UNLOCKING THE PROS' HOTTEST POST-PROCESSING TECHNIQUES

THE HDR BOOK

Second Edition

Rafael "RC" Concepcion

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To Albert J. Fudger:

You have been with me through thick
and thin. You have served as a sounding board,
cheerleader, jester, motivator, critic, and as
a person that teaches me humility and the gift
of hard work in everything you do.

It is an honor to call you my best friend.

I appreciate that above all.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RC is an award-winning photographer and author of the best-selling books *Get Your Photography On the Web* and *The HDR Book* by Peachpit Press. He is an education and curriculum developer for KelbyOne, and co-hosts the popular podcasts *Photoshop User TV* and *Photography Tips and Tricks*.

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He has held training seminars in the U.S., Europe, and Latin America, and is a highly sought guest instructor. Recently, he has worked with the Digital Landscape Workshop Series with Moose Peterson, Joe McNally Photo Workshops at Jade Mountain, His Light Workshops with famed landscape photographer Bill Fortney, and the Voices That Matter: Web Design Conference in San Francisco. He is presently on tour with the Adobe Photoshop for Photographers seminar tour in the United States for KelbyOne.

RC lives in Tampa, Florida, with his wife Jennifer and daughter Sabine.

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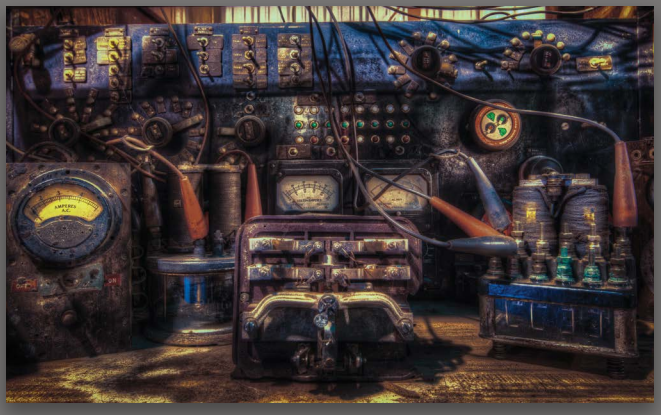

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INTRODUCTION

It's pretty safe to say that HDR photography is in full bloom. Your iPhone has an HDR picture mode. Google offers HDR filters to pictures uploaded to Google+. There are filters from various companies emulating HDR effects, offering to give you "that HDR look" that you are looking for. With so much HDR imagery available, I feel like the number of people who are interested in the technique has increased since we last spoke. It made me want to go back and think about the relevance of what I had written previously.

When I wrote the first version of this book, I really set out to debunk the entire idea that HDR was this overly complex dark art that few could really master. The fact of the matter is that making an HDR file is actually pretty easy: capture a set of images, jiggle a couple of sliders, and export. You're done. I felt like some of the stuff that was out there actually made the process harder than it really needed to be. I wanted to write a book that taught you *how* I came to the results of some of my images.

By sharing with you why I moved a slider (instead of giving you a recipe or a preset), it would help you think about what to move in your next image. I also wanted to cover a dirty little secret about processing HDR shots: you're not really done with the file after tone mapping the image. Much like every other genre of photography, the post-processing of the image is an important component of taking a good image and making it a great one. Many people used Photoshop or software from onOne Software, Nik Software (now the Google Nik Collection), Topaz Labs, and others to finish a file, but that step was usually relegated to the "Oh, I tone mapped the file and I did *some post* to it" part of the conversation. In fact, that *some post* part is the most important part of the conversation when making an image.

So, in the interest of full disclosure, I will tell you this: I am not going to talk about how reading the histogram during your capture session can benefit you when making HDR images. It doesn't. I'm not going to tell you that the best way to shoot an HDR shot is to start in manual mode. It isn't. We have cameras that can capture a series of images of a scene with incredible accuracy and great range. Let's let the technology capture as much as it can, and let's focus on playing with the results the best way we know how. Let's also do this in as straightforward a manner as possible.

