FROM FLAT TO FANTASTIC

POST-PROCESSING ESSENTIALS for LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

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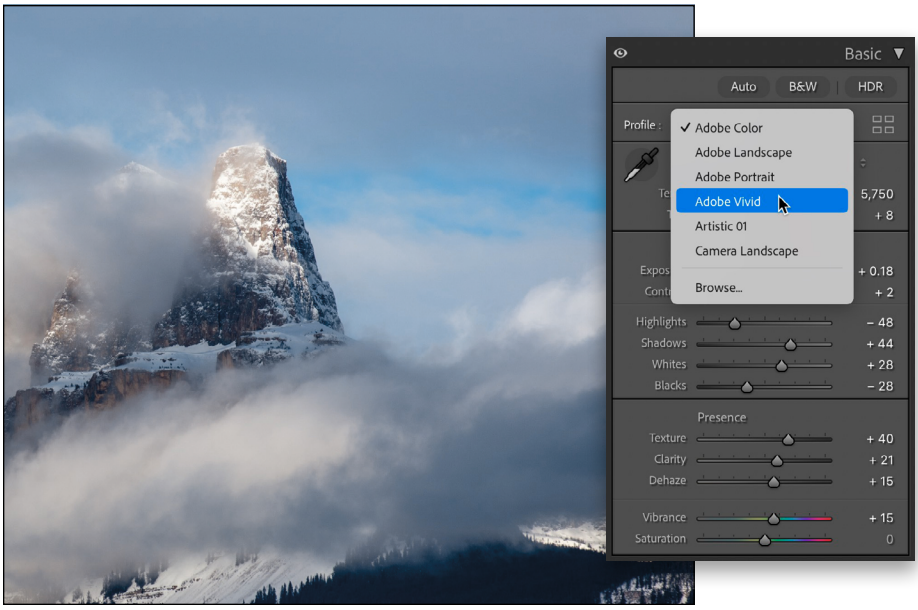
If You Shoot RAW, Do This First



This first step in post-processing here is just for folks who shoot in RAW format on their camera, so if you shoot in JPEG or TIFF, you can totally skip this page. Okay, RAW shooters, we're going to jump back in photographic history for just a minute to help you understand what we're about to do. Back in the film days, we pretty much all used standard Kodak film. Well, to get better-looking landscape photos with rich, saturated colors, the pros had a trick. They would switch to a different type of film—Fuji Velvia—which boosted the overall vibrancy and contrast, and just flat-out made their landscapes look better. Well, we can kinda do the same thing in Lightroom and Photoshop. When you open your RAW image, Adobe has to interpret that RAW file and, by default, it uses a color profile called Adobe Color, which does a pretty decent job of giving you a nice-looking RAW file as your starting place for editing. However, it's kind of the "Kodak" of starting places when it comes to landscape images. It looks good, but there's a trick to getting a better starting place, and that is to choose either the Adobe Landscape or Adobe Vivid RAW profile, which both give you a more vivid, more contrasty image to edit. You can try out these profiles near the top of Lightroom's Basic panel (or the Edit panel in Photoshop's Camera Raw), where you'll see a pop-up menu for choosing them (as shown above). So, which of the two profiles should you use? I would try them both to see which one looks best for the particular image you're working on. Whichever looks best, go with that one, and now you've got a better starting place for editing your images. It's like you just popped in a fresh roll of Velvia 50.

