

Art Vivid HDR, One Better

By Diane Miller

02-02-2017

Any camera with exposure control can capture HDR exposures. That stands for high dynamic range, where several different exposures are made in order to capture more detail in the lights and darks than can be captured in a single exposure. These can subsequently be blended, using several different software packages, into one exposure that has more detail in the entire dynamic range (from lights to darks) than a single exposure can.

In some cameras there is a menu setting for in-camera HDR, where the camera will record successive exposures and then blend them into one picture. And in some there is an additional choice for Art Vivid HDR, where colors are enhanced. But the result in both cases is a JPEG. Since the colors and tonal range are baked in, and into an 8-bit file at that, there are significant limitations on further tonal tweaks and corrections to a JPEG compared to a raw file. And to make it really low end, the camera menu even gives you an option not to save the source files (the different exposures), presumably so you won't be bothered by any possibility of improving on the camera's result. The problem is, in my experience, the result is always in need of improving. Surprisingly, I have rarely seen an in-camera HDR give much improvement on detail in light and dark areas, and the Art Vivid choice is often over saturated, sometimes with a rather hideous color cast.

Instead of letting the camera make decisions for me, I like the control of making the final image myself. And it couldn't be easier. With recent versions of Lightroom (CC or LR6) or corresponding versions of Adobe Camera Raw (ACR, the raw converter that accompanies Photoshop) I can shoot the HDR exposures and then let that software do an excellent blend and, amazingly, it gives me a DNG file, which is still a raw file with all its leeway for further tonal correction. And I can easily simulate the Art Vivid effect, right on that raw file, only I can do it better than the camera and tune it to my liking.

In the camera menu there will be a choice for a burst mode that will give you a range of exposures. To get the best range, estimate the range on either side of a middle exposure and have a quick look at the exposures on the back of the camera. Look at the histogram display, not the screen brightness, which can be misleading. You want the histograms in your HDR set to overlap and you want the darkest one to show no blowout on the right end of the histogram and the lightest one to show no blocking up on the dark end.

Of course, the Catch-22 is that if either the camera or the subject is moving your files won't match and the software can't combine them without artifacts. So a tripod and a still subject are mandatory for good results.

Once you have the exposures, in Lightroom just select the set and go to the menu item Photo > Photo Merge > HDR. (There is also an awesome panorama merge feature there.) Once the raw file is returned to the Lightroom filmstrip as a DNG file you can go to the Develop module and use all the sliders as you would with any raw file to optimize the file.

And the good news is, with Lightroom or ACR you may not even need the HDR part. If the range of light on the scene is not too harsh you can often use a single middle exposure, because of the huge tonal adjustment leeway in the Basic panel. Moving the Highlights slider left and the Shadows slider right may be all it takes to get good tonal detail in the lights and darks. If those moves make the image too low in contrast, the Clarity slider can give a very nice mid-tone contrast. This is especially important if there's any subject movement that makes several exposures a problem.

The advantage of combining the different exposures into an HDR, though, is that you will have less noise in the more properly exposed darks compared to having to lighten underexposed values.

To simulate the Art Vivid part, just play with the Vibrance and Saturation sliders. If the colors are not pleasing you have tremendous leeway with the Temp and Tint sliders and in the HSL panel. In addition, for problem colors there is even more leeway in the Profiles in the Camera Calibration tab. If you are not familiar with the Develop module, see my tutorial [Lightroom Part 2](#).

And of course you can bring the adjusted raw file into Photoshop for further work.

I find Lightroom so powerful and with such a great interface that I haven't used ACR in years, but here is a good tutorial that will show you the steps if you use it.

<http://photoshopcafe.com/HDR-photography-camera-raw-ACR>