In thinking about this second book with this mentality, it made me go back and look at a lot of the techniques in the first book and made me want to go back and pare down a lot of it. Are there dozens of different programs that you could use to make an HDR file? Yes, but many of the people in this space use one: Photomatix. Is there a way that you can do post-processing tricks in a handful of different programs? Sure, but the best program to start all of this in is Photoshop. Are there different ways to emulate a bunch of post-processing techniques that we could explore? Yes, but a large number of users out there use plug-ins to do this heavy lifting. Instead of taking a "Well, one *could* use this software" approach to tell you how to do something, I focused on a "This is what *I* would do in this scenario" approach, which lets you explore the workflow for making an image and see the tools that are best used to make them. Most of them can be downloaded as trial versions. At the end of the exploration and learning process, you can then decide which ones of these are essential to the kind of work *you* do. You can then keep or jettison tools as they fit what you are shooting.

So, we will cover what kinds of things I would recommend to you in terms of gear and technique to capture a series of images. Once we've covered that, I'll spend some time talking about the kinds of things I look for in a scene to make an HDR. This will get you best prepared to get out there, look for the shot, and get the source files you need.

We'll then spend some time looking at Photomatix and how we can use it to create a tone-mapped file (the merger of a series of exposures). There's really not that much to Photomatix, and I feel like going through the

process in my specific order will get you making good tone-mapped files out of the gate. (I'll cover how to use Photoshop and HDR Efex Pro for tone mapping HDR in videos on the book's companion website at **http://kelbyone.com/books/hdr2** in the event that you want to see other options.) Now you're ready for the post-processing part.

The rest of the book takes you through 10 projects from start to finish. I'll talk about how I got to the tone-mapped version of the file, and what kinds of things I wanted to focus on in Photoshop to take that image to the next level. The images for each of these projects will be available to you on the book's companion website (**http://kelbyone.com/books/hdr2**), so you can follow along. You are free to use those images for whatever you'd like. If you post them socially, I only ask that you let people know that you're experimenting with images from this book. In a couple chapters, you'll see a section called "It's Your Turn." Here, I'll show you my finished file and give you the source files for the project to see what you can come up with.

I also wanted to introduce you to a few HDR photographers out there who are making great work. These photographers can offer great insights and help inspire you along the way.

For those of you who purchased the first edition of this book, I give you my thanks and present to you a book that further focuses my HDR technique to just what you need, and shares new techniques. I'm giving you 10 new projects that you can play with and share, and introducing you to new photographers for additional inspiration.

For those of you picking this book up for the first time, I promise you a straightforward, no-nonsense approach to teach you the tools you need to express yourself in this HDR world. I'm thrilled that you've considered this, and can't wait to share with you what I've learned.

Let's get to it!

FOUR

Project: Alabama Hills

A couple of years ago, I spoke at a couple of workshops based in the eastern Sierra Nevadas (California) for famed wildlife photographer Moose Peterson. Driving up and down the Sierras would come to be one of my most treasured memories. That said, when you are making landscape images there is no bigger wrench that can be thrown into your plans than the weather.

We initially set out to visit the Alabama Hills—a great rocky area just south of Mammoth, CA. As we were driving to the area, I noticed that the clouds started increasing. More and more clouds appeared the further we drove into the Alabama Hills. By the time we got to the location, clouds covered 85 percent of the area. To everyone there, the shoot was a bust.

Now, it's completely okay for you to spend a lot of time getting to a location for a shoot, be skunked out of the shoot due to weather, and just head back home. Most photographers, however, will stick around for a little while and see if there are any breaks in the weather that offer pockets from which to shoot. The overcast gray skies didn't really provide for much, but man did we try.

I've always hedged my bets when I am out shooting at a location by bracketing shots. This is something that I did prior to HDR—you just never know when you need something a little more underexposed (or overexposed). So, I shot brackets of the area and headed back to the camp.

