

The online magazine for landscape photographers

on landscape

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# Craig Varjabedian

INTO THE WHITE SANDS



CRAIG VARJABEDIAN  
ELOQUENT PHOTOGRAPHS



# Into the White Sands

## CONNECTING WITH THE ESSENCE OF THE PLACE

Back in the summer, Craig contacted us to tell us about his new book 'Into the Great White Sands' and the more I read about the White Sands National Monument, the more I wanted to know about the vast 224 square miles that the park covers and the six distinct ecological units it encompasses. We caught up with Craig to hear more about this special place, the largest gypsum dune field on the planet, and his sense of connection with it.

### **Tell us why you love landscape photography and your route into it.**

To answer that question, I have to go way back to my experiences as a small child growing up in Canada. I was always drawn to the outdoors, being out in nature and observing and watching whatever I could find in my backyard; leaves, insects, birds, small animals. I was a focused, contemplative child who enjoyed spending time alone and getting lost in the workings of the natural world, trying to figure out why it seemed to work the way it did. As an adult, I continue to find great joy being out in nature, almost an obsession, and working as a photogra-

pher has given me the opportunity to constantly be learning something from my experiences in the natural world. For me it's more than just about making pretty pictures, that's nice certainly, but it's more about having the opportunity to observe, to be a witness to the miraculousness of it all. While out photographing in the landscape, I have learned that I have to turn off the internal dialogue, to be quiet, still and patient so that the veil might be pierced and I am given a glimpse into some magic moment. And if I'm lucky enough for the veil to stay open long enough, I am given the gift of a beautiful photograph. Sharing these moments through my photographs brings me great joy.



**Craig Varjabedian**

Craig Varjabedian is an award-winning photographer who explores the back roads of the American West, making pictures of the unique and quintessential. He shares awe-inspiring stories of the land and the people who live on it; one photograph at a time.

[craigvarjabedian.com](http://craigvarjabedian.com)





A chance encounter at a gallery with a well-known photographer at the age of 14 ignited my imagination to the possibilities of becoming an artist and pursuing photography as a craft. This led me to the formal study of photography with Phil Davis at the University of Michigan. Phil was a stickler for craft and believed that with a thorough grounding in technique one could then begin the challenging process of mining the notions of what makes a good photograph. I am grateful for the discipline that Phil Davis taught me. A few years later, thinking that I wanted to follow an academic career track, I enrolled at the Rochester Institute of Technology where I received my Master of Fine Arts degree in photography.

As a photographer, I have been incredibly fortunate to receive so much support for my work. Photography is a highly competitive field and it is difficult to get noticed, much less supported. I am tremendously grateful and a little overwhelmed by the people who purchase my original photographs, acquire copies of my books or attend photography workshops that I teach.

My work has covered a wide range of genres and has received national recognition, such as a television Emmy Award in 1991 for the PBS Documentary "En Divina Luz: The Penitente Moradas of New Mexico." I have also received two successive National Endowment for the

Arts grants for my work. I tend to work on photographic projects somewhat thematically, projects that seem to grow and take several years to wrestle with and eventually complete. These often evolve into a book, then a travelling exhibition of that work. My latest body of work, "Into the Great White Sands," is my twelfth book published by the University of New Mexico Press and photographs from this are currently being presented at The Museum of the Southwest in Midland, Texas, where the exhibition debuted. The exhibition will continue to travel around the United States and possibly go on to Europe.

#### **Tell us about your love of the American West.**

For me, it is a gift to live in the American West. I truly feel at home. Years ago, I read westerns written by Zane Grey, Louis L'Amour, Tony Hillerman and others, I loved the adventures of Roy Rogers and John Wayne on the big screen while growing up, and over time I came under its spell. Later the photographs of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston provided inspiration and helped me understand the profound possibilities that a photograph could have. My first serious trip to California was to take a workshop with an amazing well-known photographer of the American West, coincidentally the photographer I had met as a teen who'd first encouraged me, inspiring my future endeavours as an artist.

