees and the stream. However, since it was a clear day, it was difficult not to get high contrast shots.

Continuing further south is a must stop at Bishop where you can visit the Mountain Light Gallery (<http://www.mountainlight.com/>), of the late Galen Rowell right on Main Street. After a very inspirational tour you can head straight out the door west on Route 168 to visit Lake Sabrina, South Lake, and some wonderful scenery. Near Lake Sabrina is a dirt road leading up to North Lake which is a wonderful late morning shot of fall colors, unfortunately, I was late for this altitude as the trees were already spent.

For the film photographs, I used a polarizer filter and Fuji Velvia 50 film. Be careful not to over polarize your shot as this will turn the sky a very unnatural dark blue. For the digital camera (Nikon D70), I also used the polarizer. The only other filter I used was a graduated split neutral density for shots like Convict Lake where the difference in light from the foreground to the highlights is more than any film or sensor can handle. So the ND filter helps to reduce this gap by either 2 or 3 stops depending on the filter. This is a must have filter in the landscape photographers bag.

Unfortunately, my mini-vacation had to end and I started to head back to San Jose and the flight home. For my 3 nights in the Eastern Sierra's, I was enthralled by the majestic scenery, wonderful colors of the Aspens, and the wondrous light of sunrise and sunset. I will definitely come back at a later date for a much longer stay!