

# Anatomy of a Landscape



A series of articles by Nick Melidonis  
M. Photog. on tips and techniques

for producing the perfect landscape.

## Part 3: Processing the image in the field

**A**lthough I use Adobe Photoshop for the 'hero' images for exhibition and competition work, in the field I prefer to use the intuitive and streamlined workflow of Photoshop Lightroom 3. In most instances, the image is produced quickly and to a standard that is quite high and would suit the majority of purposes.

### Time in the Field

Most landscape photographers plan their shoots to maximise the number of locations and time at those locations. Getting up before dawn to catch the magic light and staying out to capture the sunset and after-glow mean long and sometimes tiring days.

By the time one gets back to the lodgings, downloads the images, formats the cards, cleans the equipment, re-charges the batteries, grabs a quick bite and gets ready for the next day, the chances of spending any considerable time processing just one image are small.

However, inevitably a few of the better images will catch your eye as you download them, so how can you see their full potential quickly? Here are my workflow suggestions.

I was sold on Lightroom while doing a shoot for Singapore Airlines a couple of years ago. I needed to provide 50 to 80 images to accompany articles being written by five journalists. I was able to process my work on the plane between locations and had the final selections ready on DVD to suit each journalist's needs while waiting in the Singapore Airlines lounge. It used to take me three or four days to achieve a similar result in Photoshop.

My workflow may not suit everyone, but with practice, I am able to complete both global and local enhancements in about one to one and a half minutes for each image.

### Why Lightroom 3?

Much has been written comparing Lightroom with the very competent software produced by Canon, Capture One, DXO Optics and others. However, for me it is the workflow in Lightroom 3 that is unsurpassed.

Firstly, Lightroom is not a pixel based editor like Photoshop. Essentially, you are working on thumbnails (therefore small files) and recording your changes to an XMP or sidecar file. In this way Lightroom remembers exactly what changes you've made and you can even make several virtual copies of the image if you want to try some variations (like a monochrome). All this is done with thumbnail images and without changing the original raw files.

When you are ready to use your images, whether for printing or making files for journalists, Lightroom will access the raw file, apply your changes and export it in any number of ways. This means that while you are in the field, you are working quickly with small thumbnails and not filling up your laptop's hard drive.

I shoot in raw as this produces the best quality image data and then convert my Canon raw files into the universal Adobe DNG (Digital Negative) raw format. This is done by ticking a few boxes in Lightroom during the download process. I like working this way because the changes I make in Lightroom can be recorded with the DNG file, so there's no chance they will be separated if I move my files from my laptop to another computer or archive drive. This can be an issue when using a separate XMP sidecar files and retaining your camera's original raw files.

Also, the DNG is a universal format and provides some insurance if a manufacturer's raw files become 'extinct'. I have also found the 'demosaiing' (translation of the raw file) in Lightroom 3 is far superior to previous versions and even if you open older raw files in Lightroom 3, you will definitely see a difference.

### Workflow Sequence

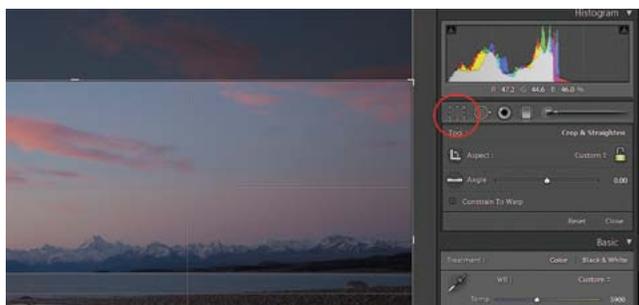
With all image enhancement workflows, start with global changes and then focus on local changes to finish.

- 1 Before working on an image, you may wish to right click on the thumbnail or the image and choose 'Create a virtual

copy'. This will allow you to make and compare multiple copies of an image if you are processing it different ways.



