

Natural Landscapes

The West Fork of My Mind

A Photographic Journey by
cover artist
Derek Von Briesen

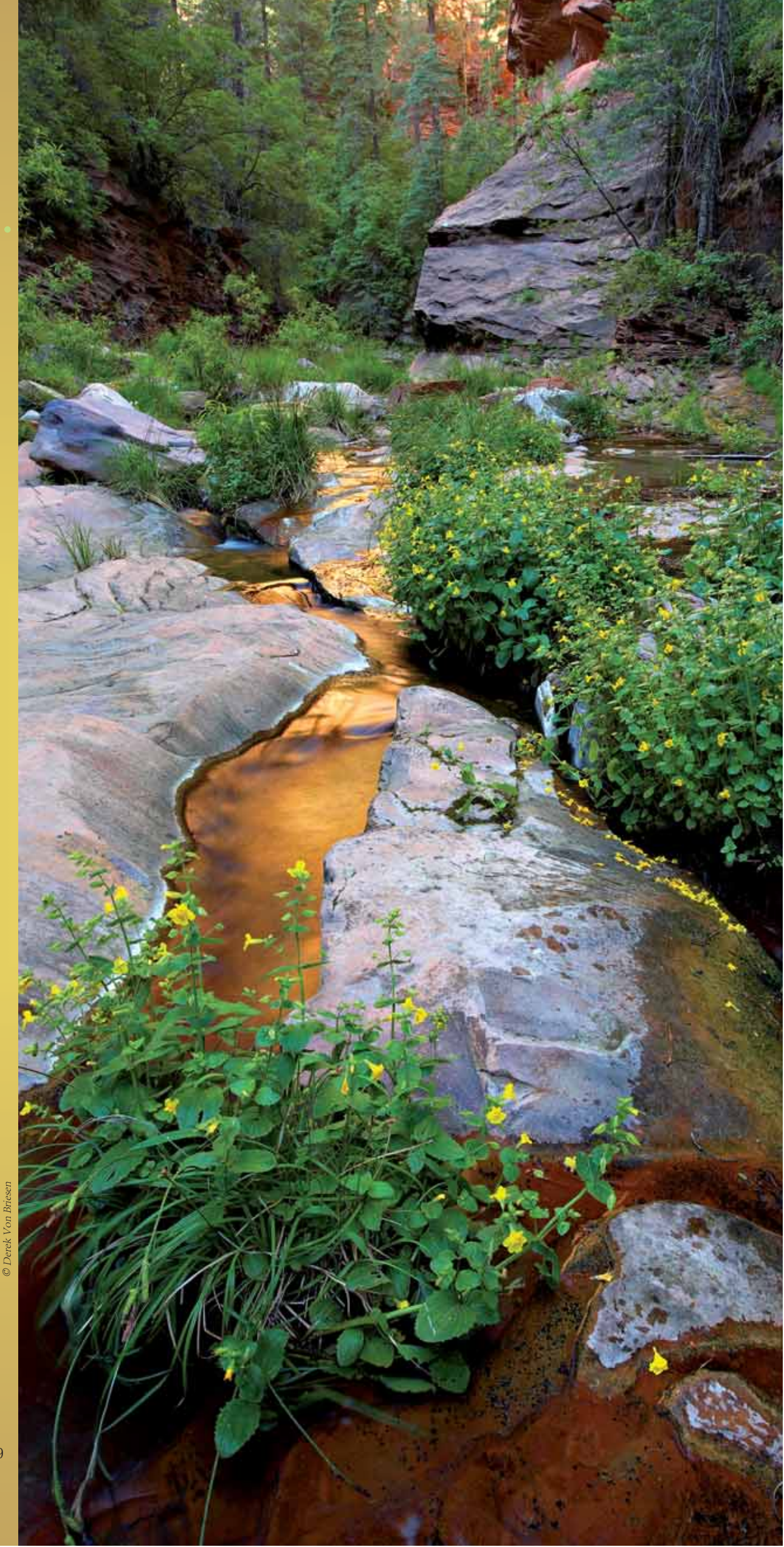
Suddenly, finally, the mirror pool just upstream explodes in a downpour. As we relax beneath a massive Supai sandstone ledge, an open air sculpted subway indicative of the massive forces of water that have flowed here in the past, the darkening skies finally open. It's the second such perfectly positioned ledge in two days, perfect in its safe haven from the ferocity of a full fledged mid summer monsoonal downpour, replete with lightning and twenty second thunder rolls.

