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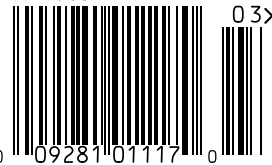
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Story of an Image

on the beach

BY BRIAN MATIASH

There's nothing like having a good friend who lives on the other side of the country visit you to give you a reason to take a long drive for a weekend of gorgeous coastal photography. When that happened recently, it was an excuse to pack the camera bag, jump in the car, and drive south to Big Sur.



When we arrived, we were greeted by miles of beautiful, jagged coastline and gigantic waves crashing against it. For our sunset location, we chose a place that neither of us had been to before: Garrapata State Park. I had received a bunch of tips regarding the best trails to take and, coupled with my trusty The Photographer's Ephemeris app (Google it, trust me), I knew exactly where I wanted to be to get the best light for photographing this subject matter. I found a perfect little spot by this cove that had a tranquil pool of water in the foreground surrounded by some rocky terrain and the ocean. It was perfect and with no time to spare (I was losing light by the minute), I got to setting up my photo.

beach shooting setup

Whenever I intend to photograph on a beach, especially if I'm going to be close to water, I use my Really Right Stuff spiked feet. They let me dig in the tripod legs securely, which is critical when you're photographing as waves flow in and out with the tide. Ideally, I would have switched the spikes out for my rock claw feet (which are perfect for this type of environment) but I didn't have time and the spikes provided more than enough stability.



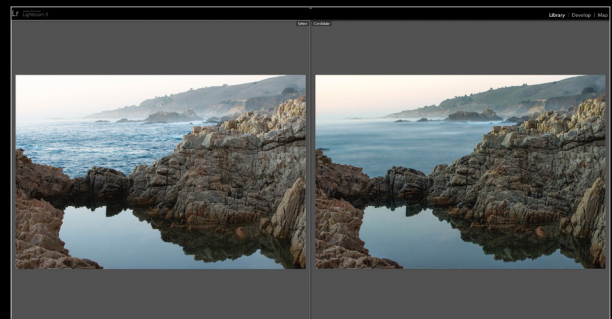
I wanted to have a strong amount of compression in the image, which meant that I was going to use a telephoto lens. For this setup, I had my Canon 70–200mm f/2.8L IS lens with a LEE filter system mounted on my Sony A7 camera.

For this photo, I envisioned taking a long exposure to help match the glassy feature of the foreground pool with the roaring ocean just behind it. To achieve this, I slid the LEE 10-stop Big Stopper ND filter into the holder mounted on the front of my lens, set the camera to Bulb, and exposed for 68 seconds at f/9. The main problem that I knew of was that, because of the limited light in the scene, the exposure would be long enough to give me the results that I was looking for with the ocean but at the expense of underexposing the rocky foreground. Instantly, I knew that the most time-effective solution would be to take a separate exposure without the ND filter and mask the results together in post. So, I removed the Big Stopper filter and adjusted the shutter speed to 1/4, also at f/9. This gave me all of the detail that I needed for the rocky foreground.



processing

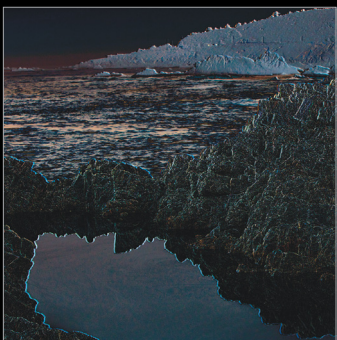
After importing both of these photos into Lightroom, I began applying some basic adjustments, focusing first on those that would be shared between the two, namely White Balance, crop, and rotation. Next, I moved on to individual corrective edits, such as Exposure, Contrast, and Clarity. Now, I have both images looking relatively similar with the main difference being the water in the background.



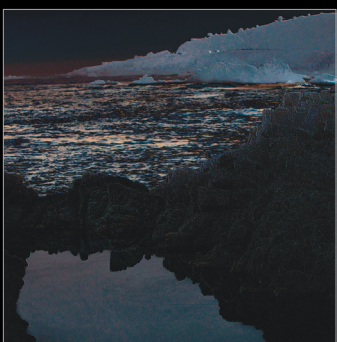
To blend the two together, I'm going to need to use the masking power of Photoshop. Fortunately, there's a convenient menu item that will take multiple images from Lightroom and apply them to a single Photoshop document, with each image assigned to its own layer. To do this, select both images from the Grid view (G), choose Photo>Edit In>Open as Layers in Photoshop.

Here's an important lesson that I painfully learned after several, how shall we say, frustrating and time-sucking situations.

Whenever you intend on masking two images together to combine specific features, it's critical to ensure that both layers match up perfectly. If one layer deviates, even by a few pixels, from the other image, the masking process won't look clean. In this case, the tiny bit of camera shift must have been introduced when I removed the Big Stopper ND filter in between photos. Luckily, there's a great blend mode in Photoshop that can easily and clearly show whether there are shifts between your layers. Select the top layer in the stack and change the blend mode to Difference. Almost immediately, you'll see the misalignment between the two layers. If you look at any of the hard edges, you'll see a shift in color, almost like a halo of sorts.



