



Turning a Snapshot Into Something More

Article and Photographs by Bill Wight, Mountain High Workshops™ staff instructor

The instructors at Mountain High Workshops have many people ask us how we get our images to look the way they do. There are two distinct steps in producing a landscape image that has impact and interest. Phase one is taking the very best photograph possible in the field and phase two is improving that image in post-processing. In this series, we will take some of our images and share with you how we took and processed them.

I took the image below during my transition from film to digital. In 2006 I was still primarily shooting with my Nikon F3 camera and slide and negative film. I purchased a digital camera for my wife to use and on this occasion, with rain predicted, I left the Nikon F3 in our trailer and took the Canon Point and Shoot on the hike.

While I feel that this image is well composed, it is not much to look at. The P&S camera exposed the image based on



Storm in McGee Canyon by Bill Wight - Original image. All Images Copyright 2008.

an average exposure reading. The sky is overexposed and the colors are dull. This is not at all uncommon to see from a digital camera. This is an image that many might just toss as unusable, or wonder why the image came out so dull and uninteresting when what they saw with their eyes was much different. However, in post-processing, I used a few techniques to give this image a bit more impact. I use this image to show how when you have a good image processing program and know a few basic techniques, you can save an otherwise uninteresting shot. I added nothing to this image during post-processing. All the colors and features were there in the original. It just needed some

tweaking in Photoshop to bring them out. I used Photoshop 7 for this image but I could have accomplished the same results with Photoshop Elements version 6 or 7. The scene below is more like I envisioned it when I was there. I did not see a washed-out McGee Canyon, I saw a dynamic scene with storm clouds and light rays and rain coming down.

The image below also shows how you can add a creative element to a snapshot to make it more dramatic. I darkened the foreground and middle ground to put emphasis on the sky and the sun rays. Do not feel that you must render the scene exactly as captured. We are landscape photography artists and not photojournalists. We are not bound by any rules that say we cannot make changes to a scene. In the original image, nothing really stands out. In the processed scene, that is not the case.



Storm in McGee Canyon by Bill Wight - After post-processing All Images Copyright 2008.

The story behind the image--

My wife and I were camping in McGee Creek campground. The day started off with broken clouds and a possibility of afternoon thundershowers. It was in late July in California's Eastern High Sierra mountains and I figured, at worst, we might get a bit on rain if we took a hike a few miles up McGee Canyon.

We had a great morning hike, beautiful skies and stunning mountains. About 1 PM it began to lightly rain. So we turned around at the 2 1/2 mile point and headed back down the canyon. The rain remained light and we were in sight of the trailhead and our truck when I happened to turn around and look back up the canyon. When you are out in the field shooting, especially in weather, it is important to put your head on automatic swivel and look around you. You never know when you might see something spectacular.

The entire day, I was shooting with my wife's Canon A-80, a 4 MP Point and Shoot Camera. I saw these sun rays coming through the clouds. As soon as I took this photo the skies opened up and began to drench the canyon. We moved as fast as we could towards the truck and by the time we got inside, we were soaked. Luckily, the camera

stayed dry in my day pack inside the plastic lunch bag. So when going for a hike in the mountains, it's always a good idea to take a plastic bag to protect your camera gear from rain.

About the image--

This is a good image to talk about composition. You might think that I just turned around and snapped a shot. That is not what I did. Before I lifted the camera to my eye, I took in the scene before me and I decided on what I wanted in an image. Perhaps this is what Ansel Adams meant by 'previsualization'. I think this is what differentiates the snapshot shooter from the serious landscape photographer. Most snapshot shooters see a scene and just snap it. Ansel Adams would sometimes spend days composing a shot. I certainly did not have days but I did take several minutes to determine what I wanted to include in this image.

What makes this image rather dramatic are several compositional elements. First, I used the 'Rule of Thirds' in the overall composition--one-third foreground, one-third mountain and one-third sky and clouds. Second, I liked that there were no straight horizontal or vertical lines in this image, they are diagonal. This also gives the image impact. Lastly, the rain and sun rays give the image a point of central interest. I also gave the foreground brush a bit more color saturation to add some interest there.

Technical--

Canon A-80 1/200 at f-4.5 ISO 200. Saved as largest JPEG. Hand-held. No filter.

Post-processing--

Obviously, this image has undergone some extensive post-processing from its original state. You might say that this image does not look too sharp. You would be correct, but not because of out of focus or camera movement, but because I gave this image the Orton Photographic Treatment. But before I did that, I took it into Photoshop 7 and used the Levels Adjustment Tool to boost the color saturation a bit and to increase the overall contrast. I also used a technique called Smart Dodge and Burn to bring out a bit more detail in the foreground sagebrush and the mountain face on the left. I darkened the mountain overall and that brought out the sun rays.

Something that I often use in landscape composition has its roots way back to the Renaissance masters. It is a technique called Chiaroscuro (key-är-o-sky-rō). This is an Italian word that literally means "light dark". Photographers use this term to describe the balance of light and dark along with strong contrasts to create dramatic effects in landscape photographs. Ansel Adams used this technique extensively and made it popular in landscape photography.

In my original image, there are no darks and lights--only grays and lights. The processed image has dramatic darks and lights and much higher contrast. This gives this image a much more dramatic effect.

In our upcoming June 3-6, 2009 Mammoth Lakes workshop, we will be demonstrating in classroom sessions these techniques and several others that can greatly improve the impact of your landscape images.

Take your landscape photography to a higher level

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