We've been hiking for two days in light rain, along this beautiful trail, not really a trail at all but a meandering low-volume watershed which follows the most prominent western tributary of Oak Creek in a densely forested canyon beneath towering sandstone cliffs of the Mogollon Rim. We make bets each day as to when the skies will open full force.

As the rain pours down in sheets, my thoughts wander and drift. Mostly, I look on in rapt silence at a place so incredibly beautiful, so wild, so pure. Like people and places so singularly memorable as to require the minimum of appellation (the Canyon, the City, Pele...) one need only say the words West Fork for Arizonans to conjure wistful remembrances of Sedona's most popular hiking trail.

West Fork is visited by tens of thousands every year. For southern desert dwellers, its elevated location in the heart of Oak Creek Canyon offers perennial respite from the heat. For visiting tourists and hikers the world over, the meandering trail along high benches and down and over stone-stepped creek crossings, is the very definition of a perfect hiking experience: a trail full of character, switchbacks, twists & turns, goosenecks, & vibrant color with just a hint of a true wilderness experience an arboreal treat with old-growth ponderosa pines, big-tooth maples, gambol oaks & alders galore.

For photographers, West Fork's sinuous watershed is an absolute marvel: innumerable riffles and mirror pools reflecting an amazing diversity of foliage and



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multi-hued geology; world-class seasonal color changes; amazing varieties of light; and a seemingly endless supply of jaw-dropping landscapes around every corner.

Very quickly two things happened: I hiked the entirety of West Fork's 'formal' trail; and then, as my understanding of local geography increased, I learned that this was just the tip of the iceberg as it were. The wet zone beckoned me, a good ten miles more, deep into the uppermost reaches of the Red Rock-Secret Mountain Wilderness. My imagination ran wild with the mysterious fantasy of it all.

I became fascinated by the concept of the thru-hike. I learned of deep pools high in the watershed that would require long swims, waterproof packs, and no shortage of good plain sense. As I had for thirty years of trans-global surf trekking, I spent restless hours anticipating, planning, making equipment lists, and most importantly, vetting a short list of potential hiking partners, always a key element in a journey fraught with the possibility of emergency. I thought (and now know) this is a place where your choice of hiking partner would, by necessity, have to be someone good to have on the team in an emergency.

My friend Herman is such a partner. A friend for years now, an ex-Army paratrooper, schooled in survival and long marches, a true outdoorsman and something of a backcountry Top Chef.

In other words, the perfect hiking partner for three days, fourteen miles, dozens of chest-deep pools, a half-dozen long swims.

And here we find ourselves under the giant ledge, protected, safe, in spellbound rapture as the rain comes pouring down for forty-five minutes straight.

