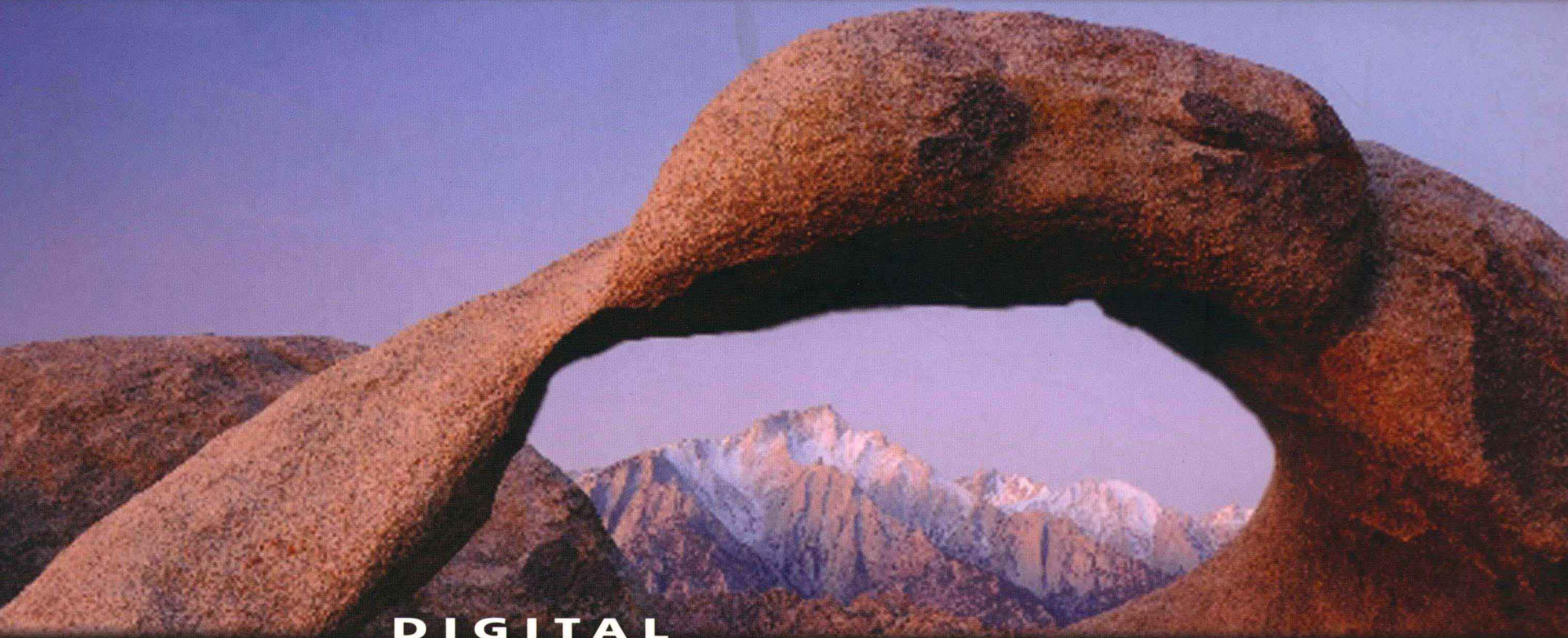


JOHN & BARBARA GERLACH



DIGITAL
LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

Digital Landscape Photography

John and Barbara Gerlach



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Digital Landscape Photography

About the Author

John and Barbara Gerlach have been professional nature photographers for more than 25 years. Their beautiful nature photographs are published in magazines, calendars, and books worldwide. They travel the globe leading photographic safaris to terrific wildlife destinations and teach field workshops on landscape, close-up, and hummingbird photography. More than 50,000 people have attended their intensive 1-day nature photography instructional seminars. Both love to teach others how to make their own fine photographs. They enjoy living in the mountains near Yellowstone National Park and frequently ride their horses in the backcountry to photograph. For details about their instructional nature photography field programs, please go to www.gerlachnaturephoto.com.