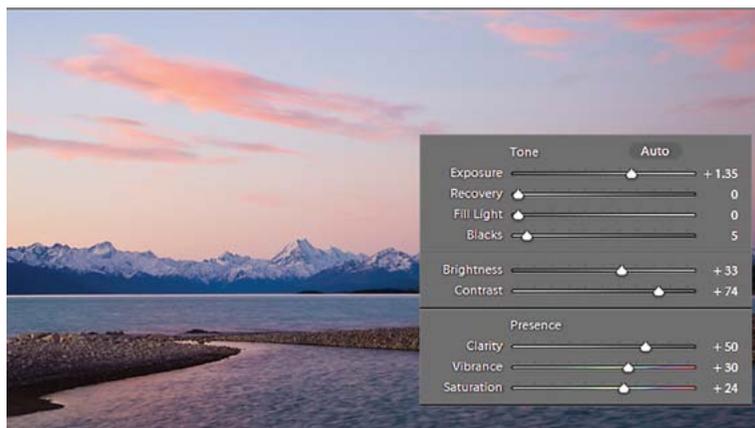
2 Select the Develop module and move to the Basic tab. Start with a custom white balance using the eyedropper tool. Click on something in the image which is neutral grey or white. If you like, you can tweak the 'temp' (blue/yellow) or 'tint' (green/magenta) sliders to taste instead.



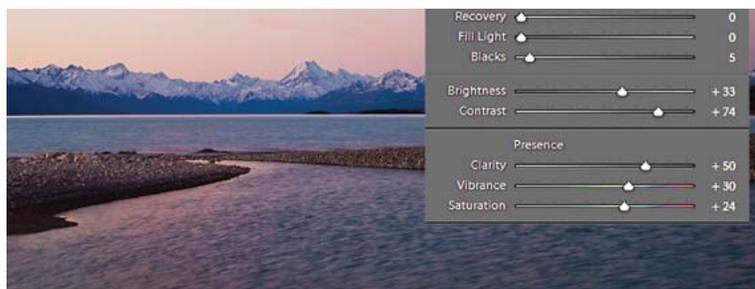
3 Crop your photo if required before making any tonal adjustments as the histogram reflects the values of the cropped image. The crop tool is just above the Basic tab on the left. When open, you can also adjust a crooked horizon by using the 'straighten' tool within the crop tool. A useful feature is that you can rotate the image within the crop.



4 Back in the Basic tab, click the Auto button next to the Tone label. This sets the white and black points and you will see that the histogram has stretched out the tonal range and provided contrast to the image. It also tweaks a little brightness, contrast, fill light and recovery. Hold the Alt/Opt key and click Reset to undo the changes at any time. The Auto button works most of the time, but if it doesn't, you may need to pull back the brightness slider if you think Auto has overdone it.



5 Now tweak the brightness and contrast sliders to taste. I rarely touch the exposure slider, but I will use the recovery, fill light and blacks. Tweak the fill light if you want a little more detail in the shadows (opens up the three-quarter tones) and then the recovery (recovers blown highlight areas for more detail if required).



6 Adjust the Presence group of sliders. Try clarity first (the contrast slider adjusts midtone contrast, but the clarity slider adjusts edge contrast and brings up the detail in an image). Clarity can be increased in images such as landscapes to 'pop' the detail, or can be turned in the negative direction to decrease edge contrast and provide a glow with diffused edges, useful in portraits. Vibrance increases the saturation in colours that aren't already over saturated, unlike the Saturation tool which boosts all colours equally. Vibrance also doesn't overly saturate skin tones and so it's a good tool for portraiture. Desaturating with vibrance is subtle and gives a hand tinting effect. Pull the saturation slider all the way down and, as it desaturates linearly, you will finish up with a black and white image. Don't forget the 'backslash' keyboard shortcut for seeing the before and after effect of your changes.

### Beyond the Basic Tab

7 Although there are several tabs beyond the basic tab, I rarely use them for this quick workflow. However, I do like to vignette an image. Dark edges keep the viewers' eyes inside the photograph. Use the Post Crop Vignetting in the Effects tab, not the Vignetting in the Lens Correction tab.

