

# I Never Knew This About Myself

By Craig Spielman



South Coyote Buttes – Vermillion Cliffs NM, AZ

Humans are complex creatures with most of that complexity often hidden from view. Potential talents and passions can exist below the surface that may never be expressed as we go through life. Then again, perhaps they can emerge under the right conditions, if given the chance.

Such an experience of self-discovery happened to me later in my life. It was my good fortune to explore a love of nature and wilderness that I had not been especially receptive to in earlier days. I learned that something profound had been there all along, waiting for my attention. When I finally began to venture out into the wild, I eventually let in the clarity inherent in these majestic settings. Eventually, the door to photography also opened for me as I ventured outside. In the past, I believed these types of endeavors were too hard or rough, or that even lower-impact activities in the natural world were just not for me. Maybe you do too.

I understand how you feel. I've had the good fortune to enjoy a lifetime of travel that has given me priceless experiences. My work for international businesses provided the opportunity to visit countries and cultures throughout Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. I've

seen amazing architecture and history, and have met people from many walks of life. In my late twenties I took an assignment to live in Japan for six months, which gave me an invaluable perspective of the world.

Later, as my sons Jeremy and Alex grew older, and I settled down with my new wife Janet, and extended family, we created fresh memories cruising through tropical islands and dreaming the time away on the beautiful beaches of the mid-Atlantic coast. I'm incredibly grateful to have had all of these wonderful times in such places.

Yet my travels were always about business, culture and relaxation. I was never much of an outdoorsman. In fact, it wasn't so long ago that I thought a carabiner was an admirer of the Caribbean. Once or twice, Janet and I did discuss a vague mutual desire to visit the Grand Canyon though it always remained an undefined event somewhere beyond the horizon.

While we were all occasionally relaxing in paradise, during college, Alex was also taking road trips with his best friend, driving from our home on the east coast to the western states. He would return from these excursions fired up as I had never seen him. To me, he seemed a bit like a crazed late-night TV pitchman selling Ginsu knives, with all his babbling about the canyons, mountains, and big sky.



Craig at the start of the Halfdome Cables

As he approached his senior year, Alex got the notion that I should join him on an epic father-son road trip so he could show me what he had seen. My reaction was less than enthusiastic; I had been perfectly happy laying on a beach and letting the ocean lull me to sleep. Not only that, but somehow he thought I should make this trip a gift to him for graduating with a certain GPA (which he could predict within a few hundredths of a point anyway since he was in his last term). *Wait a minute!*, I thought. *Didn't supporting his education count as the gift?*

In the years that followed, Alex would hound me often about the trip, insisting that I had somehow promised this to him. And I would continue to demur. Then, one day, I surprised myself by suddenly thinking, *why not?* I was entering my sixties and I realized that the window on a bonding opportunity like this could close quickly as I got older and Alex got a little further into adulthood. So, to his shock and delight, I agreed. In June 2018, we rafted through the Grand Canyon for a week and then drove through Death Valley to Yosemite for some epic hiking. The rest, as they say, is history.



Alex & Craig on Saddle Canyon hike at the bottom of the Grand Canyon



Now that I've become that passionate believer in whom others see the maniacal pitchman, I remind Alex that all of this is his fault. In each succeeding year we've taken several more trips to immerse ourselves in the wonders of nature. Janet and I spent a magical two weeks in and around the Grand Canyon in a much more impactful way than we had ever imagined. I had a similar father-son bonding experience with Jeremy as we traveled through the incredible Everglades and Florida Keys. More such trips followed, including a family excursion through Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks, as well as several subsequent immersions in the astonishing terrain of Southern Utah.



Craig & Janet at Toroweap, Grand Canyon, overlooking Lava Falls Rapid 2 miles away, which we had rafted the day before.

Along with these developments, I discovered a growing passion for nature photography as I knew I wanted to return home with landscape photos that did these epic places justice. In time, this also spurred Alex to join in, giving me the pleasure of seeing him become the craftsman and artist he is today. Yet, I didn't want my desire for awesome photos to become the sole focus of my attention. After all, I was on fast-moving adventures with others, and it was essential to soak in the experience as it happened. This was definitely a balancing act, one which I've adapted to over time.

On our early trips, I used higher-end point-and-shoot cameras and, due to my lack of photography knowledge, I kept things simple by shooting in auto mode. Soon, I wanted to have prints of the best images on my walls, but found that small camera sensors presented limitations on the size and quality of the prints I could produce.

I felt that these places were so special, and our trips so infrequent and uncertain, that they should be captured with a full-frame sensor camera. I also realized that, if I went in this direction, I would have to invest the time and effort required to become educated on photography, from equipment to best practices, and from capture to post processing. As a result, began using a Sony A7II full-frame mirrorless camera body. It's was few generations old, but at 24 mega-pixels, with a host of still-advanced features, it was a good way for me to get started at a really good price point. Before long, I graduated to the A7RIII, which served me very well for the past 3 years. Now, I've just invested in the A7RV and I can already see that using the advanced quality and technology of this camera will be real pleasure for many years to come.

