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Story of an Image

the breaking wave

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Despite being rhetorical, have you ever thought about what a half-second looks like? We're so predisposed to counting down the second and moving effortlessly from minute to minute, but imagine what sort of energy can be carried and captured in just that half-second.



I find myself wondering about that a lot, especially when I'm standing on a rocky shore on some coastline, getting mesmerized by the waves that come barreling in. As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing more calming and exciting at the same time as watching waves crash into particularly rocky shores. First, you see the wave swell up as it builds momentum. Next, it begins to break just as it approaches the shore. And finally, that terrific clap as it explodes against the rocks, flowing around in dizzying patterns and following the path of least resistance, only to get pulled back out with the tide and repeated all over again. In fact, it's one of my favorite environments to use my camera and tripod.



What's the significance of a half-second, then? Well, in my experience, setting your camera to 1/2 second often produces a wonderful result when capturing the motion of moving water without totally glassing it out. This is different than if you have a really strong neutral-density (ND) filter that requires an exposure of 30 seconds or more. In those situations, you'd likely render the water into a glassy mist, but it would come at the expense of capturing the detail of motion. Depending on how bright it is outside, you should be able to dial your exposure down to 1/2 second by setting a small aperture (f/16–22), ensuring your ISO is as low as it can go and, if needed, use a 2- or 3-stop ND filter. In almost all cases, I find the best results for the exposure to be between 1/2 and 1/8 seconds.

tell the story

Another important facet to consider is telling the story of the wave that you're capturing. At first blush, you may find this to be tricky because it usually takes a wave a lot longer than a half-second to make its way to the shore. That's why it's important to study how the waves break against the shore that you're standing by and to stagger your exposures so that you capture their full lifecycle. I recommend setting up your camera on a tripod and using a remote release to easily fire off your bracketed images. Here, I was able to capture

three interesting moments of my wave in three photos. You'll notice the wave first crashing onto the rocks in the background, followed by it swelling in the middleground, and then spilling over on the ground at my feet in the foreground.







An important thing to note is that you don't necessarily have to capture the same wave to convey its lifecycle. Often, it will take many waves for me to get the right back-, middle-, and foreground components—and don't think that you should limit yourself to three-component images. Grab as many as you feel tell the best story for your wave.

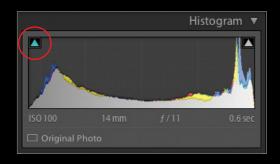
basic image editing

With your images imported into Lightroom and the source images selected, the first thing to do is go to the Develop

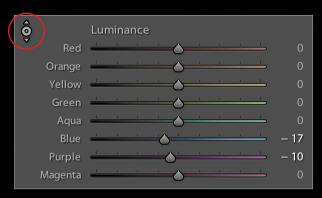
module and edit one of the images to taste. With nature scenes such as this one, it's probably best to ensure a good white balance is set. Choose the White Balance Selector tool by pressing W or clicking on the eyedropper in the Basic panel. With this image, it was easy to find a section that was close to neutral gray to sample. Additionally, the shadows in this image were a bit too deep and the highlights were close to clipping (something that can easily happen with these scenes), so it's important to work with the Highlights and Shadows sliders and pay close attention to your histogram. You'll know if you're blowing out highlights or clipping shadows if the triangles on the top left (shadows) or right (highlights) are illuminated (top right).





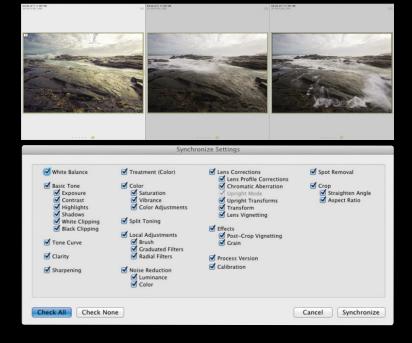


Stylization of an image like this can be a personal choice. In some cases, you may want to retain the original, natural colors and feel of the scene, but in this case, adding some flare may be a good thing. To begin, let's bring out some of the blue in the sky and overall image. In the HSL panel at the top left of the Luminance section, you'll see the Target Adjustment tool. This is a nifty little tool! Start by clicking on the tool, then hover your cursor over a dominant color that you want to adjust. In this case, by placing the tool on the blue in the sky in the upper-left corner of the frame and dragging down, you're effectively decreasing the luminance value of all the blues in the image, making them appear more distinct. (Note: The respective color labels highlight as you hover over different areas of the image.) When you're done with the adjustments, be sure to click back in that target area to park the tool.



Another fun option to consider for stylizing is to apply split toning in the Split Toning panel, where you select a color to tint the Highlights and another to tint the Shadows (next page). Experimenting with different color combinations often yields some really cool results. For nature scenes, I often use a warmer color for the Highlights and a cooler one for the Shadows. For both the Highlights and Shadows sections, select the colors you want using the Hue slider (or the adjacent color picker), and then control the strength of that color with the Saturation slider. The Balance slider lets you bias the color toward the shadows by sliding to the left or the highlights by sliding to the right. The results of split toning for this image adds a different feel and lends itself well.

Now you're almost ready to combine all three wave images, but first, you need to make sure that all three images look exactly the same. Fortunately, Lightroom makes it really easy to copy your Develop module settings to multiple images. Press G to return to the Grid view in the Library module. Next, select the image that you just finished editing, hold the Shift key, and select the remaining images in your set. Next, click on the Sync Settings button at the bottom-right corner of the Library module. Since you're going to sync every change made on the original image to the remaining images, click the Check All button in the Synchronize Settings dialog, then click Synchronize. You should now see all three images look exactly the same.



take to photoshop, return to lightroom

Now you're ready to combine the three images in Photoshop. With all the images still selected, Right-click on one of the thumbnails and choose Edit In>Open as Layers in Photoshop. This will place each image on its own layer in a single document. Once in Photoshop, the first thing to do is label the three layers accordingly so you know which one is which. Double-click the layer name and enter your descriptive name, such as Front.

You should also create layer masks in between the Front and Middle layers, and between the Middle and Back layers. To add a layer mask, click on a layer to make it active, then click on the Add Layer Mask icon (circle in a square) at the bottom of the Layers panel. The masks will be used to blend the images together. Now, it's simply a matter of selecting the Brush tool (B), pressing D then X to make black your Foreground color, and painting on the areas of each layer that you want to hide, revealing the layer below it. Be sure that

you have the layer masks selected and not the image thumbnails. If you make a mistake, simply press X to make the Foreground white, paint to correct the mistake, then press X again to return the Foreground color to black.



When you're done, choose File>Save to return to Light-room. To finish things, apply a bit of sharpening in the Detail panel, and add a vignette in the Effects panel to help draw the eye to the center of the frame. Now you have a beautiful image that showcases the full lifecycle of a wave!