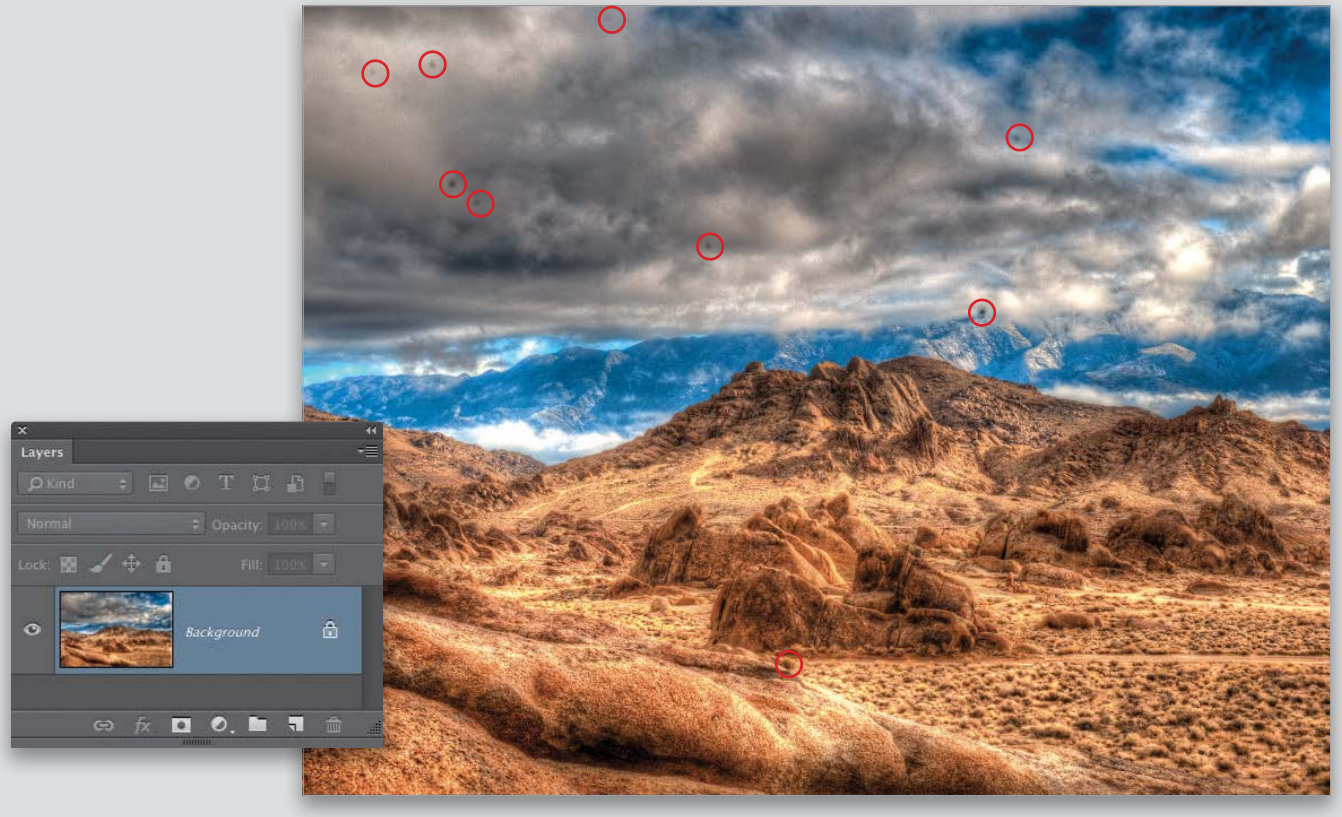
Much later, I would come back to those brackets and think, "You know, by themselves the pictures don't really do much, but what if I used all of them in HDR?" The results really surprised me.

TONE MAPPING THE IMAGE

The default setting needed a little bit of work, so I moved my Strength and Detail Contrast settings to their maximum values. Once they were set, I added some Color Saturation to taste—my taste usually borders a little bit on the oversaturated side here, but I'll tone it down a little later. With that set, I dragged the Lighting Adjustments slider to the right and then increased the Tone Compression, and you can see the clouds and mountains start popping in.

