



# local flavor

OCTOBER  
2019

SANTA FE  
ALBUQUERQUE  
TAOS

A TASTE OF LIFE IN NEW MEXICO

**FLYING  
STAR**

Nob Hill's  
Trailblazer

**TRAIL TO  
TEN 3** Hike it Like a Local



CAPTURING BALLOON FIESTA





# THE ART OF

Listen to your inner voice.  
Remember the Ah lies closer to  
the heart than the head.

—Charles Mann

# Seeing

story and photos by  
**CHARLES MANN**

There is always something fabulous to photograph in New Mexico, at any time of the year. But some seasons are better than others. My favorite time to be enchanted in the Land of Enchantment is late summer and the autumn months of September and October. There's still so much to see and capture, long after the August monsoons have filled the skies with thunderheads and when cottonwood and aspen leaves begin to turn, when the landscape speaks out loud. It's the time of village harvest festivals, red chile ristras, pueblo dances, Zozobra and Fiesta in Santa Fe; when yellow-flowered chamisa, sunflowers and snakeweed, along with purple asters, burnish the landscape with a gold and azure patina. It can be magical.

Photography is often called the Art of Seeing, learning how to capture something special that's just sitting there in the environment. A favorite oracle of mine once described it as, "the placing of a frame around a collection of objects." In placing the frame just so, one creates a new object that, in and of itself, conveys a completely unique feeling, insight, dynamic or aesthetic.

I call the discovery of that special placement of the frame the Ah.

I became addicted to the hunt for the Ah, whether in landscapes, portraits of people, cultural events or abstract patterns. The Ah is everywhere and anywhere—found whenever the light, the subject and the seer converge. Seeing a composition (or envisioning frame placement) in the viewfinder that reveals the Ah to me is a genuinely emotional experience. I think this is what drives most photographers, whether they know it or not. It is actually (don't laugh) a lot like the game Where's Waldo? There is a special treasure there in front of you, should you be able to find it. When you do find it, it is a revelation.

An opportunity for such is in October, conveniently also the month for the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, a happening that surpasses all others in the category of finding Waldo. Promoted as the Most Photographed Event in the World, some estimate that as many as 25 million photos are taken at the Fiesta over its nine-day run. Beyond documenting the personal experience of immersion into happy chaos, however, most of those 25 million photos are forgettable. The



Balloon Fiesta is akin to a huge kaleidoscope, overwhelming and dazzling, like swimming within a school of gigantic colorful fish. With a camera. Being able to see an Ah picture here is a true test of one's seeing eye; the ultimate photographic challenge. It's a highly aerobic exercise in photography to play Where's Waldo? here, in no small part because of the enthusiastic crowds. Everyone can walk, wade and plunge into the field of inflating, bulging, fire-blasted balloons to mingle, gape and rub up against the experience. And they do. It is an exhilarating, sensory feast, and it's a real opportunity to hone your skills in the Art of Seeing.

Over the years I have gathered a few strategies and observations that I think make it more likely that I might come home with a picture I really love. Here are some of them:

### If you have limited time, go to a Mass Ascension.

The first and last Saturdays and Sundays are reserved for Mass Ascensions, when all balloons are required to launch. There are other interesting events, like the Balloon Glow, but there is nothing to equal the sight of 500-plus balloons going up in the air all at once.

### Get there early and stay late.

Getting into Fiesta Park is always a bit traumatic. I like to arrive super early. Trying to park while the balloons start flying is very frustrating, but being set and feeling prepared long before the dawn begins to appear is always a great start. Later in the morning, things continue to happen on the field even after all of the balloons are launched, so hang around a bit. I've found favorite pictures when the crowd is thinning and the last crews are just going up or coming down.

### Leave your camera bag in the car.

I've made the mistake of toting a camera bag full of gear. It is cumbersome and it gets in the way, especially when you are trying to maneuver through the crowd. I long ago converted to a vest, in which I can stash a couple of lenses, a flash, and any needed extras like batteries or business cards. It's a lot easier to walk, talk and shoot with a vest, and a lot more comfortable over the two hours or so that I am carrying that gear.