Acknowledgments

We dedicate this book to a fantastic group of skilled landscape photographers whom we know personally or vicariously through their photo books that find a home on our bookshelves. This list includes Ansel Adams, Ian Adams, Craig Blacklock, Willard Clay, Carr Clifton, Jack Dykinga, John Fielder, Tim Fitzharris, David Muench, William Neill, Pat O'Hara, Galen Rowell, John Shaw, Tom Till, Larry Ulrich, and many others. Their wonderful images of the landscape inspired us to visit many of the places they photographed. We know it was seeing so many awesome landscape images, especially of the American West, that encouraged us to settle close to Yellowstone National Park in 1993.

You wouldn't be holding this book were it not for the help and encouragement of the super staff at Focal Press. Paul Gottehrer, a Senior Project Manager at Elsevier, attended our one-day photo seminar. At the end of the seminar he asked us to send a book proposal to his company, which we did shortly thereafter. That proposal led to our first book, *Digital Nature Photography — The Art and the Science*. Cara Anderson, Carlin Reagan, and Valerie Geary at Focal Press were our primary contacts throughout the process of creating this book. They deserve special thanks for putting up with us spending way too much time in the mountains far away from e-mail and cell phones. They somehow kept us on schedule, even though we were impossible to reach most of the time.

Many of the images in this book were taken around our Idaho mountain home and in nearby Yellowstone National Park. We wish to thank Bill Howell and Clyde Seely for hiring us in 1995 to lead winter photo tours by snowmobile in the park. Over the years, we've thoroughly enjoyed hundreds of winter days in fabulous Yellowstone National Park. Some of the images we captured appear in this book.

Terry and Angie Search who own Yellowstone Mountain Guides helped us pursue our passion for riding horses in the wilderness by hiring us to be their photo wranglers. For several years, we've enjoyed guiding photographers on extended overnight horseback photo trips into the backcountry of Yellowstone National Park and the Lee Metcalf wilderness.



Storms in the Sierra Nevada Mountains near Lone Pine, California, frequently produce dramatic light on the mountains when the red light at dawn passes unimpeded over the clear desert air to the east.

x Acknowledgments

Mike and Mary Sue, Jan and Terry, the two Nolan couples who collectively own the Timber Ridge Lodge, deserve more thanks than we can possibly bestow on them. Since 1988 we have taken over their small motel and lodge that's nestled in the gorgeous northern Michigan woods for weeks at a time. Mary Sue and Jan never once protested when we completely rearranged everything in the lodge to make it more suitable for our photography workshops. When we ask Mary Sue if we can move all of her furniture just one more time, she always cheerfully responds with the most beautiful Yooper accent by saying, *you betcha, I need to clean under the couches anyway, eh?*

Writing a book is a daunting task with long and lonely hours. One of the hardest parts is finding typos that are obvious when pointed out but nearly impossible to see if you wrote them yourself. A couple of our best photography students offered to read the text over to spot typos, errors, omissions,

or anything that wasn't clear. Al Hart and Dan Pater both helped considerably in finding these errors. Al spent incredible amounts of time reworking much of my original writing to make it far more understandable and precise, so we all owe him a huge debt of gratitude. Dan did his best to help control our comma chaos and contributed numerous important advisory comments. Together, these two fine writers helped enormously in making this text so much better for you to read. Edited chapters flew back and forth across the country via e-mail at all hours of the day and night. We all laughed a lot and learned a lot and hope these fine editing commandos will join us for future books! Since both of these excellent photographers shoot Nikon, more Nikon details made it into the text, too. If you do find typos or other problems, I (John) accept responsibility and beg your forgiveness.

Two professional photographers read this manuscript, too. Many thanks to Craig Carlson and Tony

Sweet for offering suggestions that make this book better. We appreciate your time and effort greatly!

The fifty thousand or so students who have passed through our photo classes over the decades deserve the most recognition of all. Many have offered advice on where to find magical landscape opportunities and their probing questions have forced us to find crucial answers to questions we haven't ever considered. Teaching has always been a two-way street for us. We help our students improve their knowledge and photo skills in the field and they help us deepen our own depth of understanding, too. It's a win-win situation for all. We feel truly blessed for all of the wonderful folks we have met over thirty years of teaching nature photography!



Cindy Koch, one of our gifted students, made this fine image of a New Mexico aspen grove. Remembering our advice, she turned the sun into a star by stopping the lens down to $f/22$. We love how she balanced the sun with the bear claw marks on the nearest tree!



