

MASTERPIECE

DEATH VALLEY

PHOTOGRAPHER: NICK MELIDONIS M. PHOTOG.

Desert Feature, Death Valley





Figure 1: The original colour transparency.



Figure 2: The first attempt after stretching the image and reducing it to grey scale.



Figure 3: The image was flipped and the mountains were merged without any stretching.



Figure 4: Clouds from the previous day were added on a separate layer ready to merge with the desert feature.

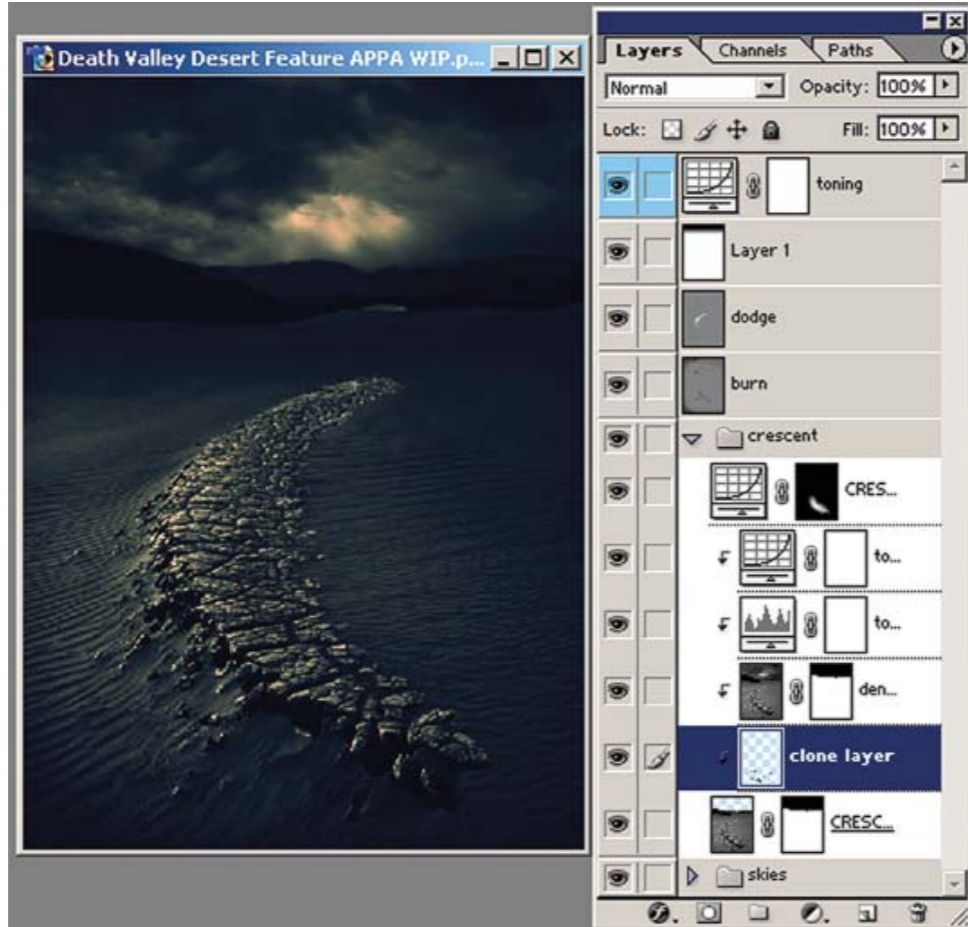


Figure 5: Most of the processes were kept on separate layers for maximum flexibility, labeled WIP (work -in-progress) and saved as a PSD file.

Passion is a strong motivator and a few years ago I made a lifestyle choice to discontinue my career in HRD training and lecturing to pursue my love of landscape and travel photography on a full time basis. For the first two or three years my goal was to improve my skills and develop my visual literacy by photographing locations around the world that held a special interest for me. A location I found myself revisiting on numerous occasions was Death Valley in California.

Death Valley is one of America's largest national parks and has a rich diversity of landscapes from vast salt pans to colourful deserts and sand dunes. I noticed some crescent shaped formations on the desert floor during a sunset shoot and thought they would make an interesting image. The original photograph was captured on Fuji Velvia film, using a Pentax 645 camera with a 45-90 mm lens, set at f22. Most of my images are scanned on my return to Perth in Western Australia and receive only minor manipulation in Photoshop before being printed for publishing or display.