### Localised Adjustments

8 Lightroom 3 has a couple of very useful local adjustment tools. The Graduated Filter mimics a graduated neutral density or coloured filter. Not only will it produce a graduated effect, it will let you make numerous slider adjustments to



tweak sharpening, colour, brightness etc., all from the same selected graduation.

To use the Graduated Filter, select the tool (above the Basic tab) and click and drag the cursor down to where you want the graduated effect to finish (hold the shift key while dragging to keep the line parallel or vertical). You can always re-edit what you have done by clicking back into the Graduated Tool icon and choosing 'edit' to adjust what you did previously.

## Mount Cook and Lake Pukaki, New Zealand

The original raw file was flat with little contrast. I opened the image in the Develop module in Lightroom 3 and cropped the image so the histogram reflected the image within the crop. I applied a little warmth by changing the Temp slider from 5900 to 6615, and a little magenta with the Tint slider from -2 to -9. I clicked on the Auto button and the white and black points were expanded to provide more contrast.

Next I adjusted Brightness (+17 to +33) and Contrast (+50 to +79). As there were no highlights to recover and the shadows didn't need to be opened up, I just adjusted the Blacks a whisker from 6 to 5. I rarely touch the Exposure slider unless there is a serious blow out of the highlights. Finally, Clarity was moved from 0 to +50, plus a little Vibrance (0 to +30) and Saturation (+50 to +24). This put a bit more colour in the red clouds. This completed my global adjustments.



The first local adjustment tool I used was the Graduated Filter. This darkened the sky, gradually fading away at the horizon. Within this tool, I changed the brightness from 0 to -81. I also wanted some more warmth in the sky, so I clicked into the rectangular colour swatch and chose an orange colour.

The second local adjustment tool was the Adjustment Brush. I painted an area near the centre of the image to lighten up Mt Cook and a little of the foreground to make them more prominent (Brightness from 0 to +15). To help with the effect, I also adjusted the contrast, clarity and sharpness up a bit.



Finally, I used the lens correction tool to correct any lens aberrations and added a little Post Crop Vignette to darken the edges of the image.

*Lightroom 3 makes it quick and easy to make changes like these, even when working in the field.*



9 The Adjustment Brush will allow you to select or paint an area and use the same suite of slider adjustments as found in the gradient tool. You have precise control over the size and feather of the brush (you can still use the bracket keys found on your keyboard next to the letter 'P' to increase or decrease brush size as in Photoshop). The brush size stays constant as you zoom in or out of the image. You have a choice of a large soft brush or a smaller sharper brush and you can select them at will while painting (shortcut is the forward slash key).

The Auto Mask finds similar textures, colours and edges to what you have painted over, automatically selecting similar areas and without going over the edges. If you keep the density of the brush to around 50, you can build up the effect with more than one stroke for more control. Of course you can turn off the Auto Mask and just paint with the brush where you want.

The Adjustment Brush can be used for local dodging (lightening) of areas in an image (move the brightness slider to the right in the tool options), or burning (darkening) by pushing the brightness slider to the left.

The number of controls outlined may appear complicated at first glance, but with a little practice, the Basic Tab controls for global adjustments followed by a couple of local adjustments



can be used to produce a very respectable image in just a couple of minutes.

*Nick Melidonis is a Master of Photography and is a triple winner of the AIPP Australian Professional Landscape Photographer of the Year. Nick leads photo and cultural tours and takes pleasure in leading his iconic Greek Islands Odyssey Tour, now in its 12th year. There is a new tour to Cambodia and Vietnam in December 2011 (see his website for details of the tour). He also conducts seminars and workshops including Creative Photoshop, Lightroom and Photoshop Elements Workshops (see his website under 'courses'). Nick is also available as a speaker. You can contact Nick at [nick@nickmelidonis.com](mailto:nick@nickmelidonis.com) or visit his website at [www.nickmelidonis.com](http://www.nickmelidonis.com).*



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Details of tours and workshops on Nick's website  
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