Introduction

Everyone can easily find wonderful landscapes to photograph no matter where he or she lives. Even city dwellers have backyards and nearby parks where perhaps a small stream offers interesting images. Many live near an ocean, a mountain range, or a national park that was set aside to preserve scenic features. Each of these places offers the landscape photographer endless possibilities.

Landscape photographers can buy and carry less gear than other photographers, such as wildlife or macro photographers. You can do quite well with a couple of zoom lenses and a few other accessories. Two advantages landscape photographers have are the ability to approach their subject rather easily in most cases, and the ease of finding magnificent landscapes in protected and well-publicized parks.

However, natural landscapes are by no means easy to photograph well. Humans have put their mark on the landscape, too. Man-made distractions such as telephone wires, fences, litter, and signs may be difficult to keep out of your images. Even in the most remote locations, jet contrails often streak across a blue sky and smog may obscure the Grand Canyon.

Landscapes tend to be huge subjects, so natural light is crucial to getting the best images. The macro photographer's tactics of modifying light with reflectors, diffusers, and fill flash just don't work on a distant and massive mountain! You must be present when the best light is illuminating the landscape. This means photographing at dawn and dusk whenever possible. However, there are times when middle of the day light works well for landscapes, too.

We've been most fortunate to live most of our lives in northern Michigan and, since 1993, at 7000 feet in the picturesque mountains of Idaho near Yellowstone National Park. Both of these wonderful places offer fabulous landscapes to photograph. We live in the mountains to enjoy wonderful views on a daily basis, to feel and hear the storms as they crash into the mountain peaks, and to live with the mountain wildlife.



Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore's white birch forest is absolutely stunning at peak color. Since it's adjacent to Lake Superior at the Twelve-Mile beach campground, it peaks late during the autumn color season.



This tiny northern Michigan hillside spring is only two feet wide, but offers rich photo opportunities when autumn leaves litter the scene.

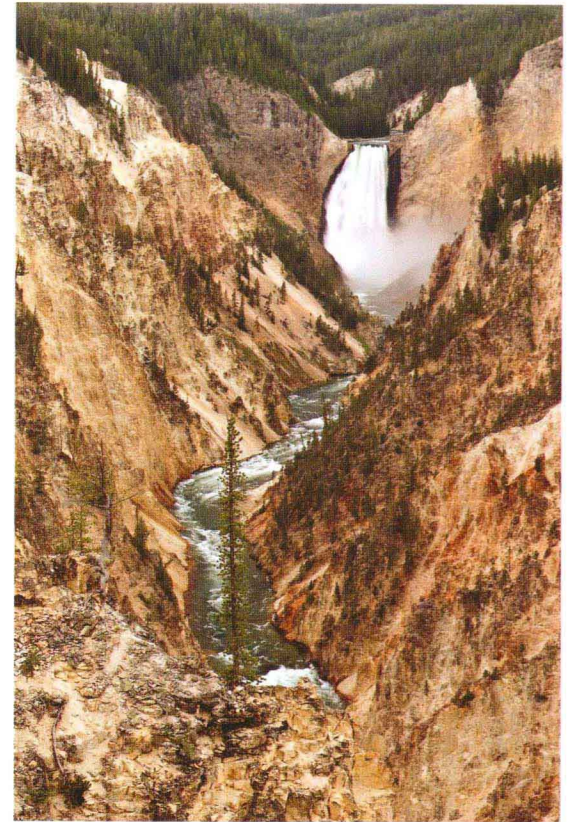
Some people think landscapes are static and don't change, but they are mistaken. Landscapes change as seasons come and go. Drought or torrential rain can drastically change their appearance. Landscapes change rapidly as the light illuminating them changes. Often, fabulous light is fleeting, so you must be able to quickly and efficiently use your camera gear to capture the light before it disappears behind a cloud or drops



(a, b) The Lower Falls from Artist Point in Yellowstone National Park is a splendid landscape during all seasons of the year.

below the horizon. The landscape is dynamic and always changing its mood.

