

CHASING *the* LIGHT

By Erin Hanson



The Fruit Loop in Hood River Valley, Oregon

JUST GOT BACK from a week-long excursion across the western states in search of beautiful light to paint. I kept a journal of my travels from Mt. Hood in Oregon, through the Colorado Plateau, and finally down into southern California in search of inspiration. My goal was to capture fall color and photograph the most beautiful light I could find, which usually occurs within an hour or two of sunrise or sunset. I take photos while I am out in the field so I can remember the light and re-create it on my canvas. *Here are the travel notes from my journey of chasing the light...*

MY FIRST DAWN was at Mt. Hood's Fruit Loop (called that because there is a loop road that travels through the fruit orchards at the base of Mt. Hood.) The mountain was huge, larger than I had expected from photographs. I will have to figure out how to capture its absolute immensity in my paintings. I drove around for two hours after dawn, crisscrossing and retracing my steps, trying to get the perfect view of orchards with Mt. Hood in the background. I finally found the best view in a field of sunflowers.

After dawn, I drove to Arches National Park, 14 hours away. I had to get there before daybreak the next morning, because tickets were not available—the only way to get into the park was to drive through the gates before sunrise, when

you could enter without a ticket. Even pre-dawn, there was still a line getting into the park!

My favorite spot that I love to paint in Arches is a specific point at the La Sal Mountains Viewpoint, where you can see the maximum overlapping of rock formations catching the dawn light. Someone else was waiting right at the same spot. I told him this was the best place to photograph the dawn anywhere in the whole park, and he replied, "I have been coming to Arches for forty years, and I agree."

After getting my "money shot," I rushed around the rest of the park taking advantage of the early-morning side-lighting. By 9AM, the colors were washed out, the sun had risen, and it was time to travel to my next destination.

Bryce was next on my list. I will have to remember for my next visit: don't photograph Bryce at sunset. "Sunset Point" is misleading. Yes, you can see the sky turn pretty shades of pink, but the red rock hoodoos are completely in shadow long before sunset.

I caught the following sunrise at Cedar Breaks, and it was much more beautiful. I then went on a 24-hour hunt to find the aspen forest I remembered hiking through eight years earlier. I never found it. Maybe got burned in the fire?

I did find some crazy, rocky dirt roads that I bravely took my Ram ProMaster on, and I found some beautiful long shadows and backlit aspen trees to paint. I also discovered a lake hidden high on a lonely dead-end road, with aspens at peak glory reflected in its still waters.

Next, I headed into Zion. The fall colors were starting to appear, but cottonwoods turn yellow much later in the season (in fact, a month after this excursion, I flew back to Zion just to catch those cottonwoods at their peak... and it was worth the trip! I can't wait to paint the classic Watchman vista in full autumn glory.)

I have a museum show in St. George next year, so I wanted to photograph some of the local landscape for

inspiration. I decided to explore Snow Canyon at dawn, but when I woke up and started driving through the pitch-black desert before dawn, I was blinded by flashing police lights as I approached the canyon. It turned out the canyon was closed for a marathon! There were only fifteen minutes until dawn, and I didn't want to miss the precious golden hour. So, I went to a trusty favorite of mine—Kayenta, just around the corner. I'm glad I did. In Kayenta, I saw sagebrush like I had never seen it before: in October it was lush and green with fresh growth.

As I went wandering through the sagebrush, trying to get the best angle for sidelighting on the red rock cliffs, the sun came up over the horizon, turning the bushes from a pale blue-green into a blaze of color. I realized I could tell the exact speed at which the earth was turning. I walked twenty feet through the sagebrush, then turned around and watched the sunlight light up bush after individual bush behind me. I wondered, if I kept walking, how long could I stay one step ahead of the sunrise?

I drove across the empty Mojave. My goal was to catch the sunset on Highway 1. I made it to Cambria with a few hours to spare before sunset. Unfortunately, there were

(BELOW) *Autumn in Zion*, 2020. Fall color inspiration while backpacking through Zion National Park.



signs everywhere saying Highway 1 was closed fifteen miles north. I headed up anyway. There was a secret steep and winding road I knew about: Naciminto-Fergusson Road, the only way to get across from Highway 1 to Route 101. Up I drove, getting great inspiration shots of aqua-blue waters and sunset-colored cliffs along the way.

