

CHRISTMAS LETTER 2021

Once again, it's that time of year when I have the pleasure to write my annual Christmas Letter, which has been a tradition of mine for 28 years, since the first one in 1993. This year, unfortunately like last year, it will be a short letter, with only one trip outside southern California. However, it was a very active year with over 80 real estate photo shoots, several of which were both challenging and amazing. And in addition, I spent a lot of time hiking in the hills around Redlands, which I enjoyed very much. Last, but not least, there were some events that I attended, as well as a memorable birthday trip. All of which I will describe in more detail, along with some photos as well.

As I just mentioned, I spent much of the year working as a freelance contractor photographing properties for four nationwide real estate marketing companies. The photo assignments were quite diverse, ranging from your typical 2 BR, 1 bath suburban tract home all the way to multimillion dollar homes in exclusive gated communities. In addition, there were several commercial photo assignments involving large public schools in southern California and two big department stores in Phoenix, Arizona! I also had the opportunity to do some "specialized" photo shoots, including a number of preschool daycare centers, an art gallery in Los Angeles, and an historical law office in the Chinatown district of LA. What follows is a "sample" of the most interesting and challenging photo assignments.

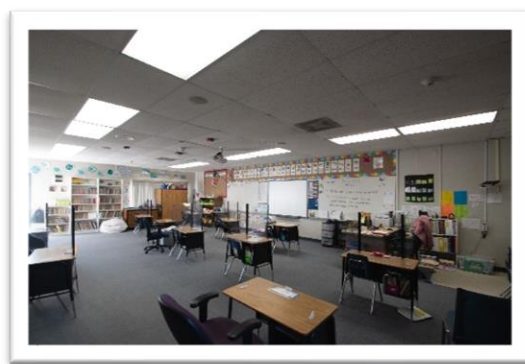
Public School shoots (Palm Desert, Los Angeles, Santa Clarita)

These assignments required complicated photography to create 3D virtual models of all the school buildings (classrooms, offices, maintenance facilities, etc.), in preparation for construction companies to "renovate" the structures.

These assignments were quite challenging, but I gained a lot of experience using a very sophisticated 3D camera (Matterport) that has both a high-resolution lens as well as a series of infrared sensors. The camera rotates 360 degrees to capture a complete view, and this is repeated every 6 – 10 feet to generate a series of photos that are "merged" later to create a 3D model, as well as a detailed floor plan and interactive virtual tour.

The school properties were often over 30,000 sq ft and required 8 – 12 hours to complete, sometimes over the span of two days. One assignment in Santa Clarita was especially challenging in the middle of August when temperatures were 110 – 115 degrees! But despite the long hours and technical challenges, I felt a real sense of accomplishment when the assignments were complete. And these photo assignments paid quite well – each one being \$1500 to \$2000, plus travel expenses.

Here are a few photos from two of the schools, Carter Elementary School and Starview Elementary school, both in Palm Desert.



Starview Elementary School – Palm Desert



Carter Elementary School – Palm Desert



Carter School “Mascot”

H&M Department Stores (Phoenix, AZ)

Once again, this photo assignment required the Matterport camera to create 3D models of each store in preparation for remodeling of the premises. Although the “technique” of doing the 3D photography was essentially the same as for the public schools, there was a unique “twist” to the assignment. Since 3D photography requires that there be NO movement in view of the camera, the work could only be done after the stores closed when no customers or staff were present! That meant the only time I could photograph in the stores was between midnight and 6 AM! (at least the “mannequins” never moved!)

I spent 3 days in Phoenix to complete the assignment of the two H&M stores. Since all my work was done late at night, I had the days free to visit sights in the Phoenix area. (which I’ll cover later in the letter)

Residential Real Estate (From San Diego, Santa Barbara, Bakersfield, Palm Springs and all points in between)

While a majority of the assignments were typical suburban tract homes, there were some beautiful luxury homes that were amazing. Among them, these were some of the most memorable.

CORONA

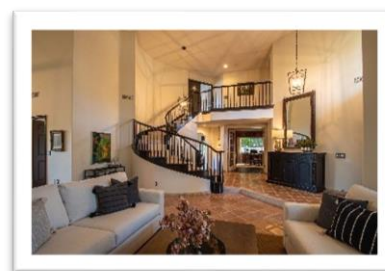




WEST HOLLYWOOD



LAGUNA NIGUEL



SHERMAN OAKS



UPLAND



Specialty Photo Assignments

Bright Horizons Preschool Daycare Centers

Some of the most interesting “specialty” photo shoots were those of several preschool daycare centers managed by a national company called “Bright Horizons”. The purpose of the photos was to improve and update the company’s marketing materials. My job was to photograph classrooms, daycare facilities, and outdoor play areas. However, the photos could only be shot when no children were present, either after the centers closed for the day or on weekends. In every case, I was always impressed by the excellent facilities and the dedicated staff. Here are some photos from a few of the Bright Horizons centers.