Along with the Sony mirrorless full frame bodies, I'm using three Sony e-mount lenses that cover most of a landscape photographer's needs, also at reasonable price points. One is a 24 – 105 mm zoom (f/4.0), which is great for the vast majority of my shots. It can go wide, and also long enough to capture mid-distance scenes. For longer distances, I have a 70 – 300 mm zoom, mainly to capture more selective compositions within large landscape vistas, as well as wildlife. I'd like to be able to go farther at times but this lens is relatively lightweight and compact, which is an important consideration on long hikes. The third lens is a 20 mm (f/1,8) prime, mainly for night sky shots.

Having the Sony full-frame mirrorless gear has been a game changer for me, but it does come with much to consider, including:

- Time & Effort – Once you start using other shooting modes, like aperture priority or manual, and begin swapping lenses for specific purposes, you have entered a new world. There is much to learn, and one question always leads to three more questions.

Pretty soon, you find yourself becoming devoted to a serious avocation. Still, if you want to minimize complexity and investment, you could use a full-frame camera in auto mode with one multi-purpose zoom lens, such as the 24 – 105 mm I mentioned above. You could also take your photos in JPG, instead of RAW, format to let the camera process the photo (instead of doing the post-processing work). Nothing wrong with that. Eventually, if you feel the desire for more control over the process, as well as more artistic freedom, you can grow into it.

- Risk – I found that in high impact wilderness environments, such as rafting the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon, a rugged point-and-shoot, such as my Olympus TG-5, was a great choice for getting decent photos in wet and harsh environments. But now that I have the Sony full frame gear, I want to bring it with me. If I'm hiking. I'll now need to deploy additional measures to protect my equipment, such as rain covers and dry bags, secure camera clips and straps, a photographer's backpack, etc. If I do another rafting trip, I'll need to have a waterproof compartment, and consider a trip specifically geared towards a photographer's needs (e.g., the Gary Hart workshops in the Grand Canyon).
- Quality – To get the absolute best image sharpness and quality, a tripod is required. All the photography teachers I've followed hammer that point. They also consistently say that morning and evening light are the best, and that bright daylight can be harsh and unforgiving. All true. However, because I need to combine my photography with the experiences I happen to be moving through with others, I rarely use a tripod or avoid daylight shots. My strategy is to go handheld by trying to set the exposure with a fast enough shutter speed that still allows the depth of field and tone curve I need. A higher ISO is usually required for this approach, but I find that the advanced performance and capabilities of the newer bodies, coupled with the recent cutting-edge AI denoise software in post-processing, make this almost a non-issue.

My goal in the field is twofold: become skilled enough to spend less time on dialing in the settings and focus more on the composition. In addition to the photography, I also want to leave space to be in the moment, experiencing my surroundings. With this in mind, I find that I can take enough photos without slowing down too much, so that I have a good chance of finding some keepers when I get home. Using Lightroom Classic and Photoshop to make adjustments on the back-end, as well as Topaz AI correction software, this approach generally works well for me. Of course, if I know I'm going to be at a site for a while or in low light, I will definitely use a tripod and take all the steps required to eliminate camera shake (delayed shutter release, disabled steady shot features). In fact, I wouldn't bother shooting a sunset or the Milky Way without these practices. Same for multi-exposure shots, such as in high dynamic range or extreme depth of field situations. All of this said, I've been able to produce large prints for my



walls that more than satisfy my aesthetic sensibilities. They also look pretty good on the Web after I've resized them.

- Cost – Clearly, moving to full-frame gear from a point-and-shoot can be a significant investment. Once you dive in, you are likely to find indispensable, as well as attractive, accessories you didn't think about when you began. In other words, it all adds up. Consider whether your photography needs and objectives warrant making this commitment, or whether taking an initial intermediate step (e.g., using an older generation, full-frame unit in automatic mode, with an all-purpose zoom lens) makes sense.



Jeremy leading the way through the mangroves in the Buttonwood Canal, Everglades

Along with photography, it's also important to highlight other vital benefits that are sure to accompany a meaningful relationship with the wilderness. Some will accrue from the preparation one needs in order to have a safe and rewarding experience. A reasonable level of fitness is required to hike, raft, and otherwise be on the move frequently in rugged terrain. Learning occurs at many levels that tends to be quite gratifying – about wilderness gear, geology and topology, wildlife, history, government policy, and so on. Acquiring new skills,

such as reading topological maps and route finding also may come with wilderness undertakings. And, perhaps most important, is the changed perspective on life one gains by developing and sharing an appreciation and reverence for our earthly treasures with our loved ones.

Look inside and see for yourself.