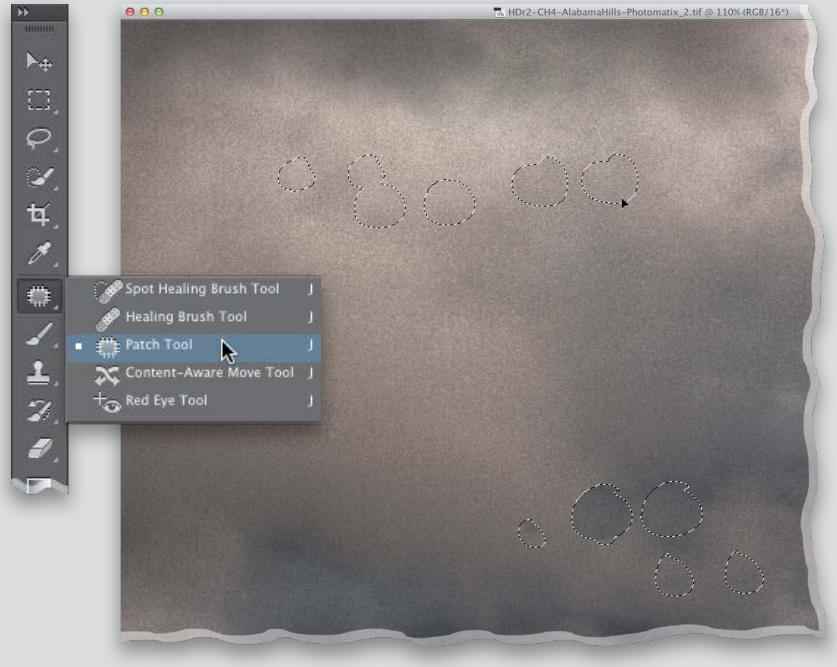
The clouds are a little dark here and I don't have enough contrast in the mountains. So, to counteract that, I'll drag the Gamma slider to the left (giving me contrast), and increase the White Point (helping the clouds). While it's not exactly what I would want in the clouds, I know I can fix them a little bit better in Photoshop.

POST-PROCESSING IN PHOTOSHOP



STEP ONE:

Whether it's a dusty sensor or rain on the front of your lens (as was the case here), spots or specks in your photo will immediately appear magnified in the tone-mapped image. While they're distracting in an otherwise normal picture, they scream, "Look at me!" in a tone-mapped image. So, let's take care of those first. Now, when you look at a photo full screen, it may look good, but you also may see a host of problems when you zoom into it. So, you should always zoom in to 100% to get the best idea of whether the image needs a little bit of spot work. When I zoomed in here, I saw all of the distracting areas shown circled here in red. Ouch!



STEP TWO:

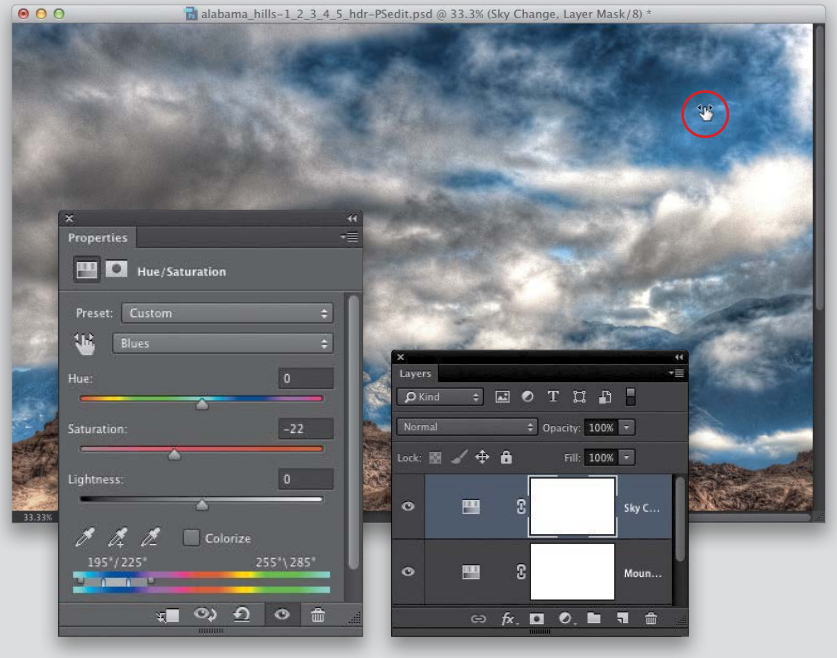
For fixing spots on a background, the Patch tool (press **Shift-J** until you have it) does very well. Sometimes, it can be a little repetitive, though, so here's a quick tip to help you: Instead of making one selection and dragging it immediately to patch, press-and-hold the Shift key after your first selection is made and then make another selection around another spot. This way, you can select a series of spots and, once you have all of them selected, you can then drag them in one fell swoop to get rid of them.