### Forget the tripod.

Tripods are great for landscapes. But they are awkward, take up a lot of room and are not built for a busy crowd that is moving around you like a buffalo herd. When I see someone carrying a tripod here, I feel as though they have burdened themselves unnecessarily. Instead, take that tripod to the evening Balloon Glow, where it will be indispensable.

### Learn to love your wide-angle zoom.

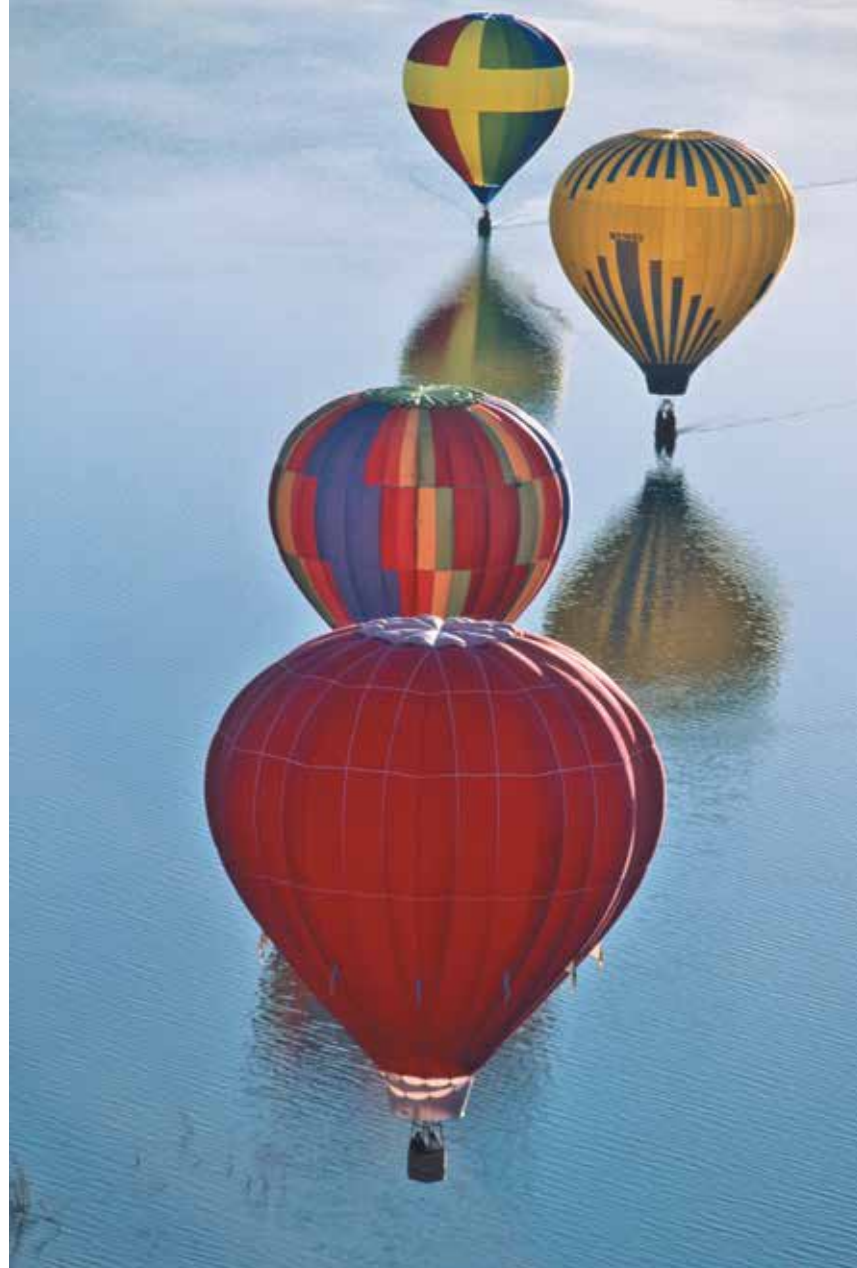
If I could only carry one lens onto the field, it would be a wide-angle zoom. For most serious 35 mm shooters, this means something in the 25 to 100 mm range. My Canon 24-105 mm is the lens for me most of the time. It can really cover the territory. I also carry a super-wide, maybe a 16-35 mm zoom or even a 14 mm ultra-wide, but these are generally good for a select few shots only. Telephoto? I see people at the Fiesta carrying very long lenses and I know they will not get much more than an isolated picture of a solitary balloon up in the sky. A telephoto can come in handy, but generally at the expense of not capturing more dynamic, all-encompassing scenes. I prefer the Big Picture to tell the whole story.