As in our first book on digital nature photography, this book will also stress shooting the highest quality images possible in the field. We'll do little with the digital darkroom (Capture NX, Photoshop, Aperture, Lightroom) because so many books already cover that topic and those applications. Sadly, we see too many photographers taking short-cuts, such as shooting landscapes



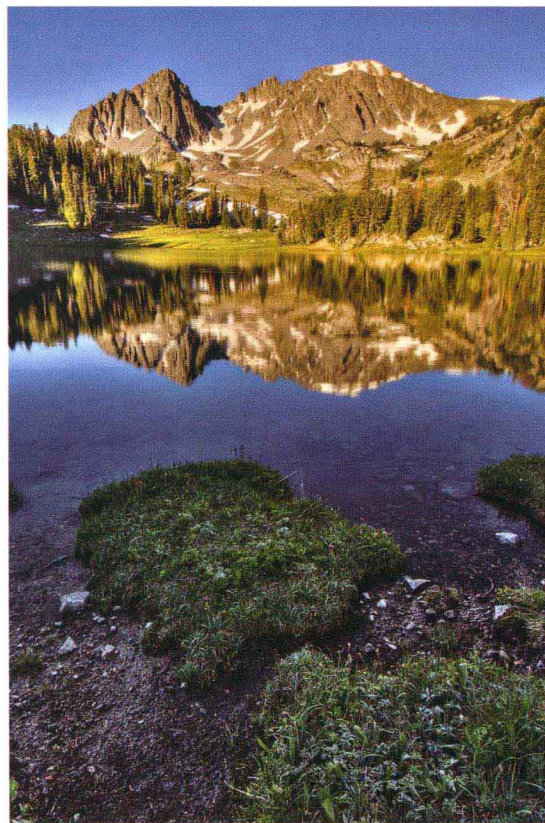
hand-held, when it would be easy to get sharper images by using a tripod. Too many photographers are taking short-cuts because they think they can fix most problems in the digital darkroom. Perhaps they can minimize the problems later, but making wonderful landscape images is so much easier if you adopt superb shooting techniques and make them a habit. We stress these techniques throughout this book and, with practice, they will become a habit that allows

you to shoot outstanding landscape images shot after shot.

However, we must explore at least a few things that you can easily do in the digital darkroom, because the power of image-editing software may significantly affect the way you shoot images in the field. Shooting a series of overlapping images so that later you can use software to stitch them together into a stunning panorama is just one important example.

Another example is the power of digital capture and high dynamic range (HDR) software to successfully record a scene that is so contrasty that it could never before be successfully photographed. HDR photography can produce truly awesome results! We'll be discussing how to shoot an HDR scene that can be computer-assembled into an image that preserves the detail and color of the original scene's brightest highlights and darkest shadows. We've devoted a whole chapter to this powerful new technique that you surely will want to use and master.

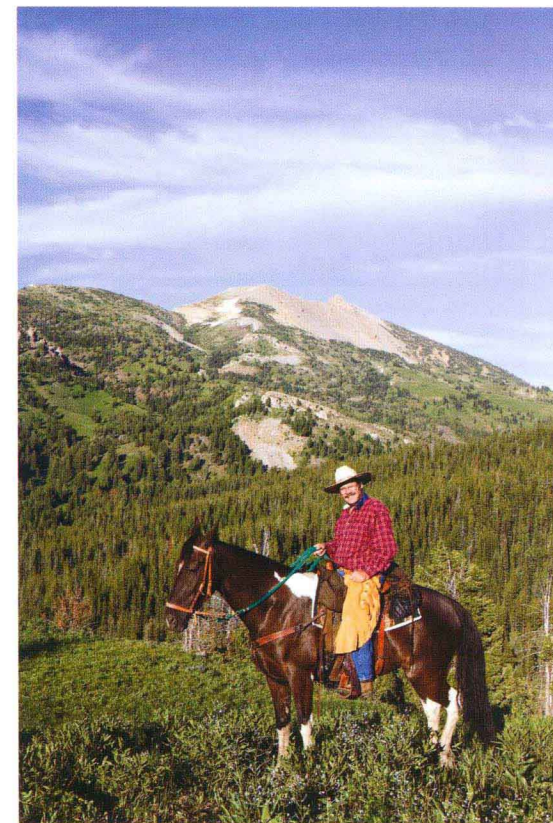
In the interest of full disclosure, I'm (John) on uneasy terms with the computer, so I know how you feel if the computer frightens you, too. I struggle with the computer more than most. If it weren't for Barbara, who easily makes computers do her bidding, I would be absolutely lost. I have developed certain Photoshop skills, though. I'm an expert at starting the program, a guru with the crop tool, and a master at stopping for lunch — the three easiest things one can do in Photoshop. Oh, one more thing: I can convert RAW images with the Photoshop RAW converter quite well, so that must be easy, too, but I know little beyond that. Fortunately, Barbara is a whiz



Pristine Lake Ha Hand in the Lee Metcalf wilderness is at the edge of the alpine zone at 9000 feet. We used HDR techniques to capture color and detail in both the sunlit mountains and the heavily shadowed foreground.

with computers, remembers all of the short-cut keys that make Photoshop dance to her commands, excels at making wonderful prints, and continues to expand her knowledge by practicing and attending advanced printing classes taught by master printers such as Charles Cramer.

