

Processing the Image

Digital format: If you are shooting digital, shoot in RAW format. RAW contains far more detail than JPG's. RAW files can be converted into TIFF files, which do not lose detail each time they are edited. Invest in a good RAW converter program like Capture One or the like. For example, if parts of your image are dark, it is much easier to get detail out of the dark areas using RAW versus JPG's. If you are using film or digital, shoot at the very lowest ISO setting or film that you possibly can. There will be less noise and larger prints will look much better. You pay for this extra quality in longer exposure times, but usually that is not a problem since you will be using a tripod. Wind may be a problem though.

Workflow: Once you have taken your shots, processing is extremely important to the success of an image. Image processing can be at least as important as the shooting of the image. Whether you are working with film or digital, the camera will not be able to record the scene as well as your eyes. So each part of the image should be given your undivided attention. Restore detail in dark areas and bright areas. Correct blemishes resulting from dust spots or salt spray. Producing a good image may take 30 minutes to two hours or even more. Ansel Adams and others often spent days working on a single image.

Digital Workflow: Each person will develop his or her own methods of processing. Here are some of my techniques.

1. Shoot in RAW format in the Adobe colour space. Check your camera settings.
2. Create a 16 bit TIFF file using a good RAW program like Capture one. Adjust exposure, colour, contrast, temperature, and possibly sharpen it slightly before converting to a TIFF file.
3. Look at the whole TIFF image on your screen in Photoshop or your preferred image editor. Adjust the horizon first.
4. On wide angle images, there may be vignetting (darkening around the edges), so fix this problem before working on anything else.
5. Remove dust spots, and clone out any unwanted small objects like distant cars. I try to keep cloning to a minimum and only use it when there is no better way to avoid a distracting element.

At this point, you can create individual layers to make the following adjustments. This is beyond the scope of this brief overview. But you can work on the original layer if you want, and still get great results. I often just stick with the original layer.

6. Look at each section of the image and decide what to do to each one. Use the lasso tool to select each area. Then use 'select/feather' window to smooth out the effect around your selection so that there is a smooth transition from the area you selected to the areas outside your selection. Depending on the situation, feathering from 10-60 pixels is a good amount. Experiment each time before applying the change. Each area may need small adjustments to look its best. The sky may need more contrast or more detail. The land may need more light. A reflection may need

adjustment. If you are using Photoshop or similar programs, use the Levels control to make these adjustments. Be careful when making adjustments to horizons or other areas where there are sharp edges. You may get distracting halo effects around the edges. When making lasso selections, always select inside of a region and then feather it. Dodging and burning is another way to make these adjustments, but I find it to be more difficult to control when making subtle changes.

7. Once brightness and contrast look good, colour saturation can be addressed. Be careful adding colour. If you add colour where there was little, the image will just look manipulated. The more you increase colour saturation, the more grain and noise you add to the image. If the image is taken after dark, a blue cast can be removed by adjusting levels for blues only. That will bring back what you saw with your eyes.

8. Once these adjustments have been made, go over the complete image with a fine tooth comb. View it at a size where you can see the whole image at once. Make sure that overall it looks good. Then review the whole image at full (100%) resolution.

9. Sharpen the image only after the previous steps are completely finished! If using Photoshop, use the Smart Sharpen option on selected parts of the image individually. Rarely should the sky be sharpened. It will only add noise. Sometimes you can add a little contrast to the sky by sharpening it very slightly at an amount of 20%, a radius of 10-40 pixels, and a threshold of 0 levels. The separate areas of the rest of the image should be selected on the inside of each area. Feather each selection and then sharpen it. I often do two or three passes of sharpening on each area. First at maybe (20% - 4.0 pixels – 0 levels.) This just adds a little contrast without adding noise. Then I sharpen at (20-60% at about 2.0 pixels – 0 levels.) This makes things look a little sharper, also without adding much noise. Then I do the 'real' sharpening at (50%-100% - 0.3-0.6 pixels – 0 levels.) Sometimes I will select the edges of a mountain, horizon, or other boundary area and sharpen it separately. The edges often get sharpening halos if the sharpening is not done correctly.

10. Remove noise. Select each area separately, and feather it just as you did when adjusting levels, saturation and sharpness. Use the noise filter in Photoshop, or the equivalent. This give you control over how much noise to remove. Experiment with different settings so that you remove the noise without sacrificing detail. 'Revert' if you go too far. If you remove too much noise, you end up with a strange look (especially in the sky) so be careful.

11. Once the TIFF file is completely finished, you can resize it for the web. After you resize an image, you often have to sharpen it again. If the tiff file is too big, you can create a jpg image at 100% quality. This is a good way to get a high resolution image for printing or sending via email. Often when creating web images, you can save it to as low as 50% quality and 30% of the original jpg size and still have good quality for web applications.

Other considerations

Self-critique: It is very important to be realistic about the images you produce. Encourage and allow people to say what they do not like about your images. You may think that a photograph you just took looks great because you were there for that awesome sunset or storm. But you may not realize that the image does not convey the drama of the moment. Listen to any critique you get and incorporate it into your next shot under similar circumstances. For example, if someone says that a foreground rock is blocking the view, open up similar views by reducing the size of the foreground rock. Don't get 'married' to an image. There is always a way to improve it by returning to the location for another shot or processing the existing image differently. But also remember that you cannot please everybody all the time.

Photo websites: One of the best ways to learn landscape and other photography is to join a photo critique website. I belong to www.ePhotoZine.com (see below) and have received many thousands of critiques on my images. And making critiques on images created by others forces you to think about what is good and not good in an image. Nothing beats direct and honest critique from an expert standing right in front of you, but anonymous critique is often more honest and informative.