### Pack a flash.

I always have my flash ready to go along with a battery dedicated to the unit. A flash can fill in dark shadows and give highlights a pop. I can turn it on or off whenever I analyze the scene, but more often than not, it is on. Experience is the best teacher here. Sure, you can do some of this work in Photoshop, but we all have to admit, a great original capture is the most rewarding goal.

### Consider a polarizing filter.

I like to have a polarizing filter on my camera. It is a love/hate relationship. On a day with a clear blue sky, the filter can ruin your photos, but at times, when popping out clouds and colors, it makes all the difference.



Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta



# THE ART OF Seeing

## Be ready at around 7 a.m.

When the sun appears over the edge of Sandia Peak after 7 a.m., it blazes down like a laser and signals the beginning of the best moments of the day for shooting memorable photos. The gathering light on the inflating canopies can result in wonderful silhouettes, glowing colors and great drama. As the sun continues up, the light flattens, and soon it is not as fabulous. There are still great photos to be found afterward, but the early morning light is precious.

## Be prepared for bad weather.

Sometimes winds or stormy weather prevent the launch. Or it is overcast above. The photos you came for will have to wait for another day, but there are still Ah pictures to be made. Remember Where's Waldo?

## Be curious about other aspects.

- The launch officials, called Zebras, are dressed in black-and-white stripes. They can be a colorful element.
- When a balloon is laid out on the ground, it is a field of color surrounded by the crowd.
- The flames in the balloon canopy can be dramatic, especially when there are silhouettes.
- At the moment of lift off, the crew and passengers are sharing a peak highlight of their ballooning career. All balloon pilots want to fly Albuquerque—it's like the Balloon Olympics.
- Kids are a source of potential charm.
- Special-shape balloons create whimsical and often funny scenes. There are dragons, dinosaurs, stagecoaches, locomotives, giant cows, aliens and much more.

## Look for things that speak to you.

This is the heart of the matter. More personal. This is where the journey really depends on you, on what you are feeling and what you find compelling. Listen to your inner voice. Remember the Ah lies closer to the heart than the head. Do you love chaos and motion and spectacle? Are you moved by contrasting colors and shapes and patterns? This is your opportunity to be honest with yourself about the art you want to make.

## Know your camera.

Knowing how to use your camera is paramount to capturing the Good Stuff. Keep the shutter speed up above 125th of a second and try not to overexpose any part of the shot. Check your memory cards and batteries.

Experiences are everything in life. Capturing a great photo embellishes and enhances our experiences, and a picture often becomes the kernel of the memories that we emotionally archive and reflect on. Carrying a camera always heightens my ability to look more expectantly and thoughtfully at any situation. Moreover, those Ah photos can embody an archetypal, underlying Platonic beauty that transcends the moment and resonates with our inner-knowing. Discovering this truth led me to a lifelong passion of placing the frame just so.

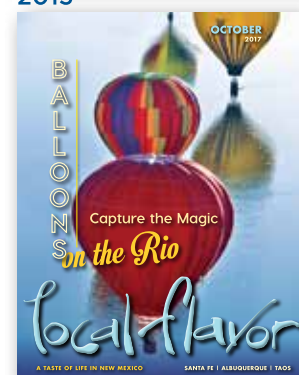
For more information about Charles Mann and his work, please visit [charlesmannphotography.com](http://charlesmannphotography.com).



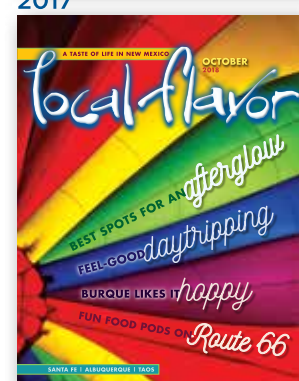
2012



2015



2017



2018



2019