Occasionally, I attempt to create a landscape as a piece of stand-alone art and as such I'm not concerned about representing a location exactly as I saw it. There has been a lot of

discussion in recent times as to whether manipulated images such as these are "real photographs". It is also a topic I've struck many times at camera club presentations, so I would like to offer my thoughts to the debate.

In the Winter 2002 edition of *Better Photography*, Richard White wrote about photographic integrity and explained that if we play a Beethoven Sonata, we play with the notes as written (the negative), but we can interpret them in our own way when we play (the print). Richard also stated that we don't add notes to the score because we feel it needs it.

I'm inclined to agree - for Beethoven. There are some who also like to play jazz and would like the artistic freedom to interpret the music and the notes. One approach is not better than the other, just a different outcome. In my opinion, it does not make any difference what label or school we put an image into, it either works for the viewer or it doesn't - and isn't that what photography is all about?

Having worked with Photoshop over a number of years at a rudimentary level and realising its enormous potential, I often find myself pre-visualising a final image in the field which I can progress to its conclusion at leisure later. The ability and freedom to be

able to pursue this personal work is one of the main reasons why I took up photography seriously in the first place. I think this is becoming the aim of more and more hard-working imaging professionals as they are rediscovering the pure fun and passion of photography.

The original colour image (Figure 1) was fine, but the space in between the crescent was bland and did not really contribute much to the composition. I decided to stretch the image vertically, burn in the areas surrounding the crescent and dodge the highlights of the desert feature. My intention was to let the feature lead the eye to a couple of sand dunes and a glow in the far horizon. I also felt the image would work better as a selenium toned black and white print, so I converted the colour image to grey scale via the channel mixer in Photoshop. This allowed me to tweak the red, green and blue channels independently, to obtain a better balance in the tonal grading.

My first attempt is illustrated in Figure 2 and it seemed to be heading in the right direction. Although the vertical stretch seemed to improve the crescent, the surrounding hills started to look a little out of shape. I decided to scan the hills true to scale and merge this part of the image with the elongated crescent (Figure 3). This merger improved the image, but I found my eye following the crescent to the horizon and being led to a featureless sky.

I had also photographed some interesting clouds in Death Valley the previous day at sunset. I chose one of those frames, scanned it, converted it to grey scale and replaced the original sky. Fortunately, the glow of the sun in the new clouds was naturally positioned to where the eye would rest after it followed the crescent to the horizon. This was certainly an improvement and now began the laborious job of making all those elements combine seamlessly.

A lot of dodging and burning was needed to produce a dark, broody landscape, with the new highlights as the main feature. This was a task I used to carry out in the darkroom with black and white images, but I found the instant feedback of Photoshop more convenient.

In Western culture, our eyes prefer to read and scan information from left to right. I tried flipping the image vertically and it seemed to work better. The merging of the different images, curve adjustments, dodging, burning etc. meant a complex stacking of layers in Photoshop. To ensure all was working as Photoshop designed it to do, I sought an informed opinion from my friend and colleague, Brent Acie, to assist in this process. Brent enjoys the rare combination of being a Photoshop guru while having the perspective and headspace of both a visual artist and a photographer.

We decided to confine each part of the process to a separate layer for maximum flexibility and this paid off in the end (Figure 4). After several hours of fine adjustment and tweaking, the image was

achieving the look I had initially pre-visualised.

The last stage was the split toning effect and it was felt a warmer pink in the highlights with a colder blue in the shadows would work best with this image. This was achieved by using curves adjustments on a separate layer.

Finally some sharpening was done, using the unsharp mask in lab mode, and the image was then printed on a textured photo paper using an Epson 1270.

Desert Feature, Death Valley scored 88 at the APPAs held in Perth last year. In 2001, another image from Death Valley, taken only about 50 metres from this one but in the opposite direc-



tion, scored a gold and was part of my winning portfolio for the 2001 Australian Landscape Photographer of the Year (above). Both images were pre-visualised and received a similar approach in treatment. ■

Nick Melidonis is the AIPP 2000 and 2001 Australian Landscape Photographer of the Year and conducts photo tours and seminars through his company Odyssey Style. Ring Nick on (08) 9336 4135 for information on Odyssey's departures for the Greek Island Photo Tours.

A second image taken in Death Valley also scored highly at the AIPP's APP Awards.