It isn't that I don't want to know a lot more about the digital darkroom, but my time is criti-



We love riding horses over the mountain peaks around our Idaho home. Here's John riding Teton, his well-behaved (usually) Tennessee Walker. We frequently use our horses to explore the wilderness where magnificent photo subjects abound.

cally limited. I love shooting outdoor images and teaching field workshops. Both of these interests permit me to spend massive amounts of time in wild places, which suits me perfectly. In my *spare* time, I do enjoy trout fishing, bird watching, kayaking, cross-country skiing, and riding Tennessee Walking Horses in the rugged mountains surrounding my home. I spend most of my

time outdoors, but I do enjoy writing because it can be done at night, on rainy days, or when buckled into an airplane seat.

We never get tired of learning new ways to use cameras and lenses to shoot better images. It's exciting to buy a new camera so all of the new features can be explored to see if they're useful for taking better images. We meticulously go through every custom function to figure out what each one does and then carefully consider how it might help us shoot nice images. Many custom functions aren't that useful for landscape photography, but some are critical and are covered in detail later in this book.

Our goal is to always shoot quality images because we have no use for snapshots. We hope you're reading this book because you, too, want quality images, but don't want to struggle with camera gear or use methods that are unnecessarily complicated or aren't especially effective. We shoot landscapes with digital cameras quite differently than we did when shooting film. That's why every image in this book comes from original digital capture. Although we've shot film all over the world for most of our careers, we feel images captured with a digital camera (not scanned slides) should be used to illustrate a book about digital photography. That's why you won't see any Antarctica images, even though we've led two photo tours before going digital to that magnificent part of the world. In some cases our recommendations differ from those of other photographers, but everyone is entitled to an opinion. Often, there's more than one way to achieve excellent results. We explain why our shooting strategies are what they are and hope

you'll try them. Ultimately, you must decide for yourself what works best for you.

We have more than three decades of experience seriously photographing landscapes. (Could that much time have flown by?) We enjoy being productive, so we carefully choose what to photograph, because weather conditions and light are critical to making spectacular images. In addition, we've led hundreds of field workshops that we always strive to make successful for our students. When you have a dozen students expecting you to lead them to outstanding subjects, it adds pressure to selecting worthwhile destinations. We want our workshop students to shoot images they'll cherish. The key to accomplishing this goal is to make sure the students have wonderful subjects to photograph in good weather and bad, and are guided in using their camera equipment in the most efficient manner they can.

This book is unlike many photography books because the emphasis is on the process of capturing outstanding images in the field. We concentrate on perfecting shooting techniques and developing strategies for dealing with the weather and light. We emphasize thoroughly working various subjects, such as fall color, waterfalls, and snow scenes. We spend a lot of time on using camera gear effectively, shooting perfect exposures, making sharp images, and creating pleasing compositions. We don't spend much time on the digital darkroom, nor do we go into detail about how lenses focus light, the pros and cons of different imaging sensors, or the inner workings of cameras. While some of this information might be interesting to know about (or not), knowing how a lens is assembled does little to

help you shoot outstanding images. We simply don't have space in this book to cover topics that really don't help you shoot pleasing images.

The methods we use to shoot landscape images are simple and fairly straightforward. They work for us and we know they work for the thousands of students who have attended our field workshops over the past 30 years. Our students do extremely well in our field workshops and many have gone on to make nature photography a part- or full-time activity for fun or profit. We're thrilled by the enormous success our students have enjoyed and love seeing their images published all over the place. Once they develop superb shooting habits, learn to spot photogenic subjects, and make good decisions about where to go, given weather and light conditions, excellent landscape photography is easy to achieve.

