

# Bisti Moonrise, Illusion at Magic Hour

by Joe Bridwell

"The land sloped downward now into an immensity of erosion. What had once been a sandstone plain had been carved into a grotesquery of shapes. Tables, heads, exposed ribs, serrations, and things to which Chee's imagination could not attach names. Wind and water had cut through the overlay into the blackness of coal deposits, into crimson clay, into the streaky blue of shale. Every color showed—except green.

"This was the Bisti Badlands. It stretched away for 50 miles under clouds that had been steadily building."

—Tony Hillerman, *People of Darkness*, 1980

The almost inexplicable lure of the Bisti Badlands in Northwestern New Mexico simply runs bone deep.

Hoodoos are rock forms composed of multiple rock layers and shaped in countless ways by centuries of erosion. Many photographers have taken gorgeous daylight shots of hoodoos on the Bisti. Few have captured remarkable sunset silhouettes; fewer still have taken images of surreal hoodoos shot at moonrise.

In 1986, Galen Rowell published *Mountain Light, in Search of the Dynamic Landscape* through Sierra Club books. In 1975, nine American climbers, including Rowell, spent three months attempting to climb K2, the second-highest mountain in the world. A premier National Geographic photographer, Rowell coined the term "Magic Hour":

"Twice each day the cool, blue light of night interacts with warm tones of daylight! The most interesting parts of the natural world are the edges, places where ocean meets land, meadow meets forest, timberline touches the heights. Near Magic Hour, transmitted light becomes ever warmer, reflected light ever colder."

The Bisti's Magic Hour occurs within an hour or so of both sunrise and sunset. Imagine this: fading sunset enhances one side of a hoodoo in direct golden light, as the moon rising from behind casts indirect blue light on its shaded side!

To put the cherry on this evocative chocolate sundae, one can, by facing west, view towering clouds saturated with rains that come forcefully and sudden. These rains carved the Bisti hoodoos. Then face east, when the light of the rising sun emphasizes strong red and blue light on the landscape, and capture an exquisite image.

And there you have a remarkable concept—Bisti Moonrise Digital Expeditions.

I got into digital photography and the Bisti at about the same time. As a geology undergraduate, graduate, and professional, I've made many landscape images from around our planet. Many Bisti photo-ops have added hoodoos, rainforests and dinosaurs to that exciting litany. Walking through the Bisti, it's common to find bizarre hoodoos, less common to find petrified logs and tree stumps, but



it is really quite rare to find dinosaur tracks.

What is truly uncommon is to learn that these ancient petrified logs were once a gorgeous part of a verdant rainforest beside a great seaway. In the Bisti, some logs exceed 100 feet in length. To the south, there are many petrified stumps in a place called Fossil Forest. Some 70 million years ago, this great seaway, with its warm, humid climate, stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada, partially covering New Mexico. These rainforest remnants have become a part of the Bisti.

Beyond capturing the present image lies the charm and mystery of an enduring ancient landscape. Hand-in-hand with former rainforests, dinosaur bones can be found all over the Bisti. From the fast little Triassic beastie *Coelophysis* from Ghost Ranch, to the longest Jurassic dinosaur on our planet, Sam the *Seismosaurus* from Ojito, along with the late Cretaceous *Bisti Beast*.

When the Bisti was created, lazy rivers ran into the sea, depositing sand, mud, and swampy remnants, which became coal beds.

Top right, *Wingman's Adios*. Bisti hoodoo with gorgeous sunset backdrop. ©David Lyons and Joe Bridwell;

Center: *Rebekah's Suitor*. ©David Lyons;

Bottom left: *Cover's Sister*. This image was companion to the award-winning photograph featured on the cover of *New Mexico Magazine*, January 2006. ©Joe Bridwell;

Bottom right: *Sphinx*. ©Joe Bridwell.





ing tours. The emphasis is on 9-to-5 day trips rather than fully involved moonrise expeditions.

Like the Digital Tours, Road Scholarships combine landscape photography with the history of the land. On Road Scholarships, one can participate in Storytelling sessions on the area's natural history, tour museum exhibits of ancient life, and take wilderness treks where dinosaurs left ancient tracks. The scholarships that have been planned include "Early Dinosaurs at Ghost Ranch" and "Sam the Seismosaurus in the Ojito Wilderness."

While darkness at Magic Hour may be the ideal time for image capture, your Moonrise Expedition may return at witching hour. You want to return in *hozho*, the Navajo phrase that means "to walk in peace and beauty." It also conveys living in harmony with the land. Your Digital Tour or your Road Scholarship contains amazing photography, dinosaur tracks, and ancient rainforests—all cast during Magic Hour on our enchanting Bisti.

Towering rain clouds are close kin to brusque cracks of thunder and intense streaks of jagged lightning. Of these storms, Hillerman said, "When the clouds gather anger they cry thunder and rain, this is the male rain." When exposed many millennia later, lightning from such male rains, upon striking the exposed coal, created underground fires. Such ancient events created an exceptional, crowning glory to the superb enchantment of Bisti Badlands: Red Dog Hills! Red Dogs are simply clay fragments that were fire-killed by these underground fires to their famous reds and orange hues. Like ruby-strewn fields, they cascade brilliantly across hillsides.

Not many photos exist of the moon backlighting hoodoos at the Bisti. It is no simple matter to capture digital images of them under a rising moon, with its

edge of light on the landscape. The Bisti is a wilderness area. There are no trails. There is no water. Packing your camera gear and energy on your back, you become a wilderness trekker. The badlands are at an elevation of nearly 6000 feet, yet during hikes, climbs are perhaps 100 feet. Spring and fall are ideal for photo-ops. Would you want to go in the summer if you knew an area just south is called Split Lip Flats?

The lure of colorful Bisti photography, along with some "Storytelling," are parts of our sponsored day trips and digital photography weekends. The Bisti Moonrise Expedition will take place over six-day periods, culminating in the full moon's rising. The Bisti Planet 50+ Digital Tours are also making their debut, in the form of three-day hik-

*Joe Bridwell's training in various aspects of geology focused on numerical modeling of physical phenomena. Naming the hoodoos makes great fun for his grandkids. The companion photograph to Cover's Sister was chosen over a thousand photos in New Mexico Magazine's Fifth Annual Photography Contest in January 2006. Planet 50+ and Road Scholarships are sponsored by Bear Canyon Senior Center and Meadowlark Senior Center of Albuquerque and Rio Rancho, NM. For details, contact Joe Bridwell at 505.296.4623 or photo@geocompa.com, or visit his website at geocompa.com.*

Top left: Long View. ©Joe Bridwell; Center: God's Boot. ©Joe Bridwell;

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