Set Your White Balance

I think it's important to set your white balance first because if you change it later in your editing process, it can change your overall exposure (open an image and drag the white balance sliders back and forth while looking at the histogram—you'll see major changes to the exposure as you drag them). So, let's get it where you want it right from the start. If you shot in RAW, you'll be able to choose the same white balance presets you could have chosen in your camera from the WB presets pop-up menu (shown above). So, try out a few to see which one looks the best to you (luckily, there is no international committee on proper white balance—you're the photographer, this is your art, you get to choose which one looks best to you). Another method for setting your white balance (and the one I use most) is to use the White Balance Selector tool (shown circled above in red; it's found in the top-left corner of Lightroom's Basic panel, or to the right of the Color panel's White Balance pop-up menu in Photoshop's Camera Raw). How it works is simple: just click the eyedropper on something in the image that's supposed to be a light gray. If there's nothing in your image that looks light gray, then try to find a neutral color (something tan, beige, cream colored, etc.) to click on instead. If you click it somewhere and don't like how it looks, just click somewhere else until it looks good to you (it usually takes me a few clicks until I come up with a white balance I like). It's a really simple way to set your white balance and I highly recommend it.

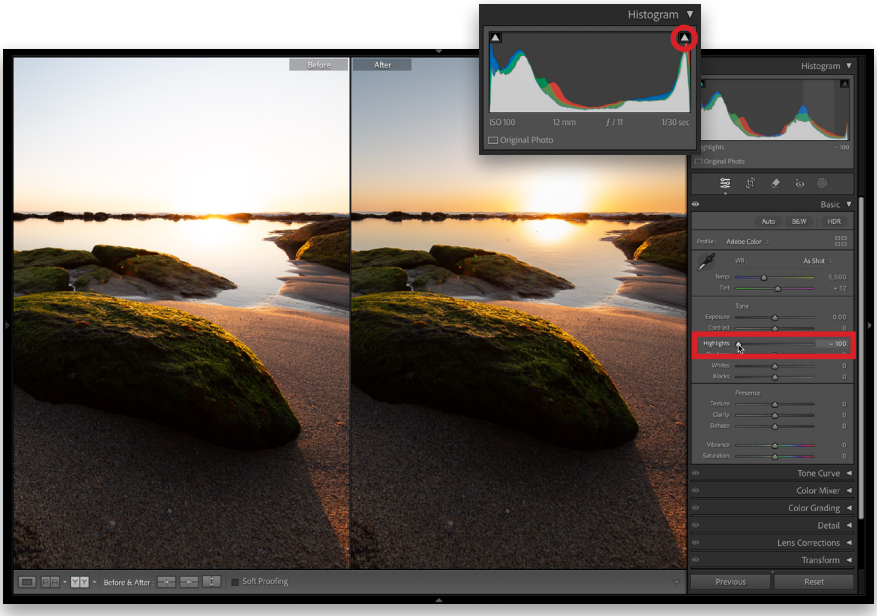
Set Your White and Black Points

Now that the white balance is set, the next step is to expand the image's overall tonal range (getting the most out of it without clipping the whites or blacks) by setting the white and black points. What that means is I get the whites in the image as bright as I can get them without blowing them out. Then, I get the blacks as dark as I can get them without turning them solid black. There is a manual way to do this, but thankfully, Lightroom (or Photoshop's Camera Raw) will do this for you automatically, as long as you know the "secret handshake": In Lightroom, press-and-hold the Shift key, then simply double-click directly on the word "Whites," and then on "Blacks" in the Basic panel. In Camera Raw's Light panel, you Shift-double-click on the slider knob itself. Either way, they both do the same thing—you'll see the Whites and Blacks sliders move to automatically set your white and black points for you. If you don't see a slider move very much, that's okay, it just means the tonal range for that image is already pretty well expanded (the Blacks slider is more likely to move very little or not at all). Just in case you're curious, the manual way of setting your white and black points is to press-and-hold the Option (PC: Alt) key, and then start dragging one of the two sliders. As you do, the screen turns black (for whites), and any areas that start to appear in white are clipping (blowing out the pixels). If you just see red, green, or blue areas appearing, it's not as bad—you're just clipping detail in those channels, not overall. For the Blacks slider, the screen turns solid white as you drag, and any areas that appear in black are clipping the blacks (turning them solid black, so there's no detail in those areas).