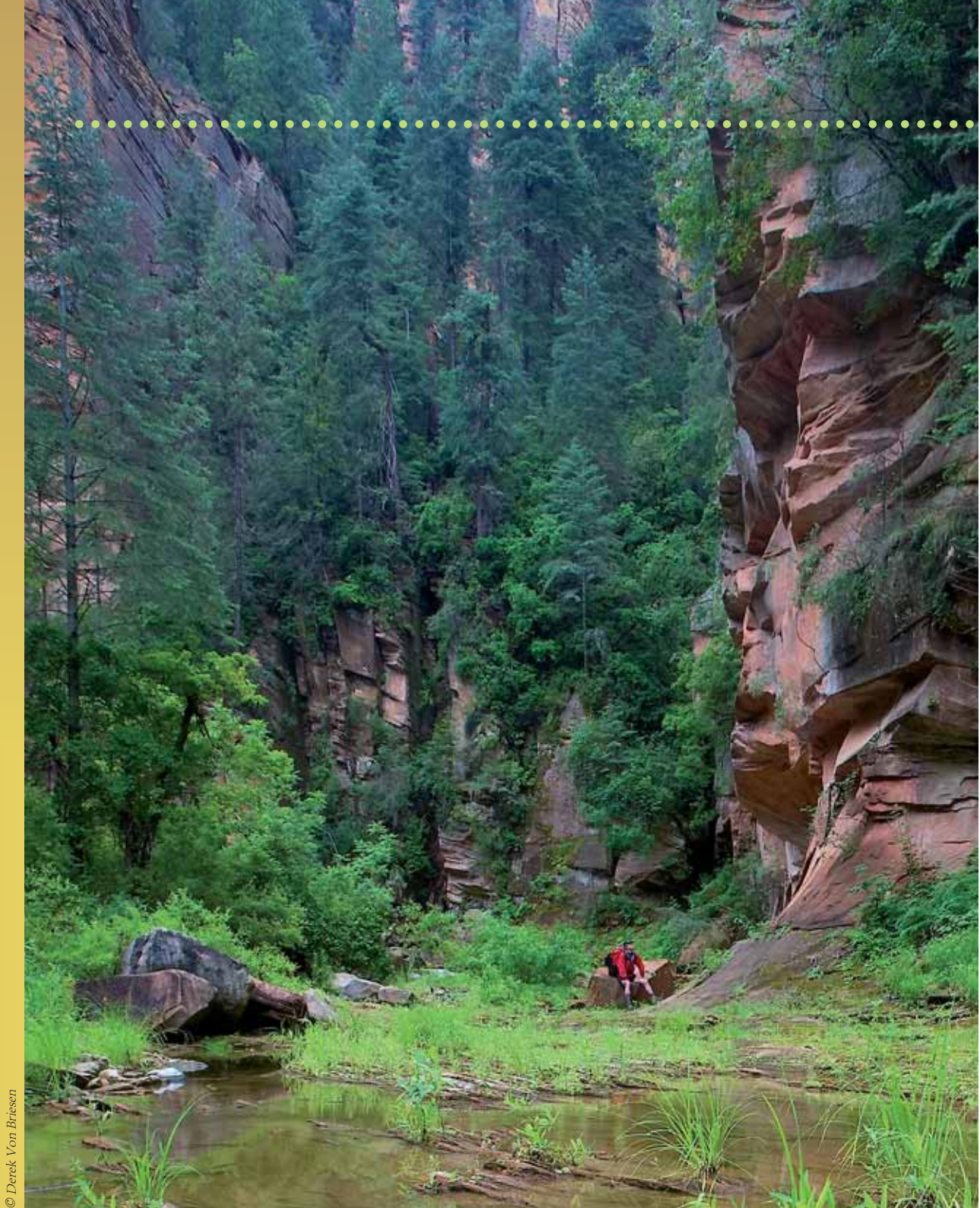
So the mind wanders . . .

And then we both see it at the same time, a slight opening in the clouds allowing for the slightest hint of sun to backlight rain-drenched ponderosas, maples, alders, gambol oaks and the ferns and vines that grace the sandstone faces upstream. As I struggle to undo my rubberized canvas dry bag to gain access to my camera, I already know I've lost the fight. This, like the rest of the amazing terrain today, is ours but as my friend suggests, only ours. Sixty seconds later that particular special light is gone and Herman suggests somewhat definitively, "maybe, just maybe, that was for our eyes only." It takes me a second, but the import of it registers: that special piece of light, that ephemeral moment in time, that ever precious present of the here and now was a gift to us both. Perhaps even a reward after all our hard work.