SAN CLEMENTE



WESTWOOD



SANTA BARBARA



The Night Gallery

The “Night Gallery” occupies a 6200 sq ft warehouse in the heart of the Los Angeles “Arts District” downtown, specializing in the latest contemporary art from young new artists. My job was to photograph a 3D virtual tour of the gallery with the Matterport camera, making sure the artwork was clearly visible, just as if one were walking through the gallery. The virtual tours were then posted on the gallery’s website for viewing by the public. This was especially important during the pandemic lockdown when the gallery could not be open to the public. Each time the work of a new artist was put on display, I was requested to do a new 3D virtual tour. I always enjoyed photographing the exhibitions! Here are a couple of photographs of the Night Gallery.

LOS ANGELES



Chinatown, Los Angeles

One of the more unusual assignments I had was to photograph an old historic law office in the Chinatown district of Los Angeles. As I was photographing the office, the owner of the building told me some of the history of the Chinese in Los Angeles and the establishment of Chinatown. One of the most interesting facts was that Union Station was built by Chinese laborers. And until the early 20th century, they were not allowed to own property in the city. So, they banded together to form Chinese “Cultural Societies” that could buy property, the result was the establishment of Chinatown – a beautiful example of traditional Chinese architecture and artistic design.



Although real estate photography occupied a significant amount of my time this past year, including a lot of freeway driving, I managed time for some other pursuits, such as hiking, writing travel blogs, cooking, and attending a few events. The following is a summary of these activities that I really enjoyed.

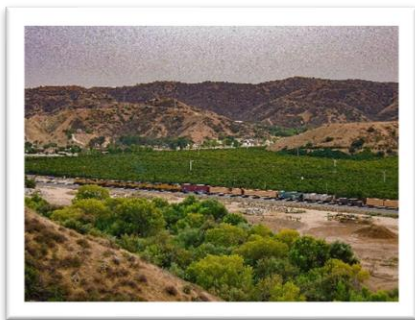
Hiking (San Timoteo Canyon, Norton Younglove Nature Reserve, Cajon Junction – Mormon Rocks)

Last year in 2020, as the pandemic shut down virtually all bars and restaurants, I took up hiking on trails in the hills around Redlands, along with a couple of cold beers in my backpack. Here are my favorite places to hike.

San Timoteo Canyon Nature Reserve

It's a short 10 minute drive from my house, and I found a lovely spot on the edge of San Timoteo Creek where I could watch all the wildlife, including Red-Tailed Hawks, Quail, Rabbits, Ground Squirrels and literally dozens of different species of songbirds. Occasionally I spotted a Coyote and heard the braying of wild Burros that inhabit the orange groves nearby. However, I never saw them, just their numerous "droppings" on the trail! (It was just recently that I saw a large herd of them alongside the Reche Canyon Road) One day in August, all of a sudden, as I watched Union Pacific freight trains pass by, the Amtrak "Sunset Limited" passenger train appeared, headed west to Los Angeles. It was then that I realized the train was running over 12 hours late! (Note: the mainline of the Union Pacific railroad from Los Angeles to New Orleans runs adjacent to San Timoteo Creek, and up to 30 freight trains travel the route each day)

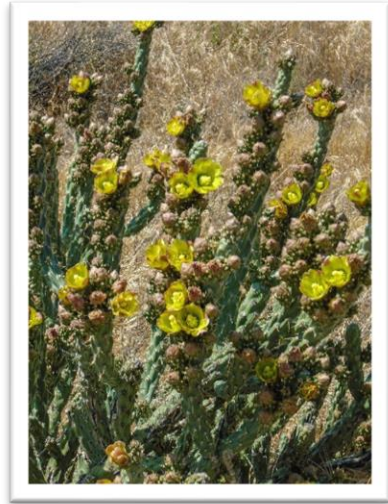
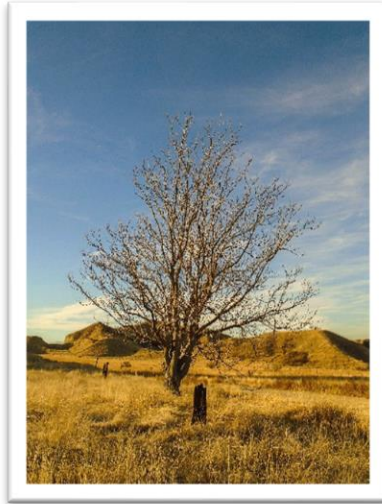
But the "highlight" of my many hikes in San Timoteo Canyon definitely had to be the sighting of a young Bobcat stalking a covey of Quail just 30 feet from me! But the Bobcat dashed into the brush before I could get the camera out of my backpack. Unfortunately, I have no photo, only the memory of the encounter. I continue to hike in San Timoteo Canyon several times a week.