I arrived at my “secret” bypass road just as the sun started dipping to the horizon, and I thought my luck would hold and I could traverse the steep coastal range, but alas, Naciminto-Fergusson Road was closed as well. The good news: when I turned my van around, I found a canyon with ancient trees that looked just like a Japanese brush drawing. I’m excited to capture that scene with my paints. And I never would have discovered this painting if I hadn’t pushed all the way through to the road closure.

I drove back down the 15 miles of winding roads, through the quickly deepening darkness. I pulled over before I got to Cambria to eat salami and cheese, and I listened to the seals barking and the waves crashing as I watched the stars come out one by one, until the whole sky was drenched with the light of the Milky Way.

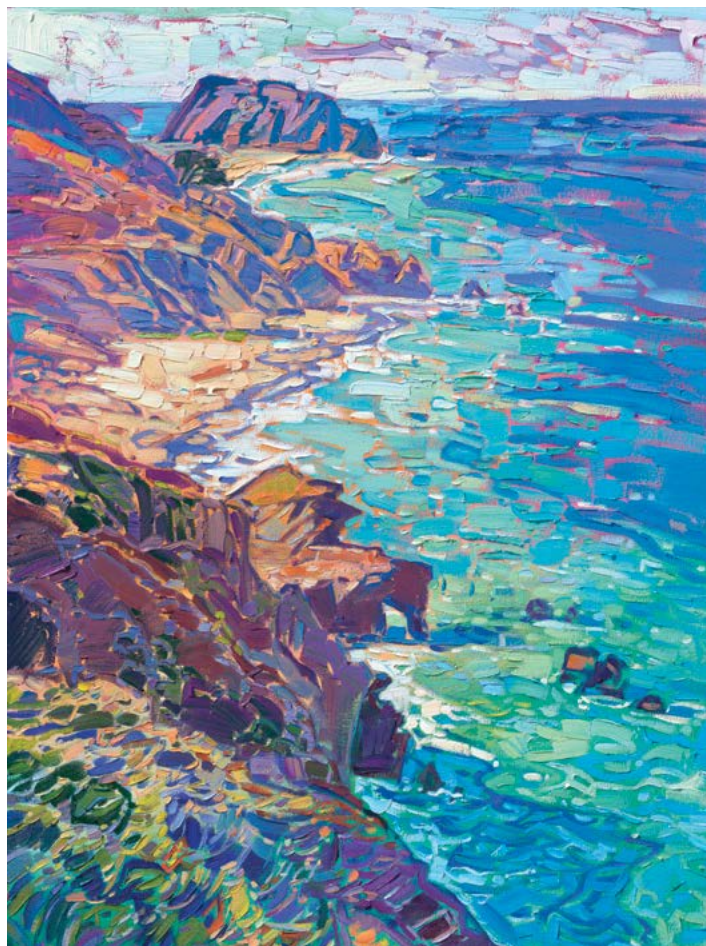
With the fog held away at sea, I caught the dawn in Paso Robles. Here I saw the best light I’d ever seen at Paso. Mountains were bluer than blue could ever be, next to perfect rolling hills with overlapping vineyards. I am ready to do another Vineyard Show.

My next stop was Carmel and Big Sur. But with the road closure on Highway 1, I had to drive around on the 101, and here I hit the first big snag on my trip—the inland valley had warmed up, and the fog came rolling in. For two days I could not take a single photograph. I was able to do some scouting though, and I discovered that most of my



Erin at Lone Cypress on 17 Mile Drive, hoping to catch some sunlight.

favorite Highway 1 paintings came from one short stretch of coastline just north of Point Sur. I went back time and again, driving over Bixby Bridge so often I lost count—hoping the sun would come out just long enough to illuminate the waters and transform them from steel gray to brilliant aquamarine. But time was passing, and I had to go to



Point Sur, 2023. After two days of waiting for the fog to clear, I got my shot of Point Sur and created this painting as soon as I got home.