This book is intended for those who want to learn to shoot solid and exciting landscape images efficiently, easily, and quickly. We stress the factors that really matter for achieving that goal. We wish you the best of luck in the wonderful journey that awaits you in shooting your own special landscape images. Take your time while enjoying that journey and we hope you'll share your fine images with others!

May fabulous light lead you to magical subjects!

John and Barbara Gerlach

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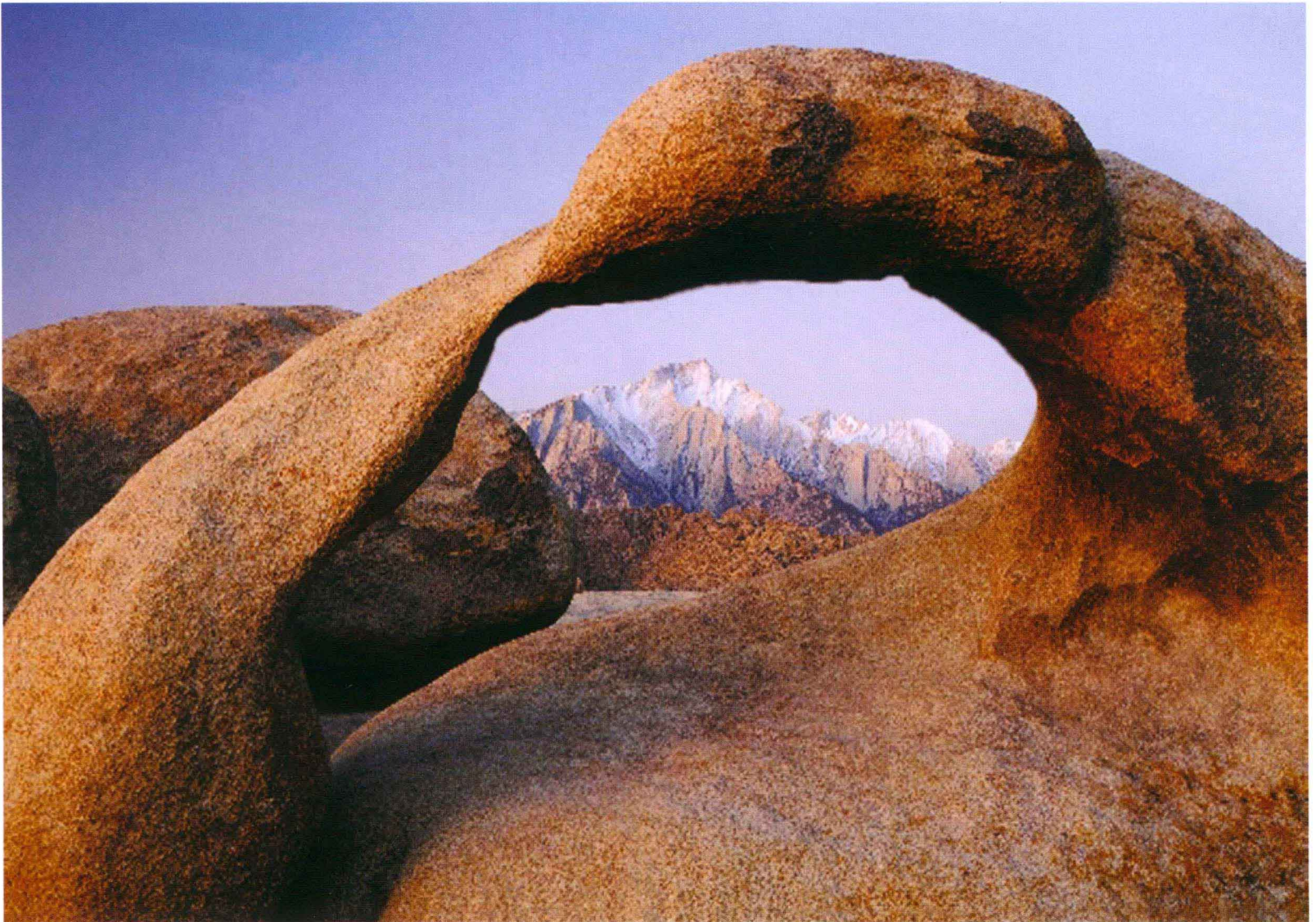
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Natural arch in the Alabama Hills in California.