Norton Younglove Nature Reserve

Another of my favorite places to hike is the Norton Younglove Nature Reserve in the upper reaches of San Timoteo Canyon. It's an old ranch that must have a lot of history, however, save for a couple of rusty old farm implements and a few crumbling concrete foundations, there doesn't seem to be any

written history of the area. But it's a wonderful place to hike, even though a major high-voltage Southern California Edison transmission line crosses through the nature reserve. On my many hikes in the reserve, I've seen a gorgeous variety of wildflowers, dozens of species of songbirds, Red-Tailed Hawks, and the tracks of Deer, Bobcat, and Coyote. From the top of the hills, the view of the 11,000 foot high San Bernardino Mountains is often spectacular! Here are a few photos of the nature reserve.



Cajon Junction – Mormon Rocks

Another location where I love to hike is a part of the "Pacific Crest Trail" near Cajon Junction, just a few minutes from Interstate 15 that crosses the Cajon Summit. It's a place known as "Sullivan's Curve", which is a famous spot to watch heavy freight trains ascending and descending the 4200 foot high summit of Cajon Pass on the mainline between Los Angeles and Chicago. From a viewpoint on the trail above the railroad tracks, there's a spectacular view of the huge "S" curve that enables 3 mile long freight trains to climb over 3,000 feet elevation to the top of Cajon Pass, one of the most difficult railroad routes in the country. Many times, the locomotive engineers would sound their horn and wave as they passed me!



Sullivan's Curve – Cajon Junction

San Tan Mountain Regional Park (Phoenix, AZ)

Another place I enjoyed hiking for one day while on the assignment to photograph the H&M stores, was San Tan Mountain Regional Park south of Phoenix. Being springtime, the weather was very comfortable, as opposed to the excessive heat in the middle of the summer. The park covers an area of 10,000 acres of typical lower Sonoran Desert, ranging in elevation from 1400 feet to over 2500 feet. The highest point in the park was the summit of Goldmine Mountain with a spectacular vista overlooking a deep escarpment and the distant mountains in Mexico. I hiked over 5 miles on trails through an area of tall saguaro cactus, whose distinctive shape symbolizes the state of Arizona. Along the way I saw numerous varieties of lizards and birds. At the end of the day, I visited the Visitor's Center where there were many of the biological features in the park on display. All in all, it was a delightful day in the desert.



Besides the many real estate photo shoots and hiking trips almost every day, I was able to travel to a few events that were very enjoyable. Here are some highlights and photos from those trips.

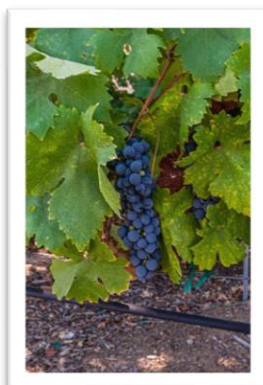
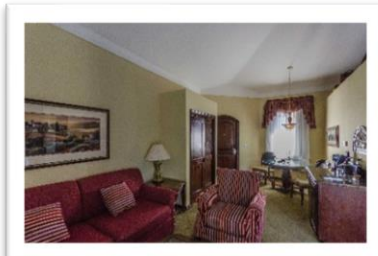
In early March, I was assigned three photo shoots around San Diego, so I decided to drive down the evening before and book a hotel for the night, so as to arrive at the first shoot early the next morning. I found a great room at the Marriott Courtyard in Sorrento Valley. And for dinner that evening, I walked across the street to the Karl Strauss Brewery where I had a delicious plate of "West Coast Carbonara" which had beer-brined bacon, sun-dried tomatoes, garlic and fresh basil, topped with parmesan cheese!

Dinner was accompanied by a couple of pints of the brewery's best IPA. Although the trip was only one night, it was a most enjoyable break from the routine.