After finishing my time in California, my mind reeling with all I had learned during that workshop, I decided to travel home through the American Southwest and experience for myself some of the places that had inspired many great artists. On the itinerary was a stop in New Mexico to see the place where Ansel Adams had taken his iconic Moonrise photograph; the small village of Hernandez, located just north of Santa Fe. I was amazed at how much the place had changed since Ansel made his photograph in 1941. After staying in Hernandez to





watch the sun set, hoping to see something magical as Ansel had, we drove back to Santa Fe. And because our financial coffers were getting extremely low, we found ourselves sleeping in the car on the old historic plaza in the state's capital city of Santa Fe.

Waking up the next morning, I saw the light streaming across the mountains into the plaza and it had a physicality; it had form! And yes, it was illuminating for sure, but this light was palpable, almost like I could hold it and capture it and put it in a jar to keep. I had never seen anything like it. Here the light is an element all its own, not just something that a photographer is aware of, or

something to be manipulated or considered while making a compelling photograph, but an individual presence that definitely informs and says, "I am here." It's like all the pieces of my photographic life came together that morning in Santa Fe, waking up to that magical light, and somehow, I knew that my whole life had been preparing me for that moment. I wanted to be where this light was and I knew as a photographer and as a person that I had found my home.

So much of the history in this region of the country is above ground, meaning that you can still see it and touch it. For example, you can travel to Lincoln County

and put your fingers in the bullet holes where Billy the Kid shot his way out of jail. You can travel to old pueblo settlements and still find pottery shards from the ancient ones. This makes living in New Mexico an incredibly rich experience; moving here I finally felt like I belonged in a way that I had never felt growing up. I had found my place. Being in New Mexico with its many incredible photographic opportunities fulfills an insatiable desire I have to explore and to learn and to make photographs. I take great joy in that.

**What came first, the idea for the book or the photography project?**

The photographs certainly came first. The book grew out of a need to bring the images together in some form and a desire to share what I had learned whilst making them. I am fortunate too that I have received a lot of support for my work from my publisher, the University of New Mexico Press.

**Why the White Sands National Monument? What's your interest and connection to this place?**

In the case of White Sands, it was a place that I was drawn to photograph. I first began going there in the 1980's, years before I had any thought of creating a book, and it became a place that I would spend time and retreat to in order to clear my mind, be contemplative and re-centre myself. After being there each time, I would feel rejuvenated and renewed. My wife used to remark that I would go there to find my smile. I think she was right. What I found at White Sands was a connection with the spiritual and this moved me to photograph more, to seek the light, to capture the nuances and subtleties that were found in that place. I also had a profound sense that White Sands was calling me to make these photographs. The magic happened and I attended.



White Sands is unique in that it is the largest gypsum dune field on the planet and in that respect would yield a canvas of amazing light and form in every way possible. No two days are ever the same, depending on the sun, rain, wind, the people, the movement of the sand across the dune field, the time of year or the seasons and the light at White Sands never disappoints and for me, that is very stimulating.

After several years of working at White Sands, the idea of a book became clear to me. I knew that in 2016 the U.S. National Park Service would be celebrating its centennial and so I approached the rangers at White Sands (employees of the National Park Service) with the idea of a book that would increase visitor understanding of this incredible place, and the staff agreed to give me access to areas of the park unavailable to the regular visitor. White Sands had the depth and complexity that lent itself to be presented as a book.

**How did you go about collaborating with the authors—Jeanetta Calhoun Mish, Dennis Ditmanson, and Jim Eckles? Were the people you knew or were there specific topics that you wanted to include in the book?**

I had previously met Jeanetta Calhoun Mish while attending an awards event at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum for my book on Ghost Ranch, that legendary place that gave expression to much of Georgia O’Keeffe’s powerful art. We were talking one day about our various projects and I happened to mention my White Sands work and a possible book that I wanted to do and she asked if she could be a part of it. I thought that was a great idea because I felt that the main essay for the book needed to intertwine the history of the place with a lyrical and personal narrative in order to provide the photographs with a sense of human scale. Poets, I believe, can do this kind of thing really well, and Jeanetta is an amazing poet.