Oxnard for the artist reception for my newest museum show at Channel Islands Maritime Museum.

After the show, I drove north again, getting some great shots in Santa Barbara before trying Carmel one more time. There, I finally saw the sun! The landscape lit up like magic, and I saw beautiful color everywhere. I took advantage of the light and visited my favorite spots in Point Lobos State Park and Lone Cypress on 17 Mile Drive.

Next up was the short drive to Yosemite. I wanted to paint the epic “Tunnel View,” and I was hoping for some great fall color or maybe some dramatic clouds overhead. However, when I came through the tunnel to see the famous vista, I saw only smoke from controlled burns down in the valley, which obscured the entire view. Driving down into the smoke, I got some interesting “foggy” shots... I can always turn lemons into lemonade.

Deeper in the valley, the smoke was mostly gone, and I got some pics of the waterfalls and monumental cliffsides.

I woke up in Tuolumne Meadows, trying to type on my laptop with freezing fingers as I waited for the sun to rise. The dawn was bright and clear at 17 degrees, and there wasn’t a trace of smoke at these high elevations.

"Light is a
thing that cannot be
reproduced, but must
be represented by
something else—color."

—Paul Cezanne



The clouds parted just before sunset at Sand Harbor, Lake Tahoe.

I went back to Yosemite Valley to try the sunset there again. Finally, I got my Tunnel View shot, with the smoke settled it looked like a low layer of thin fog.

I discovered peak fall color at Lake Tahoe, the last place I was expecting to find it. It was very late driving toward Tahoe from Yosemite, and I started seeing bright pops of yellow and orange in my headlights as I drove up the mountain roads. I marked the locations on my GPS, and the next morning, after catching the dawn at Emerald Bay, I drove back into the mountains and found the groves of aspen trees that had caught my attention the night before.

In the daylight, I also discovered beautiful alpine meadows that reminded me of Tuolumne. I found the bluest alpine stream I've ever seen, so blue it made my eyes water to look at it. I don't know how I can make my paints capture such an incredible blue. (Perhaps a combination of underpainting to make the blue more vibrant?)

It was a cloudy afternoon in Lake Tahoe. I almost didn't drive to Sand Harbor; I didn't want the disappointment of gray weather again like in Carmel, but I went anyway and was happy I went—I didn't get the crystal turquoise waters I had hoped for, but the clouds parted just before sunset, and I got some amazing sunset shots.

Back in my hotel room, I anxiously stalked the weather sites, trying to figure out the best place to catch sunrise the next day. I decided to try my luck again at Sand Harbor. I got there well before dawn, and it seemed that clear skies were smiling on me at last. As I waited, I realized that Sand Harbor happens to be located right behind the biggest peak around... so the entire rest of the lake and surrounding mountains were in full-drenched sunlight, while I still waited in the cold shade for those rays of light that would turn the gray rocky coastline into a paradise of aquamarine. (To distract myself during the wait, I wrote up these memoirs you've just read.) Finally, a full hour after "sunrise"

I saw the first glimmer of yellow sunlight hitting the trees high in the mountain peak above the lake. I waited joyfully to see those crystal blue waters I wanted to paint... but then I realized that the sun was shining through the tall pine trees lining the water's edge, and the long shadows created unpaintable dark streaks all through the clear water. By my calculations, it would be high noon before I saw clear blue waters, and by then the light would be too harsh. So, I am making a note for next time: only visit Sand Harbor on a sunny day in the late afternoon.

My last stop before heading back home was Mendocino, where my love affair with the California coast first began. As I drove the winding roads over the coastal range, I entered into a dense bank of fog. My heart sank. I had been watching weather patterns in Mendocino for weeks now, and I thought I had timed my visit for good weather.

But, chasing the light has paid off. As I waited in the cold gray winds of Elk (just south of Mendocino), the dense fog suddenly parted, and brilliant sunlight hit the ocean. Within minutes, the entire landscape had transformed into a utopia of color. The next morning the sun shone again, and I started home happy and satiated, and with enough painting material to last me a decade.

Ironically, when I made it back to Oregon, there I found the most beautiful fall color I had seen on my entire trip... just as the sun set behind the mountains.