Later, in August, our dear friend from Germany, Tina, paid us a visit more than a year after the pandemic began. One day I invited Tina and Leslie for a short trip to an area known as "Mormon Rocks" – very unique geological formations along the route of Interstate 15 on the way up to Cajon Pass in the San Bernardino Mountains. The rock formations are beautiful and named for the trail the Mormons followed from Salt Lake City to southern California in 1851. I had planned to avoid the I-15 freeway traffic and instead to follow the historic old Route 66 that parallels the freeway. Everything went as planned until we encountered a Highway Patrol car blocking the road north of Devore, due to an active wildfire in the canyon beyond. So, I made a quick decision to turn around and head back to a place where I had planned to stop on the way back from Mormon Rocks. It is a place where I have often stopped upon returning from hiking trips to Sullivan's Curve. It's a classic "dive bar" known as "Screamin Sally's Saloon", formerly the "Screamin Chicken Saloon", that is very popular with bikers. We ordered beers and had a great time talking with some of the locals at the bar, as well as meeting Sally! Although no one seemed to know the history of the saloon, everyone agreed it must have been an old gas station along route 66 in the 1930's.



At the beginning of September, my birthday arrived, for which I had arranged a trip to the Temecula Valley Wine Country, one of my favorite destinations in southern California. I decided to take the scenic route through the mountains rather than the freeway. Along the way I stopped for lunch at the "Paradise Valley Café" where I ordered their specialty, the "Whistler Burger". Apparently it was inspired by a BNSF railroad locomotive engineer - a half-pound of beef smothered in Danish Bleu cheese sauce, which was absolutely delicious, but far more than I could eat. It was lovely warm weather as I sat outside with a cold glass of Stone IPA. From Paradise Valley I headed south through the historic old town of Anza that was founded in 1775 to honor the Spanish explorer Juan Batista de Anza. Later, once I reached the junction with Highway 79, I stopped at the "Stagecoach Inn" for a cold beer as the temperature rose above 100 degrees. Nearby was a monument honoring the "Mormon March" – it commemorates the 2,100 mile journey of Mormon soldiers from Omaha, Nebraska to San Diego during the Civil War era. As I sat in the old bar, I noticed a sign above the bar that read "Please be patient with the bartender, even the toilet can only handle one asshole at a time"! From the Stagecoach Inn, it was a short drive to Temecula, where I had reserved a "Deluxe King Villa" for two nights at the South Coast Winery Resort in order to enjoy the relaxation of the resort.



After checking into my suite, with a private patio overlooking the vineyards, I drove up to the small town of Perris to watch the skydivers at the Perris airport, one of the most popular places to skydive in America. I had a very relaxing time sitting on the terrace of the “Bombshelter Bar & Grill” with a cold glass of IPA as parachutes suddenly opened high in the sky above me!



Back at the South Coast Winery Resort, I enjoyed a great wine tasting experience, before having dinner in the Vineyard Rose restaurant. My server highly recommended the “Jidori Chicken” topped with stone ground mustard and served with roasted new potatoes, wild mushrooms, and grilled Kale, accompanied by a chilled glass of their signature Chardonnay. After dinner, I relaxed on my patio with a glass of “Wild Horse Peak Cabernet Sauvignon” as the sun was setting over the vineyards, beautifully highlighting them in a soft warm glow.

Early the next morning as the sun was rising, I joined a small group of people for a ride in a hot air balloon over the vineyards. The “liftoff” at 6:00 AM was very smooth, and slowly we rose into the air under the expert guidance of our pilot, Phil. He had over 30 years of experience piloting hot air balloons around the world, so he explained exactly how he “navigated” the path of the balloon. It involved ascending and descending at intervals to catch the right direction of the wind, the direction of which varied at different altitudes – it was fascinating to watch him “steer” the balloon. As we floated above

the vineyards, it was silent, except for the occasional “roar” of the propane burners to lift us higher. At one point, Phil took us up to over 5,000 feet for a spectacular view of the entire Temecula Valley. One of the passengers asked him how high a hot air balloon could go? Phil’s answer, based on his own experience, was just over 18,000 feet, although the world record is over 68,000 feet! After 90 minutes, we landed gently in a large field. It wasn’t long before bottles of chilled Champagne appeared to celebrate our flight! While the ground team deflated the balloon, Phil showed us the path of the balloon as captured by GPS in Google maps. Not only had we travelled several miles from our liftoff point, the path had taken us over a number of vineyards and wineries. The balloon ride was my most memorable experience of 2021!