Adjust Your Exposure

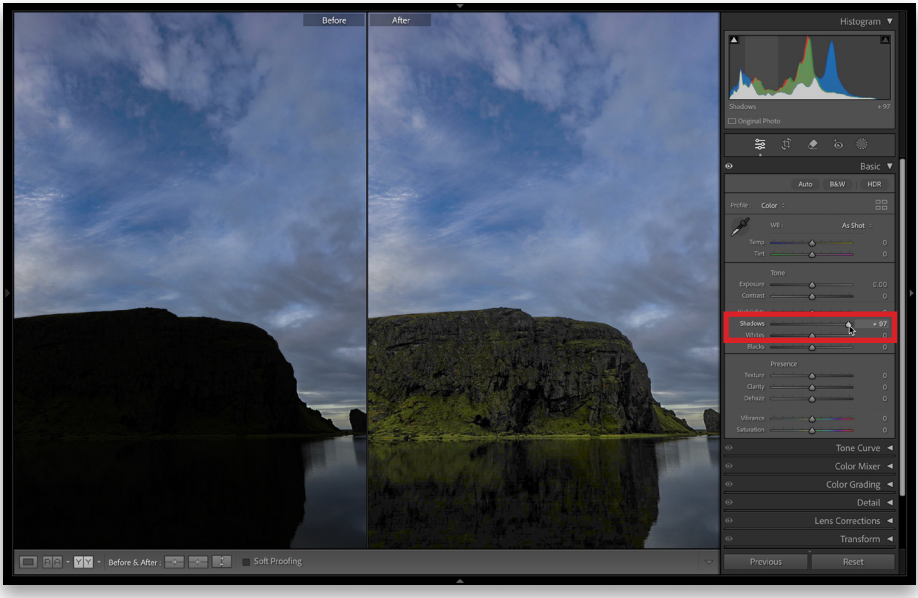
Now that your white and black points are set, evaluate the image. If you think the overall image is a little too bright or a little too dark after setting the white and black points, then you'll use the Exposure slider to fix that (it's found in the Basic panel in Lightroom and in the Light panel in Camera Raw; you drag it to the right to brighten the image, and to the left to darken it). Because you set the white and black points first, you normally won't have to move the Exposure slider very much, especially since this slider is so powerful—it controls the overall midtones for your image, so dragging it one way or the other has a big effect.

Fix Your Highlights (Clipping)