Dennis Ditmanson was probably THE authority on White Sands National Monument, having been its Superintendent for many years. I knew he would be a valuable, authentic and first-hand source of information about the park. He could also provide personal insight from his experiences managing the resource. After being introduced to him by a mutual friend, we hit it off instantly and forged an immediate bond. He completely “got” my vision for the book and was absolutely invaluable in helping me understand how the National Park Service carries out its mission to preserve and protect these amazing places.

Dennis introduced me to Jim Eckles and we too became

fast friends. Dennis and Jim had worked together while Dennis was the monument’s superintendent and Jim was the Public Affairs Officer for the White Sands Missile Range. The missile range shares a boundary with the White Sands National Monument. An important part of the monument’s history is the fact that it existed before the military began using the area around it for missile testing during World War II. Jim became the “go-to” guy for any information regarding the relationship between the monument and the missile range, and no story about White Sands could be accurately told without this vital history. He also helped navigate the difficult process of getting access to photograph the missile range, which is usually off-limits to the general public.





I am so impressed at how Jeanetta, Jim, Dennis and the staff of the National Park Service at the monument became so passionately involved in this project. I am profoundly grateful for their support and their hard work to make *Into the Great White Sands* the book that it is.

**How did you decide on the essays for the book?**

I felt that it was necessary to provide a context in which to understand the photographs, and words have an amazing and at times thoughtful way of providing further understanding to what the reader/viewer is looking at. While the images are the catalyst for the artistic vision of this book, Jeanetta's essay provided the necessary narrative that explained the many delicate layers of the history of White Sands that is so intrinsic to its story.

Even though certain topics in the essays may be inconvenient truths, modern man's impact on the land and/or the disruption of the indigenous people who lived there and/or the detonation of the world's first Atomic bomb which exploded just a few miles from the monument and . . . and . . . and . . . not to tell these parts of the story would make them conspicuous by their absence.

I think both Dennis and Jim's thoughtful essays honoured an authentic and complex account of how two government agencies, the National Park Service that manages White Sands and the U.S. military that manages the missile range, cooperatively use this landscape.

**The size of the park is vast at 224 square miles and a diverse range of birds and animals. How did you go about deciding which pictures of the park to include, which best represented the six distinct ecological units?**

Well, the short answer is that I didn't. After my first visit to White Sands, the photographs just started coming

and they came fast and furious. I made a lot of pictures and I fell in love with many of them. I believe the place was guiding me on how to photograph it. As a photographer, I tend to work from a quiet and perhaps even a more contemplative place. I pay attention to the subtle things within the landscape that often lead me to the photographs I eventually make. I want the subject of my photographs to provide me with some guidance on how they ought to be photographed. I work hard to connect with the essence of the place, its spirit.

So White Sands led me to places within it that I needed to see, experience and, eventually, photograph. The place kept beckoning me to travel farther and farther into the dunes and the process was very metaphysical in a way. Each time I would go out to make a photograph, I would come back with an image or images, or having learned something, or both. I was never disappointed. I returned from every trip not only wanting more but also with an urgent sense that I needed to return to the monument as soon as I could. There was never a plan to do a book based on a concept of methodically representing all the various aspects or distinct ecological units of White Sands.

**As White Sands is a very popular landscape location, what do you think are the positive and negative aspects of the massive increase in the popularity of landscape photography in relation to the park?**

From a positive perspective, photography at any national park or, really, in any beautiful place, brings people to explore, particularly photographers who make images which get seen and in turn bring more people to the place, including more photographers. There is an economic boon to an area and to a specific park from its visitors which helps to support infrastructure, facilities and

preservation of its natural resources. Through images, photographers are also recording the landscape, marking it at a specific place in time. This way, photographers become preservationists, showing how a specific environment has changed through images made over time.

From a negative perspective, the increased number of visitors wanting to photograph and/or visit these popular places can create problems. Some parks and monuments do not have the infrastructure needed to handle the onslaught of visitors. And because of the large number of people all looking to visit the iconic locations within a park, it becomes harder to have a personal and possibly profound experience with the place. And of course, there is the physical impact of people visiting a site and the damage they may cause. An Easter weekend visit to White Sands bears this out with the huge number of people in attendance. Perhaps it's true that a place can really be "loved" too much.