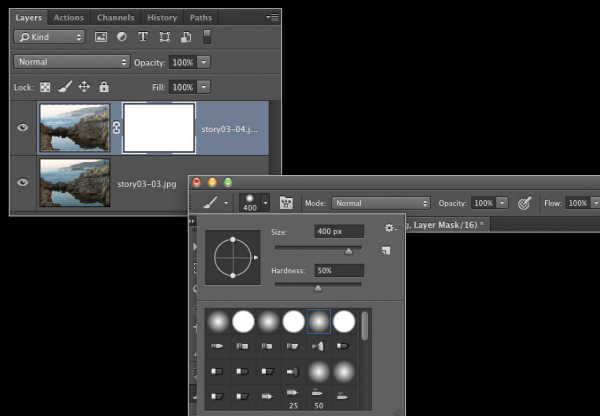
Fixing this is pretty easy, especially because my camera was on a tripod and was fairly secure. To get things aligned, select the Move tool (V) from the Toolbox. In situations like this one where the alignment deviates by a few pixels, I find that using the keyboard Arrow keys is a much subtler way to find the correct positioning than by dragging with a mouse or trackpad. You'll know when you've properly aligned your layers because there will no longer be any halos and the image will look solid. Don't forget to switch the blend mode back to Normal when your photos are aligned.



masking

Masking these two layers together is a pretty straightforward process. We're going to mask everything from the ocean all the way up through the top of the frame. To begin, create a layer mask by selecting Layer>Layer Mask>Reveal All. This places a white layer mask on the top layer. Now it's time to start revealing certain areas from the layer below. First, make sure that the layer

mask we just created is selected by clicking on its thumbnail. Next, select the Brush tool (B) and set the brush Opacity to 100% with a Hardness of 50%. This will ensure that every stroke will fully reveal the layer below it and provide a somewhat soft edge.



Press D then X to set your Foreground color to black (remember, black reveals and white conceals the layer below). Initially, I make large, broad strokes through the top of the frame and stop several pixels away from the hard edge of the rocky foreground. (*Tip:* If you hit the Backslash key [], Photoshop will apply an overlay, making it easy to see where your mask is being applied. This is a great way to make sure that you haven't missed any areas.)



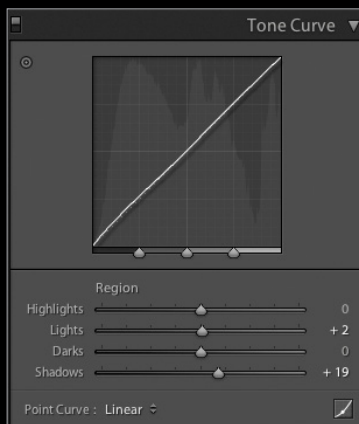
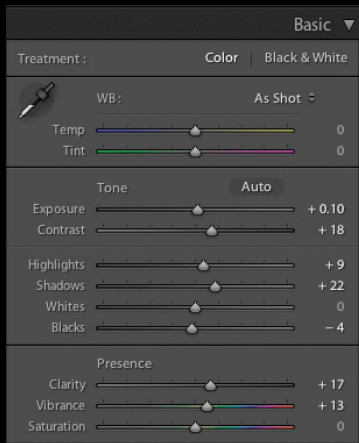
As I approach the hard edge, I drop the brush Opacity to around 30% and the Hardness from 50% to 0%, giving me a very soft edge on my strokes. This is important to ensure a smooth transition on the mask. This is also why it's so important to ensure alignment between both layers. If I hadn't aligned them earlier, the results wouldn't look very good along the edge of the mask.

Now that I'm done with the mask, I have two options with how I can proceed in terms of saving the file. I can either simply choose File>Save, or if I want to be conservative about file size, I can merge the two layers together by choosing Layer>Merge Visible, and then save to return to Lightroom.

stylization

The initial stylization of this composited image is pretty straightforward. I apply some minor adjustments in the Basic panel to

give the image an evenly exposed look, and bring out the shadows a bit under the Tone Curve panel.



Next, click New in the Adjustment Brush panel; increase the Temp slider to the right, which will add a countering warm tone to the brushstrokes; and brush along any land elements (the rocky foreground and the land in the background in this example).

With the image nearing its final state, the only things left to do are to apply a bit of sharpening in the Detail panel and a slight vignette in the Effects panel to help draw the eye toward the center of the frame. The last thing I like to do is compare the original composite against the one with these Lightroom adjustments by tapping the Backslash key. The difference is quite impressive and now the edited photo is ready to share online. ■



The next step is to infuse a contrast of color temperatures. This is often a visually striking effect, especially when it's applied to landscape images that contain water. Select the Adjustment Brush (K), then click on Custom from the Effect drop-down menu, and choose Temp. This resets all of the sliders to zero. Click-and-drag the Temp slider toward the left to apply a cool tone to wherever you brush. I usually apply a much stronger amount while applying my strokes because it's often easier to visualize. Then, after brushing across the ocean water and the pool in the foreground, the initial contrast is instantly visible.