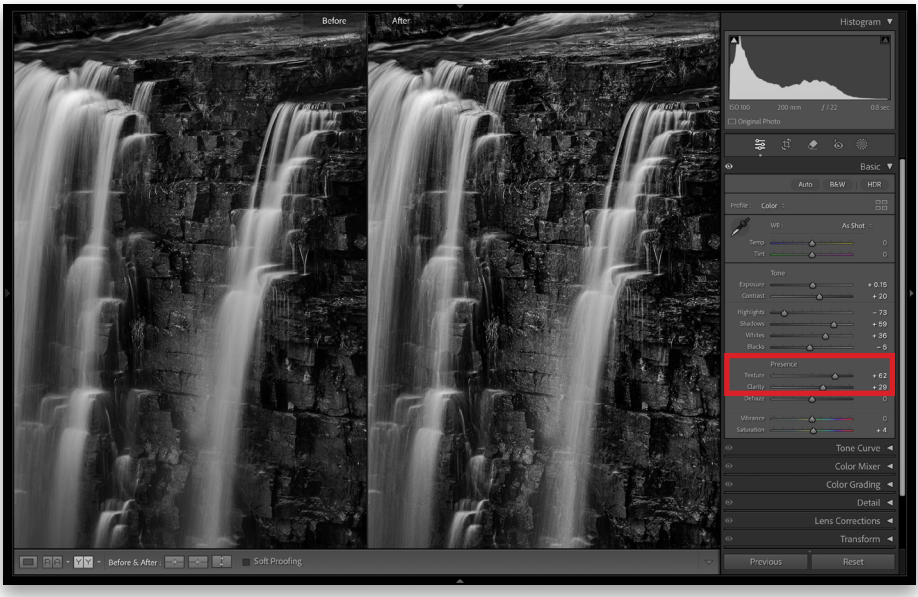
About the worst thing that can happen to an image is to blow out (called "clipping") the highlights. It's such a big deal that most cameras include a built-in Highlight Warning to let you know if you're clipping them when you take the shot (and, yes, you should turn this on because with landscape shots, we're most likely to clip the highlights in clouds, or a waterfall, or snow-capped mountains). If your highlights are clipped, there is no detail at all in those areas. There are literally no pixels, and if you printed the image, those clipped areas wouldn't have any ink on them. That's how serious clipping is. Obviously, we'd like to catch this clipping in-camera and fix it by lowering our exposure a bit (I shoot landscapes in aperture priority mode, so I use my Exposure Compensation dial to darken my exposure if I see a clipping warning), but if we don't catch it in-camera, luckily, in many cases, we can recover those clipped highlights in Lightroom (or Camera Raw) using the Basic panel's (Light panel's) Highlights slider. First, to see if we have highlight clipping, look up at the histogram at the top right of the window—in particular, look at the triangle up in the top-right corner (circled in the inset above). If that triangle is filled with white, some parts of your image are clipping. To see which parts, click on that triangle and those clipped areas will have a red tint over them. Now, drag the Highlights slider to the left until the red areas are gone and your clipping is taken care of. Yes, it's that easy. By the way, if you see a red, green, or blue triangle in your histogram, that means just that color is clipping, which isn't nearly as bad as clipping in all channels where the triangle is solid white. I don't usually worry about clipping in just one channel.

Open Up Those Dark Shadow Areas



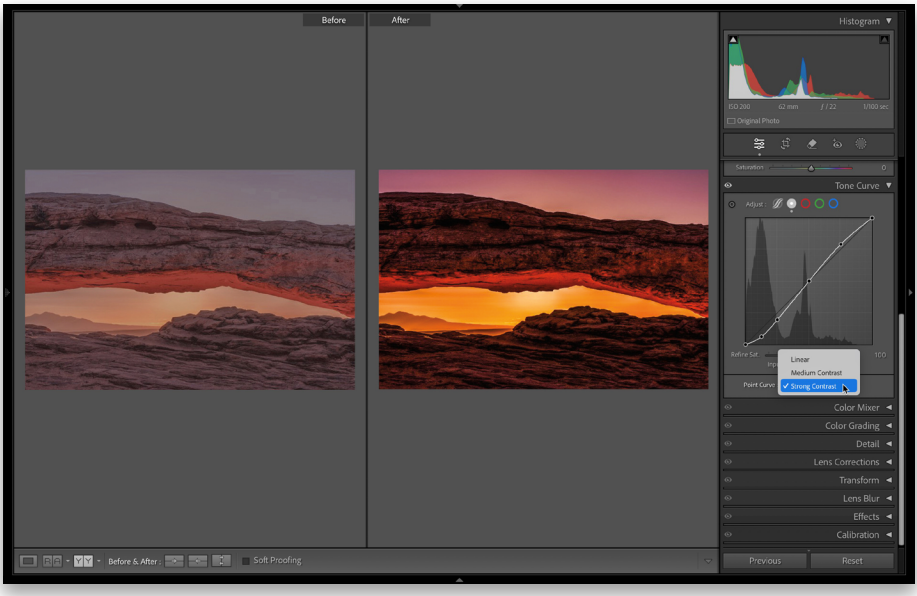
If there's one thing people love seeing in landscape images, it's detail. However, if some of the shadow areas in your image get too dark, they'll turn solid black and you'll lose detail. Luckily, there's a slider for that in the Basic panel (the Light panel in Camera Raw). It's called "Shadows" and dragging it to the right will open up those shadow areas big time. I would caution you about dragging too far to the right, though. It might be just what the image needs, but depending on the image, dragging too far to the right can kind of give your image an "HDRed" look (and I don't mean the good HDR), so just keep an eye on that. Again, it just depends on the image, but this is an easy slider to overdo because its effect is pretty powerful. Also, sometimes, if you have to drag it way over to the right, the image starts to look kind of flat, like you've lost contrast, and if that happens, drag the Contrast slider a little to the right to bring some of that lost contrast back—just drag it a little or it will clog up your shadow areas again. This Shadows slider works particularly well if you have a backlit image—drag it to the right and it kind of works like magic to bring those dark areas back. Your eye sees those areas just fine while you're standing there taking the shot, but that's because your eyes have a much wider tonal range than your camera's sensor. This is also why we take so many shots where our subject is nearly a silhouette. When you're standing there, you can see all the detail, no problem. When you put a DSLR or mirrorless up to your eye, it looks the same, but then you take the shot, and your subject looks like a silhouette. Again, it's the sensor's fault, not yours, but now at least you know how to deal with it in post.