STEP THREE:

Now, you'll notice that tone mapping an image can introduce a bit of color contamination in some areas. When things you expect to be a certain color look different, it automatically makes the viewer question the authenticity of the image. So, a small adjustment can go a long way here. In this image, the color in the mountains is looking a little electric, so we're going to need to fix that.

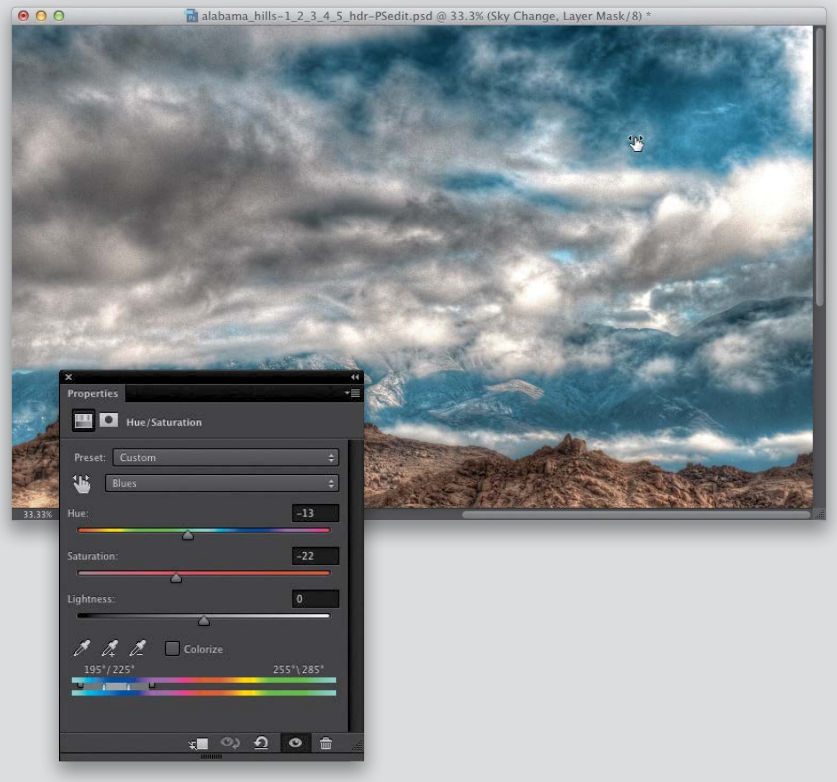
STEP FOUR:

Go ahead and add a Hue/Saturation adjustment layer (we covered this on page 64). In the Properties panel, click on the Targeted Adjustment tool (TAT, for short; it's the hand icon near the top left of the panel). With this tool, you can click-and-drag on any area in your image that you think needs a color change. So, click on the mountain and drag to the left. You'll see that the yellows in the image are desaturated, making the mountain color look a little more believable. The overall color of the image was still a little too saturated, so I then switched the pop-up menu back to **Master** and dragged the Saturation slider to the left a little.



