

Mono Lake, California © by Tibor Vari

Northeast of Yosemite Valley, across the Tioga Pass, lies one of the strangest, most photogenic natural formations in America — Mono Lake. I was there twice during one weekend this September 2003, and it was well worth the effort.

Spread across a high plateau of the Sierra Nevada, the surface of Mono Lake is pierced by grotesque natural formations called “tufas.” These large, light-colored mineral deposits are strange and beautiful to photograph, especially in the light of sunrise and sunset.

When work took me to San Jose for a week, I decided to spend the following weekend photographing in the high country before flying home. I rented a room for two nights in El Portal, just outside of Yosemite (20 minutes from the valley floor).

I had hoped to be out of the office by 10 a.m. Friday to take a leisurely ride to Mono Lake. When I couldn't leave till 11:30, I had to set some speed records to get to the lake before sundown. Via Route 120 and the Tioga Pass road (closed during the winter), I got to the town of Lee Vining, gateway to Mono Lake, in 5 hours. Nearly 10 more miles south and east of town (Rts. 395 & 120), I arrived at my chosen spot with just 15 minutes to spare. I chose South Tufa, the most common location for taking pictures of Mono Lake for both sunset and sunrise.



Tufa's are mineral deposits that create weird rock-like mounds and towers rising out of the water. These towers were formed by minerals from underground springs. Over time, the calcium carbonate formed limestone around the spring openings, creating some towers over 30 feet high. I shot the sunset with Fuji Velvia film and a polarizer filter. I then drove nearly two hours to get back to the Cedar Lodge for dinner and bed.

I had planned to spend Saturday in Yosemite but I was so excited by the Mono Lake sunset shooting experience that I changed my plans. I woke up at 3:30 a.m., got dressed and set off at 4 for the drive back to Mono Lake.

I was surprised at how many cars had joined me at the parking lot. Turns out it was a photography workshop. Fortunately, this made it real easy to figure out where I should set up.



Sunrise was simply fantastic with incredible colors on the lake and tufas. I shot probably two rolls of film during the short span that the light was great. The key is to keep moving and try different compositions using the wide angle and telephoto lenses. I bracketed +/- .7 off my matrix metering to insure I did not miss the incredible colors. All in all, Mono Lake for sunrise/sunset is a must-see and worth the effort to get there. The

views are breathtaking and the colors are fantastic.