Enhance Any Detail and Texture



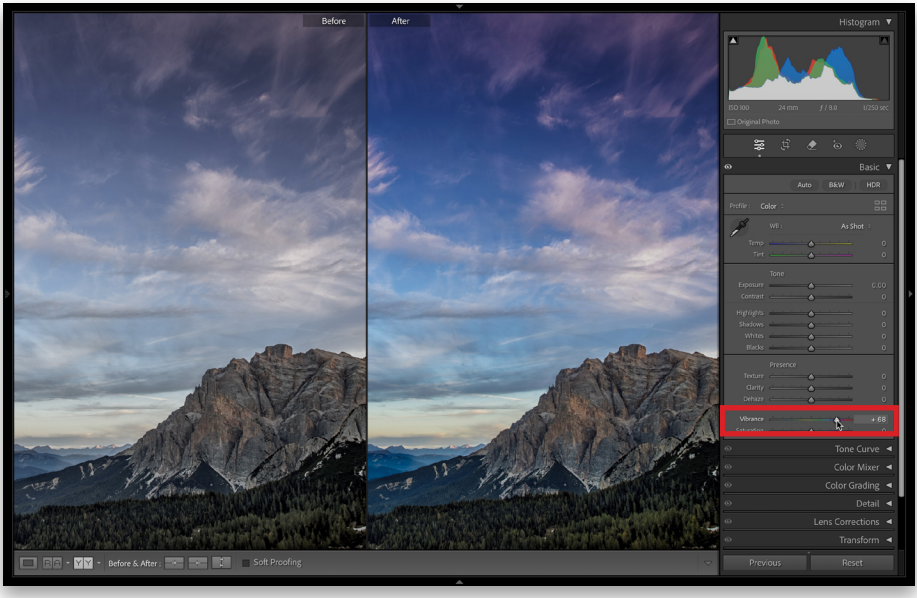
When you want to bring out detail in your image (which is nice because it makes the image look sharper before you've even sharpened it), go for the Texture slider. It's one of the best things that has happened to Lightroom (and Photoshop's Camera Raw) in years. Our go-to tool for enhancing detail used to be the Clarity slider, but the problem with Clarity is it changes the overall tone of your image. The Texture slider brings out glorious texture, but without messing with the image's overall tone. But, it doesn't replace using the Clarity slider. I drag the Clarity slider to the right when I want to enhance texture or detail (and don't mind if my exposure or tone change a bit), or I want to make water or metallic surfaces look shiny, or I want to give my image kind of a grungy look. It does all of those in just one slider. Be careful, though, because you can over-apply Clarity—if you start to see halos around objects in your image or your clouds have drop shadows, that's a warning sign you've gone too far. So, yes, they both enhance detail, but they do it in different ways, so each has its own look. That's why I like to use them together—I add a lot of Texture, and then I add about half as much or less of Clarity to make the image really look nice and crisp (both sliders are found in Lightroom's Basic panel or in Camera Raw's Effects panel).

