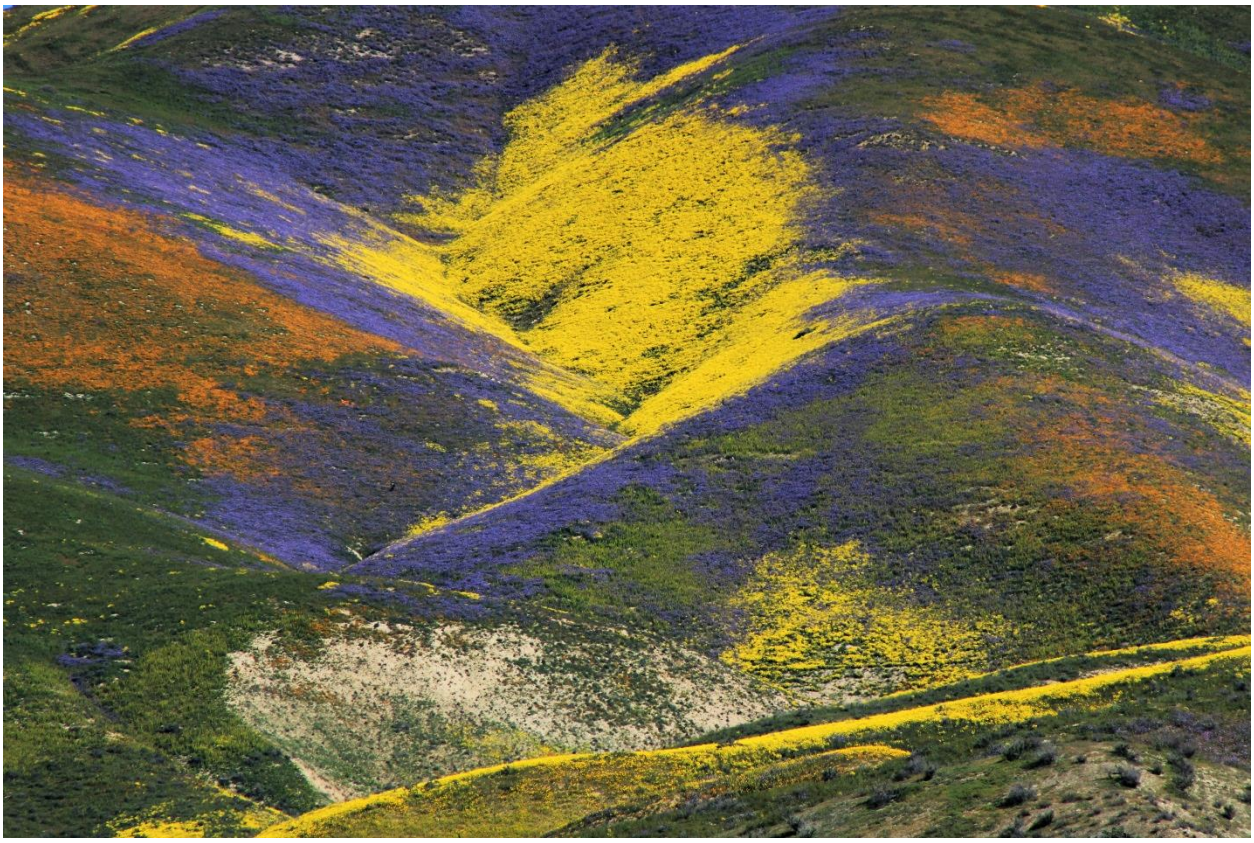
Spring Wind in California: March, 2017



George and I drove from Santa Cruz to Death Valley with a twist, taking a poorly known roundabout off Hwy 46, the Bitterwater Road, East of Paso Robles. There we got our first hint of the salute to the color yellow that would mark much of our trip.

Our destination for the first night required another poorly known, rough dirt road to access a sunbaked knoll with spectacular views of the whole Panamint Valley and the soaring Panamint Range to the East. We call it the NOTR—North Of Trona Resort. There we opened a few beers and watched the shadows creep across the valley and eventually engulf Telescope Peak. We ducked down out of the stiffening breeze, organized our packs, and made salad and skirt steak over coals of Aptos oak, chased with Salamandre Primitivo. The air was crystal clear, the moon was new, and the star show absolutely breathtaking.

Scorpio, naturally, ruled the Universe.

Day 2 we drove to Stovepipe Wells and then across the desert up to our revered Marble Canyon camp. Although we were getting a late start, we strapped on our packs and took off for Cottonwood Springs, covering about 8 miles before finding water. We saw a fine desert iguana along the way, and the brittlebushes were screaming *Yellow!*