**Tell me what your favourite two or three photographs from the book are and a little bit about them?**







**Red Sky and Dunes at Sunset, Autumn. White Sands National Monument, New Mexico**

This photograph, chosen for the cover of the book, is

one of my favourites. I clearly remember the moment I captured this and knew it could potentially be a very strong image. The photograph powerfully captures a quintessential moment that brings together all the impor-

tant elements of White Sands, beautifully summing up the whole of the project. For me, this photograph is an overture of sorts. It invites the reader to open the book to explore and linger.



**Under a Crescent Moon, Twilight, September 26,  
2014, White Sands National Monument, New Mexico**

I think there is something absolutely magical about

watching the moon as it makes its incredible journey across the heavens. Though clouds may sometimes obscure its view and its appearance certainly changes as the moon waxes and wanes, I take heart in knowing that

this celestial wanderer makes its daily pilgrimage across the firmament.





**Farewell Sunset, Spring, White Sands National Monument, New Mexico**

This photograph reveals what that wondrous orb looked like on the day of my birth some fifty-seven years previ-

ous, albeit many miles away from White Sands National Monument. I want to believe that my Dad looked up at the sky on the night of my birth and saw this same moon as it claimed the heavens years ago. And if Einstein's notion is true that the separation between the past, pres-

ent and future is only an illusion, then perhaps I was able to connect with my father once again, to embrace him if only for a fraction of a second, in that brief moment when the shutter opened and closed in my camera and I made this picture.

It was a mad rush to complete all the myriad details to make the publication deadline for *Into the Great White Sands*. On my last trip to the monument, I had hoped to take one last hike out onto the dunes, to make a few photographs and say a kind of thank you to the place for all it had given me. However, as poet Robert Burns reminds, “the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.” Well, my appointment at the monument went late and by the time I was finished, the sun had set and Santa Fe was beckoning for my return.

Fortunately, I was able to get back to White Sands about a year later to attend a launch event for the newly published book and teach a photography workshop. About mid-week, I was out on the dunes near the end of the day with my students and remembered that I needed to say that thank you that I had promised myself I would offer. As we were photographing, I looked around at the dunes and the light and the incredible sky and a wash of gratitude fell over me. I was overwhelmed. I became “*verklempt*.” As we hiked up a particularly beautiful dune, I spoke an imperceptible thank you under my breath. We watched the sun drop below the San Andres mountains in the distance and the clouds overhead turn to shades of yellow, then orange and finally red. We were given the gift of this beautiful sunset and I had this very real sense that my appreciation had been heard.

**What other projects are you working on and can we expect another book?**

I am currently working on a project with the working title of “*Faces of Native America*” which are contemporary portraits of Native Americans. The faces of the Native people I photograph reveal to me a profound sense of the sacred. These people are descendants of those I first encountered in images by photographer Edward Curtis that I admired in a history of photography class many years ago. I remember being deeply

moved by what I saw projected on the screen that day. Curtis’s photographs reveal something awesome (in its truest sense), something that is majestic and universally human and beyond words. I believe there is a flow of energy in Curtis’s images that brings them into the present and in turn, makes them timeless. It is that sense of awe and even dignity I want to bring to light in the photographs I am making over the next several years. As this project is still evolving, I am not sure what the outcome will be; possibly a book, an exhibition or even both. Or its final elaboration might be in the form of a limited-edition portfolio. Time and many more photographs will inform the possibility of another book.

**BOOK PRODUCTION**

**How did you manage the flow of the book with the images and narrative?**

I worked in tandem with my publisher, the University of New Mexico Press. When I am putting a book together, I think of all the elements, photographs, words, graphics, almost symphonically. The images are like the different musical instruments that come together as the orchestra plays a symphony. We worked hard to sequence the images in such a way as to create an emotional experience for the viewer and at the same time one that was synergistic with the text. I want the reader to feel a kinship to the powerful experiences I had while photographing miles out into the dunes of White Sands. I want them to become a part of the adventure and the wonder and I want the images, when presented in a book, to create a sense of anticipation of what will be revealed next, encouraging them to turn the pages to find out.