Near the end of October, I attended the annual “Amber Waves of Grain Craft Beer Festival” in Corona. It’s an event organized by the “All American Riders” motorcycle club and the “Stone Church Brewery” for the purpose of supporting more than 35 different Veterans organizations. This year there were over 40 craft breweries serving samples of their beers, as well as a half dozen food vendors. All their proceeds were donated to the veteran’s organizations. Once I picked up my VIP admission ticket, I was given a souvenir beer glass which enabled me to sample as many beers as I liked during the afternoon. The variety of beers was very diverse, ranging from traditional American lagers and classic West Coast IPA’s to exotic flavors of fruits and spices, such as hazy Mango ale. The event began with a parade featuring several military “reenactment” groups representing different wars, from the earliest times of the revolutionary war, civil war and Indian war to modern-day WWI, WWII, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. The finale was a “ride by” of the motorcycles “roaring” past the crowd! Later I met up with my dear friends Robert and Luci for a leisurely stroll around the craft beer booths to taste their offerings. One of the most unusual beers I found was the “Whispering Pines IPA” from the Big Bear

Brewery. It was a traditional west coast IPA with a “hint” of pine needles in both its fragrance as well as taste. There was also a very nice, authentic Czech Pilsner from the Inland Wharf Brewery. Later in the afternoon, the “K-Tel All Stars” band began playing classic 70’s rock-n-roll hits that got a lot of people dancing in front of the stage, including Robert and Luci. As evening approached and the event wound down, I joined Robert and Luci for dinner at TGI Fridays where we had a great time discussing the events of the day, as well as the time I spent in the army. After dinner, I walked back to the Staybridge Suites Hotel where I had booked a room for the night, not wanting to drive home after the event.



The next morning, as I was preparing to return home, I was “shocked” to find that my Jeep had been stolen during the night! It had been parked in front of the hotel, but unfortunately just out of view of the hotel security cameras. The hotel manager helped me contact the Corona police department, and when the officer arrived, I filed a stolen vehicle report. As I sat down to breakfast in the hotel, I felt angry, upset, and anxious about the fact that my camera had been locked in the Jeep. Then my thoughts turned to how I would handle the photo shoot I was scheduled to do the next day? I would have to rent a car, as well as a camera in order to complete the job. Robert graciously offered to take me to Ontario airport to rent a car later in the morning. Meanwhile, I decided to take a walk around the parking lot of the shopping mall next door to the hotel, just on the off chance that I might find my Jeep. And lo and behold, I discovered it parked in the very far corner of a huge parking lot! Even more amazing was the fact that whoever had stolen it left my camera in the Jeep! To say that I was very relieved would be an understatement – I thanked God that morning! Back at the hotel, I called the Corona police department to report my Jeep had been recovered, so that I wouldn’t be stopped by a police officer thinking I was the person who had been the one that had stolen it. So ended my short trip to the Amber Waves of Grain Craft Beer Festival!

In late November, Thanksgiving rolled around, and I had the pleasure of cooking a traditional turkey dinner with all the trimmings. The day before I had made two pies – a cranberry walnut pie and a classic apple pie, as well as fixing a cranberry orange relish. On Thanksgiving Day, I slow roasted the turkey and basted it with a mixture of butter, fresh rosemary, and thyme. Meanwhile I fixed a traditional green bean casserole and a dish of roasted Brussels Sprouts topped with maple syrup, brown sugar, and bacon. Then it was on to making the garlic mashed potatoes, brown gravy, and sage stuffing to go along with the turkey. That afternoon, we invited our neighbors across the street, Phil and his son Voltaire, to join us for dinner. Phil brought an excellent bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon to complement the meal. We shared some great conversation around the dinner table that made the day one to celebrate friendships.



The month of November was one of the warmest and driest in history, which unfortunately added to the ongoing drought in southern California. As well as having temperatures of 85 – 90 degrees, there was not a single drop of rain from the last week of October until the first week of December. Then all of a sudden, the weather took a giant change to being cold and wet, with a powerful storm in the second week of December, unleashing over 2 inches of rain in one day. There were places on the south facing slopes of the mountains where over 7 inches of rain fell that day. And above 6,000 feet in the mountains almost 3 feet of snow fell – a welcome sight for the ski resorts but it also closed most of the roads to the resorts. It looks like the cold wet weather pattern will continue through the rest of this month and perhaps into the new year. There are many of us who believe it's most likely a result of climate change.

Meanwhile, my sister Lynn will be joining us for Christmas this year after having to postpone her trip last year. We are looking forward to sharing Christmas dinner, opening gifts around the tree, and catching up on all that's happened throughout the year. I have also planned an overnight trip for all of us to Temecula and the South Coast Winery Resort, where I'm sure we'll all have a great time.

Here's hoping you have a Joyous Christmas with your family and friends, as well as a Happy New Year!