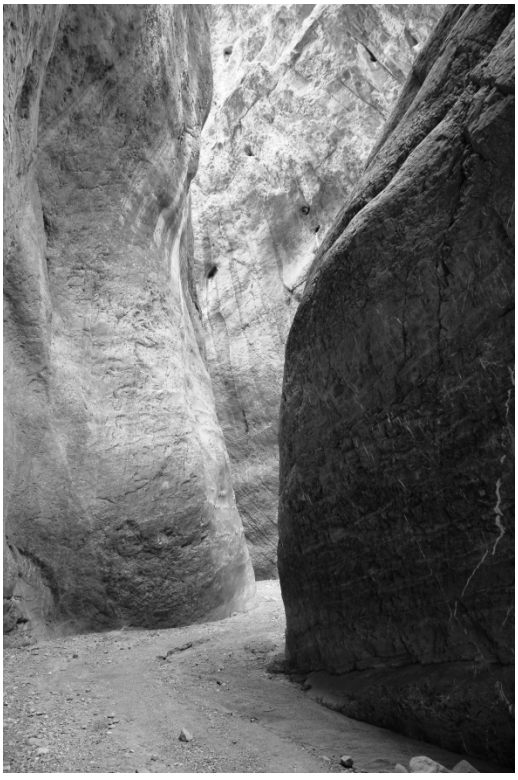
We threw down our stuff and cooked orzo pasta with shiitakes and smoked salmon. George impishly pulled out a 16 oz IPA for a surprise.

Day 3, we struck off across the open desert through "The Lonesome Valley," where I hiked way up one of the flanks to get a closer view of a white wild horse which I believe we saw as a colt a few years ago. He was now living a solitary life, I suspect having been asked politely to leave by the alpha stallion.

The second half of that hike takes a hiker over crumpled terrain (where I once got temporarily lost in Wrong Canyon), and then down a steep defile to Dead Horse Springs. We dammed up a wee trickle to collect water and endured the overdue, if cursory, body wash with a pot of that precious water. That evening, we watched a small, gray hawk build a nest in the cottonwood above us. George the Audubon among us finally identified it…a Mexican immigrant raptor well North of its usual range. I doubt that any wall will keep birdies from flying into our noble country to enjoy our superior education, modern infrastructure, clean water, and equitable healthcare. Meanwhile, they gobble up our patriotic lizards.

We had red beans and rice with linguica sausages cooked on willow skewers over a small bandit fire, matched with a fine Salamandre Malbec.

Day 4, we hiked down Dead Horse Canyon to the junction with Marble Canyon, through the zebra rocks, along the eerie narrows, and past the petroglyphs. The mudflow of 2016 had cracked, and grass and desert puffballs jumped through the cracks.



We had an original intention of going up into Upper Marble Canyon for an extra night, but decided to come back out to the truck and prepare a desultory special meal. However, when we were just a mile or so from the truck, we noticed that the air in DV had abruptly turned the color of *café au lait*. The far mountains disappeared, and the wind picked up aggressively. With startling acceleration, the wind started pushing us around, to the point that when we got to the truck, we realized we couldn't stay even 15 minutes. We just tossed the packs in the back and took off. By the time we got to the mouth of Cottonwood Canyon, the wind was blowing, conservatively, 70-80 miles an hour. The truck was getting pushed all over that sandy track for the entire harrowing 10 mile drive across the desert to Stovepipe Wells...which was invisible in the billowing dust. Ferocious streaming sand blasted continuously against the truck, making a noise so loud we could hardly hear each other.

In the aftermath, the driving sand mercilessly pitted the windshield, the paint, and any exposed plastic. There was no shelter in Death Valley, so we drove up to Townes Pass, where the dust plume was less dense, but the wind insufferable and temperature plummeting.

We cruised down into the Panamint Valley, another dive into the same *café au lait,* up the far side past good old Father Crowley's viewpoint, from which there was no view this time around. On a chance, we took the Saline Valley Road North, hoping to find some sheltered contours to spend the night, but we found none. The wind remained fierce, and the temperature at 5000-6000 feet had already dropped to 40.

So, with daylight waning quickly, we turned back and drove out toward Lone Pine. The Owens Valley featured more of the same murk and wind. We arrived at the Alabama Hills looking up through a bruise colored shroud to the vague silhouette of the escarpment of the Eastern Sierras.

We found a marginally sheltered nook in the granite boulders of the Alabama Hills as dusk plunged unceremoniously into night. We made Gina's hash, a Utah inspiration, calling for a sacrifice of a couple wine corks, and then crawled into our bags.

Day 5, the Sierras turned pink at dawn. The wind was still strong, but the air had cleared, and the snow covered peaks of the Sierras sparkled as the sun ascended.

We spent that day hiking around those amazing granite gargoyles as the wind gradually subsided. We made puttanesca with Polish sausages on the side, and slept well.

Day 6, we drove to Carrizo Plain for the flower show, and showy it was!

That painted hillside at the beginning of the article was the most remarkable palette along the Temblor Range, which forms the Eastern margin of Carrizo Plain. This year, while the colors were fantastic, that was no secret in the age of internet. The place was crawling with pokey cars, and a pall of dust hung over the Elkhorn Road which runs along the fault line on the Eastern Side of the Plain. When I was there 10 years ago in March, I saw only one car in a whole day of roaming.

We were able to find the familiar secluded spot at the end of a rough road. Our meal was another hash—cubed ham, onions, peppers, and potatoes rolled up with tortillas, a worthy prelude to another starry night, this one free of wind.

Among the special sightings, we saw the rare desert candle flower in full splendor.

Day 7, we came home…to green towering trees and gray ocean fog…warm arms…and a shower.

Those environments were so dramatically different geologically, so beautiful in such diverse ways, and all within a partial day's drive...what a State is California!

Wells and George, April 2, 2017