



Adventures Turned Into Art

By Erin Hanson

MY PAINTINGS all begin with outdoor hikes and explorations in nature. My goal when I paint is to recapture that feeling of being out of doors and surrounded by natural beauty: how do I capture the experience of waking up in a National Park at dawn, surrounded by quiet darkness and watching a sunrise slowly dawn over a dramatic canyon—how do I capture the contrast of a single cottonwood tree that has turned canary yellow before its fellow trees, strikingly gold against a red rock cliff—how do I paint in two dimensions the wide expanse of a sunset sky—how can I make my paintings as alive and fresh as I feel when I am out of doors?

When I paint, I work from photos I took out in the field. The challenge I face is how to turn a flat, uninspiring photograph into a beautiful, impressionist painting that captures all the light and movement of the outdoors.

The first step is to decide which elements I want to focus on in my painting. For example, I could decide to focus on a brilliant sunset sky, in which case I would make the foreground indistinct and dark by contrast. I could focus on the different colors I see beneath the waves in a coastal painting: here I would dramatize the size of the waves and the various hues of green, turquoise, blue, and purple, using the white foam as contrast. I might focus on the abstract shapes of light I see between the branches

of an ancient oak tree. In this case I would select which branches to paint that would make the most interesting series of negative spaces. I compose all my paintings to communicate a specific focus within the landscape.

When I am out in the field, I use a variety of cameras to capture different angles that might come in handy later when I am painting: I use two Canon EOS 5D cameras, one with a standard lens and one with a telephoto zoom lens. I use my iPhone's camera when I want to shoot wide-angle shots or panoramas. I even use a drone sometimes to get higher-elevation shots or to reach difficult angles.

When I come home from an adventure shoot, I have thousands of photos that could turn into paintings. I start by printing out several reference photos of the same scene. Then I use pencil sketches to test out different compositions that might work to best communicate my “focus.” Rarely can I use a photograph just as-is. I often move around strong compositional elements, like trees, or take hills from one photo and merge with the foreground of another photo, for example.

After painting thousands of landscape compositions, I have refined my technique of transforming a mere ordinary photograph back into the original beauty of the landscape that made me pick up my camera in the first place.

The Grand Canyon Adventure

By Erin Hanson



HALF THE FUN of being a landscape painter is getting to explore the outdoors for my inspiration. I love backpacking through national parks and discovering little-traveled back roads in beautiful parts of the world. My travels always seem to end up in some sort of adventure. Here is the tale of my first Grand Canyon backpacking trip.

Once upon a time, I went backpacking with two of my brothers into the Grand Canyon. We started hiking down about an hour before dawn, well laden with 80 pounds apiece (all my brothers are Boy Scouts, and I was raised on their motto—be prepared.) While I had been doing Zumba every week in preparation, my knees were not prepared to descend and climb the equivalent of 1,000 flights of stairs in two days.

The switchbacks leading out of the arm of the canyon were longer than I expected, and I urged my brothers forward, nearly at a jog, hoping to make it to the first viewpoint overlooking the main canyon before daybreak. I knew to the minute when the sun was going to rise, and as the last minutes before sunrise sped quickly by, I kept rounding turn after turn, only to see the view blocked by yet another cliffside, and another... but the semi-jogging finally paid off, and we made it to the final bend of the trail that looked majestically out over the entire Grand Canyon, just as the sun tipped over the horizon line and started flooding the top edge of the canyon with light.

My camera was out and ready, and the next 30 minutes were a heady race down the trail, trying to catch as many angles and compositions as possible during the precious moments of early dawn light.

Once the sun had risen 10 degrees above the desert floor, I had finished rushing around with the camera glued to my eye, and we took a much-needed break. Then, with the excitement of daybreak over, we continued downward, our packs feeling heavier with every mile. The scenery was beautiful, and the weather was perfect, but I was surprised



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that we seemed to be the only people wearing giant multi-day-hike packs. Our last backpacking trip had been a 5-day trek across Zion National Park, and we were accustomed to bringing every possible necessity with us, being days away from civilization and hiking in the backcountry. Yet everyone around us was carrying nothing more than light day packs.

Onward we hiked, getting passed by dozens of hikers carrying little fanny packs and hoisting single bottles of water. (We had gallons of water on us, enough for 2 days of drinking, as well as cooking 2 meals for 3 people.) A few of these spritely hikers said they were camping at the bottom at Bright Angel Campground that night. I was surprised, since they weren't carrying a backpack with a tent and sleeping bag, but the mystery was eventually resolved: we were passed by a mule train carrying enough duffel bags to house a small army, and after making it to the bottom of the canyon and seeing a bunch of backpacks hanging on giant metal hooks with people's names on them... I finally understood the phrase "duffel service," and I belatedly realized that we could have paid to have the mules carry our giant backpacks down for us. Next time I am doing my homework.

When we arrived at Bright Angel Campground in the late afternoon, our legs numb and exhausted, I was surprised to discover the most well-appointed campground I've ever been to outside a KOA. There were flushing

toilets, running potable water, a ranger's cabin, and flat, smooth tent areas. Half the backcountry equipment we had brought with us was completely unnecessary. Homework.