**Did you manage the project yourself or did you work with an editor?**

I worked closely with my editor John Byram, then director of the University of New Mexico Press, and also

with Lisa Tremaine, then the art director and senior book designer.

**How did you decide the format of the book e.g. size and paper, print type?**

Many of those decisions were made by the publisher and were based on the economics of publishing. It was important to create a book at a reasonable price point that would be attractive and well-printed. In terms of production, there were two things that were essential to me in regards to the book. The first was the quality of reproduction of my images. While I keenly knew that interpreting my images through CMYK lithography would change the way my images would look, I wanted the printer to come as close as possible to the original photographs, for which I provided a set of image proofs for them to work from. The second is that I wanted the book to be a hardcover volume as hardcover books last longer and are more frequently picked up by libraries for their collections. Also, hardcover books seem to be unrealistically more valued by the buying public than soft-covered ones.

**Where was the book printed and how was the experience of working with your printer?**

The book was printed in China by way of a U.S. agent. It was definitely of concern to me that I could not be on press while the book was being printed. It took some effort for the printer’s agent to understand my vision for the book and transmit that to the overseas printer. Fortunately, the publisher, the agent/printer and yours truly are all happy with the finished result. It turned out beautifully.









## YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY

### Can you tell us a little about the cameras and lenses you typically take on a trip and how you came to choose them?

To photograph the White Sands National Monument, I used a Nikon D810 camera to make the images you see in the book. The photographs were made in conditions that are influenced by extreme contrast of light, intense chromatic change and sometimes unpredictable weather, and it's like that every day out on the dunes, the elements fluctuate continuously. You have this luminous never-ending landscape of brilliant white sand and a sky overhead that is constantly changing. Photographs made with a Nikon camera have a look that I like. It's more than a conversation about sharpness. It's about a delicate balance between contrast, saturation, sharpness and some undefinable quality that makes the photographs have a particular look that resonates with what a particular scene looked/felt like when I released the shutter. Regarding lenses, I used what some photographers call "the trinity"—Nikon's exceptional 24-70mm f/2.8G, a 70-200mm f/2.8E VR and a 14-24mm f/2.8G ED lens. I also used a Sigma 150-600mm f/5-6.3 Sports Lens for specific photographs.

### What sort of processing do you undertake on your pictures? Give me an idea of your workflow.

I like to keep things simple when editing my photographs; I usually eschew tricks or digital filters in my work. I want my photographs to resonate with

the moment I originally made them. So often when using digital software, it's easy to fall down the rabbit hole and allow the photograph to be carried by some applied filter or effect. I realize keenly that expressive photographs don't just happen out of the camera but if I can tell that someone added a shaft of light, or jacked up the colour beyond something that is reasonable, I find it difficult to believe in an image. Also, I want to respect the places I photograph and I don't believe that tainting up the colour unreasonably or adding some kind of filter effect shows much respect. I love the remark attributed to Barry Lopez who wrote the book *Winter Count*, who called the brightly coloured photographs in certain nature calendars "Eco Porn."

After downloading the images onto my Mac desktop computer with an NEC PA322UHD monitor, my workflow begins with Adobe Camera Raw where broad adjustments are made. An image is then finished in Adobe Photoshop where final saturation, contrast, exposure and sharpness adjustments are made. Sometimes an image cannot be captured in a single exposure because the scene exceeds the dynamic range of the sensor of my camera. I then have to make a series of bracketed exposures in the field and process/develop them back in the studio using Skylum's Aurora HDR software. Finally, I make fine art prints for museums, galleries and collectors directly from Photoshop using an exceptional Canon imagePROGRAF PRO-4000 Large Format Printer.

You can buy 'Into the Great White Sands' from [Amazon UK](#) or [Amazon US](#).



Interview by  
Charlotte Parkin

Head of Marketing & Sub Editor for On Landscape. Dabble in digital photography, open water swimmer, cooking buff & yogi.

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Craig Varjabedian

Into the White Sands









































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