



PEAK PIXELS

TIPS FROM OUR PHOTO EDITOR

Colorado icons reimaged

by JOSHUA HARDIN

THE FIRST TIME I visited Maroon Lake near Aspen, the view looked exactly like the images I had seen in calendars and on souvenir postcards, with the pyramid-shaped peaks of the Maroon Bells reflected in the lake's mirror-smooth water. It was just too good a shot to pass by. I set up my tripod and photographed that quintessential Colorado scene – as did at least a hundred other people who lined the lakeshore that fall day.

I came home from that trip with little to show for my efforts. The images were undeniably beautiful, but they looked exactly like photos I had seen countless times already.

Repeat trips to Maroon Lake were far more fruitful thanks to a change in strategy. I bypassed that postcard-perfect vista, opting instead for wide angles of rippling reflections, telephoto zooms of jagged peaks, macro close-ups of aspen leaves or photojournalistic snapshots of fellow photographers framing their own copies of the classic scene. I hiked to the less-visited Crater Lake and found different overlooks of the Bells from adjacent mountaintops. Seeking secret spots at that well-known location yielded compelling results.

However, my first photo shoot wasn't necessarily a total loss, as a little imagination can make even an average photo interesting. As you can see in my self-portrait on this page, I used a projector to cast that boilerplate image of the Maroon Bells onto myself, creating a T-shirt design fashioned from light.

The lesson I learned at Maroon Lake was confirmed on subsequent trips to other iconic Colorado locales. Whenever I spent my first visit concentrating on a list of "must have" angles others have previously photographed, I came away disappointed. Simply running down a checklist of iconic places to photograph is a great way to



prove you've been to those places but a bad way to create worthwhile images.

As photographers, we should think twice before going on safari to bag shots of famous locales to hang on the wall like trophy hunters proudly displaying taxidermy. We're not hunting for landscapes; we're hunting for opportunities to show how light interacts with and changes the landscape.

Breaking out of our comfort zone by trying new techniques, angles or equipment is the best way to make us feel like musicians recording distinct remixes, even on outings to the most popular icons.

Fewer visitors trek up the rocky 4x4 road to the Crystal Mill near Marble than go to Maroon Lake in late September, but it's still one of the most-photographed Colorado sites – and justifiably so.

Built on a precipitous aspen-lined outcrop above the Crystal River, the 1893 power station once generated compressed air to power mining machines that bored dynamite holes in silver ore. Despite enduring the jarring drive in my Jeep, my first experience of photographing the mill with a modern DSLR camera seemed too easy. The photos I took didn't evoke the reverence for our rugged past I wanted to portray.

For a different visit, I instead tasked myself with depicting the splintery mill facade using an antique-style, wooden field

camera like one frontier photographer William Henry Jackson might have used.

Jackson didn't have it easy. He once had to reshoot many locations after a mule lost its footing and tossed a month's worth of his images down a cliff. I had no such bad luck, but using large-format equipment was still a challenging process for me.

Before clicking the shutter to make the photo on the right, I had to painstakingly compose the image in a glass viewfinder, where it appeared upside down. I fine-tuned my focus while looking through a magnification loupe under a hood and blindly adjusted dials along a bellows with my fingers. There was no autofocus, zoom lens or LCD, and film had to be changed after exposing every single sheet.

Large format's slower pace and higher cost for developing each exposure forced me to double-check my techniques. It also gave me time to reflect on a quote by Greek philosopher Heraclitus: "You cannot step twice into the same river; for other waters are ever flowing on to you."

Light is constantly moving, like the Crystal River that rushed before me, so no two photos can be exactly the same even if they are captured by the same photographer at the same place. They freeze completely unique slivers of time. This is a comforting thought when visiting places we've seen before. There's always an opportunity to photograph something differently, even our most iconic places. 🌲

THE ICONIC Crystal Mill near Marble is one of the most-photographed sites in Colorado, but Photo Editor Joshua Hardin was able to get a new take on the familiar place by using an old-fashioned wooden field camera to create this image.