We were, of course, starving, but luckily, we had brought a ton of dehydrated meals with us. We started up the burner and soon had several pots of water boiling in record time (with no need at all for the backup stove we had brought, or the pile of extra propane containers.) With very empty stomachs, we started filling up several of our dehydrated meal pouches with hot water, eagerly awaiting the result. Once the 10 required minutes had elapsed, we dug into our meals with our handy lightweight backpacking sporks. A few bites in, we realized the food was barely edible, and that we had made enough to feed 9 or 10 people, not 3.

I was then faced with the uncomfortable problem of disposing of all this food. There were signs posted everywhere (even above the flushing toilets) saying we couldn't dispose of food at the campsite. We had been hoping to empty most of our water weight at the campground, to give us a lighter pack on the hike out, but we ended up just converting our water into bloated metal ziplocks of inedible food. So, the next morning, we loaded up over 10 pounds of re-hydrated food back into our packs, and prepared for the 5,000-ft ascent.

Up we started.

The weather was still holding out—never higher than

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75 degrees, warm and dry. I couldn't get any good sunrise photos at the bottom of the canyon (mostly because my eyes were closed and I was sleeping), but I was hoping for some epic sunset shots as we neared the top. The days were still pretty long—the sun wasn't scheduled to go down until around 7 pm. Plenty of time.

Once again, we were the only ones on the trail carrying heavy packs. It actually was much easier climbing up than it had been climbing down. I know from rock climbing that static moves are much easier on the joints than dynamic moves, and the static up-climbing was actually therapeutic for our legs. Any time the trail evened out flat or started descending slightly, my brother and I almost started howling with the pain in our legs. Once we hit an upslope, it was easygoing again.

We got passed again by the mules carrying everyone's packs out at around noon. But that wasn't the only

indignity of the day. A few hours later, we were passed by a lightweight jogger who had already passed us going down earlier that morning, had jogged all the way to Bright Angel Campground, and was now passing us jogging back out again. As the sun started setting, and we were resting a few miles from the rim, we were passed by a pair who had done the rim-to-rim trail in one day (North Rim to South Rim.)

After the sun set, it soon became apparent that we were the only ones left in the canyon. We were hiking by headlamp, and my younger brother had pretty much had it. He was taking breaks every couple of steps, suffering from the elevation change and lack of oxygen.

After about an hour of hiking in the pitch black, I started seeing a little point of light bobbing around in the blackness of the canyon below. As we slowly rounded bend after bend, the little light bobbed closer and closer. Eventually, I realized it was a few people jogging by night. We were

only about a quarter mile from the top of the trail, and I became determined that we would not be the last ones out of the canyon. We would not be passed by yet another set of hikers.

I urged my brother on, forcing water on him and giving him an overdose of hearty pep talks. We crawled along while the bobbing lights moved closer and closer. Soon I could make out human forms in the darkness, and I could see they were only a few hundred yards behind us. I could literally see the top of the trailhead, only one switchback above us... when we were passed by the joggers. They told us they had done the rim-to-rim-to-rim trail that day... yes, that means hiking from South Rim to North Rim to South Rim, all in one day. And they still beat us. Sigh.... the final indignity.

Next time I hike the Grand Canyon, I am using the duffel service.



A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large 'A' with a diagonal line through it and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Painting Stories



Behind *Borrego in Bloom* | by Erin Hanson

Original oil painting available. 40 x 30 in
Also available as 3D Textured Replica.

BORREGO SPRINGS has been a favorite haunt of mine for over a decade. I fell in love with the California desert when I was a kid and went camping at Joshua Tree National Park. I also lived in Palmdale as a teenager, and I used to take my German shepherd out into the Joshua tree-filled desert, hiking by moonlight and searching for animal bones to

add to my collection (I had always wanted to be a biologist as well an artist; in fact, I got my degree in bio-engineering.) I loved being all alone in the wide-open desert, surrounded by alien-looking Joshua trees starkly silhouetted against a star-filled sky, feeling a sense of infinite space surrounding me.

I discovered the Anza-Borrego

Desert State Park when I displayed at an art festival there over 10 years ago. I immediately fell in love with this little nook of high desert, which is almost completely encircled by steep mountains. The whole region is so sparsely populated that you feel isolated and surrounded by the magnificent and dramatic beauty of the desert. There are even city regulations



Borrego Springs reference photograph
by Erin Hanson.

keeping artificial light at a minimum, so you can really see the stars at night!

There are countless hikes you can take into the canyons, an oasis located behind a giant field of sharp basalt rocks, and, if you are lucky, you can catch a wildflower super bloom in the springtime.

The painting “Borrego in Bloom” was inspired by the super bloom of 2014. This super bloom was made famous because San Diego (located just over the mountains) was overrun with butterflies as the result of millions of caterpillars eating the abundant desert blooms.

This painting captures a scene from the southern edge of Borrego, where there are hundreds of ocotillos growing along the slopes leading up to the surrounding mountains. When the ocotillos bloom, their desert stalks turn from gray-brown to bright apple green, and the tips of their spiderlike stalks bloom with bright red flowers that always remind me of birds-of-paradise.

The brush strokes in “Borrego in Bloom” are loose and impressionistic, conveying a sense of movement within the painting. When you see the painting in person, you can experience the thick texture of the paint and lustrous sheen of the oil color.

CAPTURE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE WITH A PAINTING BY ERIN HANSON



ERIN HANSON

can recreate the magic from your adventure, using photos you took as reference. *(They don't even need to be great photos!)*

Ask one of Erin's gallery representatives for more information about commissioning a painting.



Contact Us at
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