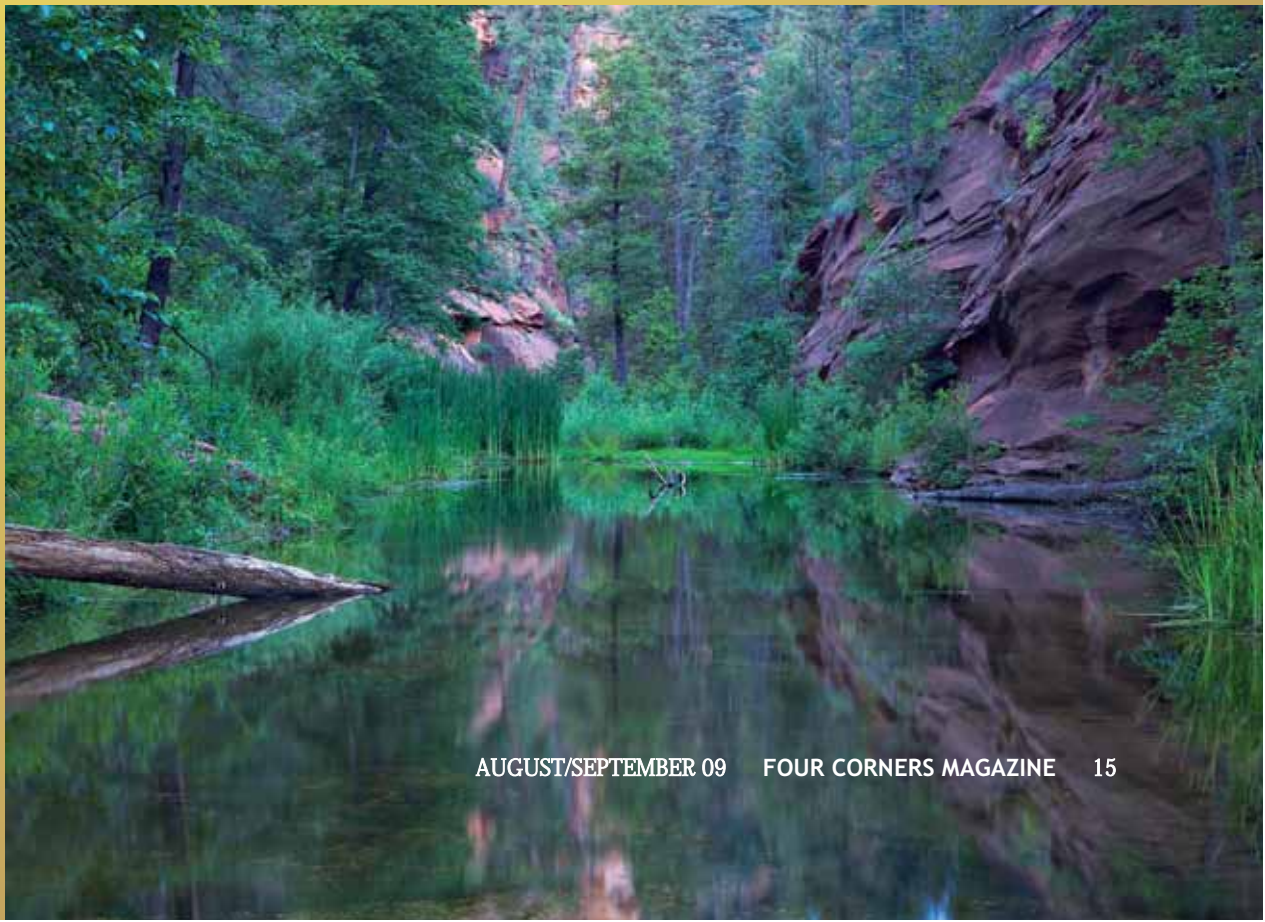
Then suddenly the steep side canyon across the creek opens up and benignly releases a mini flash flood which becomes a fifteen foot stairstepping waterfall, right before our eyes.

The air quality, freshly scrubbed surfaces everywhere; I may have missed that very moment of exquisite backlighting, but the photos that come from this next fifteen minutes are indelibly etched in my consciousness. Mine and only mine... but I'm willing to share!!

Derek Von Briesen's visual depictions of the glorious visual feast of the Southwest will touch your soul as they take you into the mysterious heart of this wild and unpredictable country. His award-winning photographs have been published by National Geographic, Arizona Highways, USA Today, the Weather Channel and a number of local and regional guidebooks, magazines and newspapers. www.dvbphotography.com.



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