Add Your Contrast



The obvious method is to use the Contrast slider (in Lightroom's Basic panel or Camera Raw's Light panel). I lean on this slider *a lot*—drag it to the right to add contrast; drag it to the left to remove it. I love really contrasty images, so I often crank the Contrast amount quite a bit (especially on B&W images), which makes your whites whiter and blacks blacker. Those things together have the byproduct of making your colors more vibrant, so it's all good. Now, don't add contrast until you've set your white and black points (see page 5) because increasing the amounts of Whites and Blacks adds contrast already, so do that before you grab the Contrast slider. That's the easiest method of adding contrast—just drag the Contrast slider to the right. If you're more discerning about your contrast, you can also add it (in place of, or in addition to, the Contrast slider) using the Tone Curve (or Curve) panel. Below the curve, you'll see the Point Curve pop-up menu set to Linear, which means it's not doing anything. To add contrast, click on that pop-up menu and you'll see Medium Contrast and Strong Contrast presets. Choose one of these and it plots a curve in the shape of an "S" within the grid. If you chose Medium Contrast, the angle of the "S" is very subtle. If you chose Strong Contrast, it's more pronounced, and if you click-and-drag the points on the curve to make it steeper, that adds even more contrast. You can add more whites by dragging the top-right point upward. The midtones are made brighter or darker using the center point (upward to brighten them; downward to darken), and you can drag either of the two points on the bottom left upward to lighten the shadows or downward to darken them (adding more contrast).

Make Your Colors More Vibrant



If you want to make the colors in your image even more vibrant, drag the Vibrance slider (it's near the bottom of Lightroom's Basic panel or Camera Raw's Color panel) to the right a bit (or a bunch—it's your call). Vibrance is kind of like a smart saturation slider in that it doesn't just boost all the colors in your image across the board like the Saturation slider does (which is why we don't ever use the Saturation slider to add more color; we only use it to take away color—to desaturate an image). Instead, it evaluates the image and if it sees areas of dull color, it boosts the color in those areas a lot, and if it sees areas where the colors are already pretty vibrant, it boosts those just a little. It has a special mathematical algorithm that automatically avoids boosting flesh tones, so if there's a person (or people) in your photo, it won't make them look all sunburned or weird. That's one pretty smart slider. So, if your color needs a little boost, drag this slider to the right.

Sharpen Your Image

I sharpen every landscape photo—every one, without fail—and since there's usually not a lot of detail and edges and texture, landscape photos can usually handle having a lot of sharpening added. There are built-in presets in both Lightroom and Photoshop's Camera Raw for sharpening, and you can find them in Lightroom in the Develop module's Presets panel (in the left side panels). Once you're in this panel, scroll down, click on Sharpening, and you'll see presets for Light, Medium, and Heavy. I generally use Heavy for most landscape images, but if you feel it's a bit too much for your image, try Medium (don't use Light—it's too light). If you think Heavy isn't enough, go ahead and apply it (by clicking on it), then go to the Detail panel (in the right side panels) and drag the Sharpening Amount slider (seen above) to the right to increase it. If that doesn't make a big enough difference, increase the Radius to 1.1 (or if you're using a 50-megapixel or so camera, bump it up to 1.2). You can find these Sharpening presets in Camera Raw by clicking on the Presets icon near the bottom of the toolbar on the right, and then clicking on Sharpening in the Presets panel. If you need to add some creative sharpening (sharpening added in just a few particular areas now that the whole image has a base layer of sharpening), get the Brush tool (K), set all the sliders to zero, then drag the Sharpness slider to the right a bit and paint over the areas you want spot sharpened.

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