STEP FIVE:

While it's easy to make this hue/saturation change to the color, keep in mind that this color change is global—the white layer mask that appears in the adjustment layer reveals the color change throughout the image. Now I want to make a change to the sky color, but I only want to apply it to that portion of the image. So, create another Hue/Saturation adjustment layer and click on the TAT in the Properties panel. Now, click on any of the blue sky area in the image and drag to the left to desaturate it.



STEP SIX:

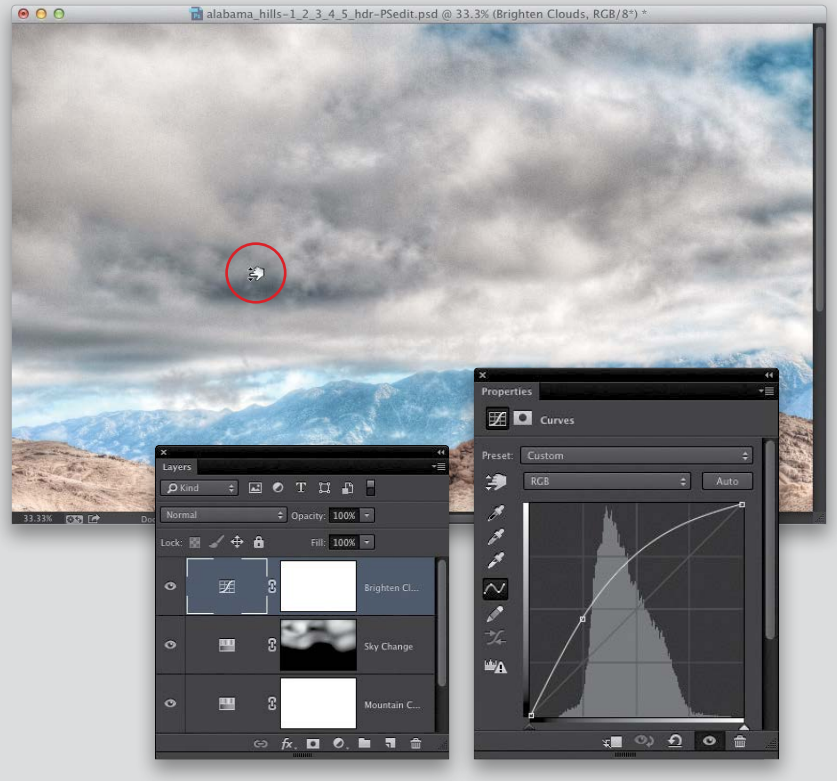
Next, let's change the hue of that blue a little bit by pressing-and-holding the Command (PC: Ctrl) key and dragging to the left. You'll see the Hue slider change, affecting the sky color.

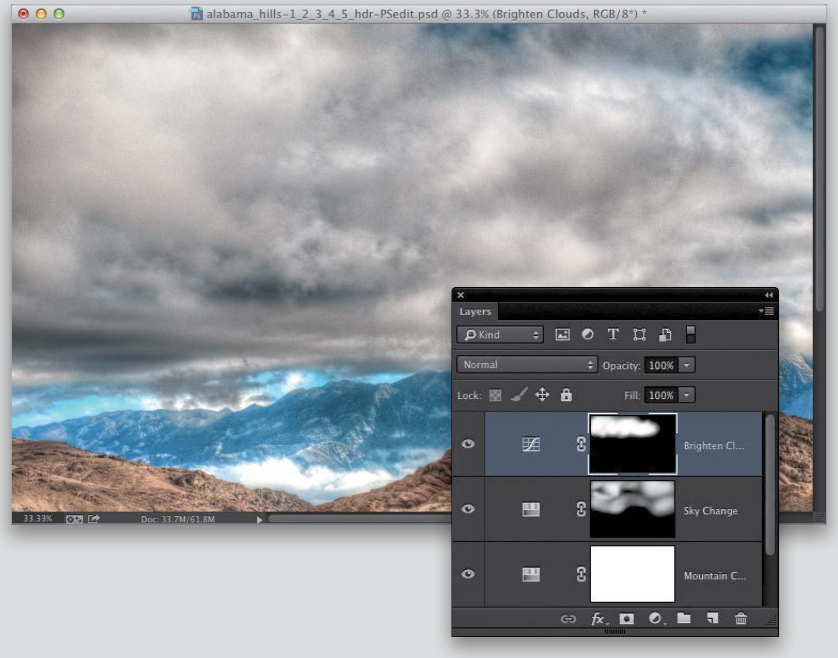
STEP SEVEN:

Once that's set, make sure the top Hue/Saturation adjustment layer's layer mask is selected in the Layers panel (it should have a border around it), and then press **Command-I (PC: Ctrl-I)**. This will invert the mask to black, hiding the entire effect. Get the Brush tool from the Toolbox **(B)**, choose a soft-edged brush from the Brush Picker in the Options Bar, and then set it to a low Flow (also in the Options Bar). Now, press **X** to set your Foreground color to white, then paint the color change back in only in the sky area.

STEP EIGHT:

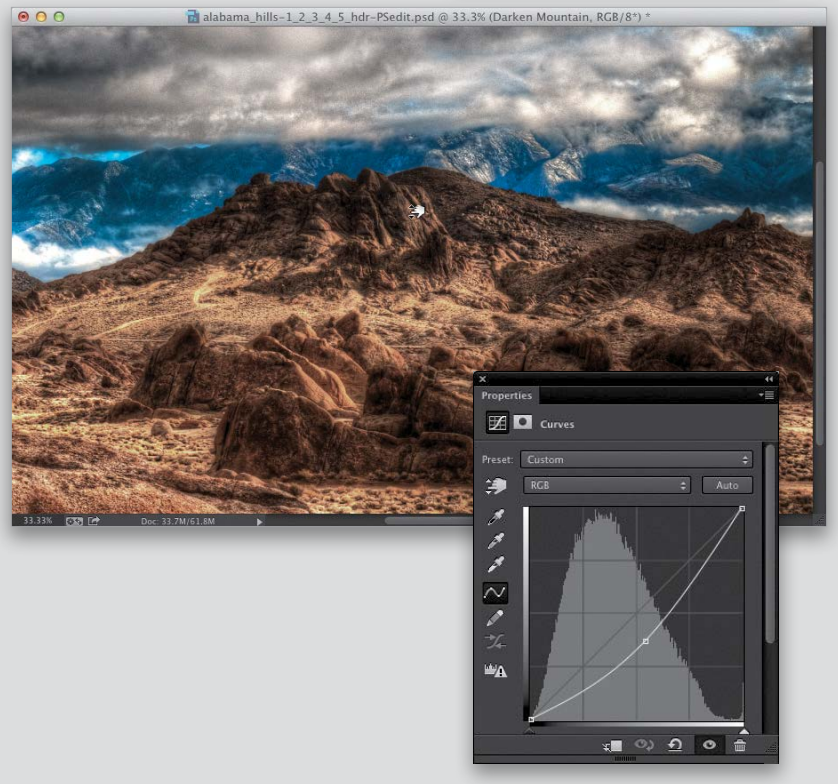
While a tone-mapped file can certainly provide a lot of contrast in images, there are times when you'll want some portions of the image to pop out more than others. Curves adjustment layers are a great way to do this. A simple S-curve and a layer mask, and you're good! In this image, I'd like to brighten up the cloud areas, as well as darken up some of the mountains to provide a little bit of texture. We'll start with the clouds. So, create a Curves adjustment layer. Then, in the Properties panel, you'll see the TAT near the top left of the panel. Click on it, and then click on a portion of the image you want to lighten—in this case, the dark area of the clouds. Drag up and the clouds will brighten.





STEP NINE:

Like before, invert the layer mask and paint back in the effect only on the darkest portion of the clouds by using a soft-edged, white brush with a low Flow setting.



STEP 10:

We used a Curves adjustment layer to brighten a portion of the sky. Now, let's apply the same concept to darken the mountains. Create another Curves adjustment layer, and then click on the TAT in the Properties panel. Click on a portion of the image you want to darken—in this case, the bright part of the mountains. Drag down and the mountains will get darker.

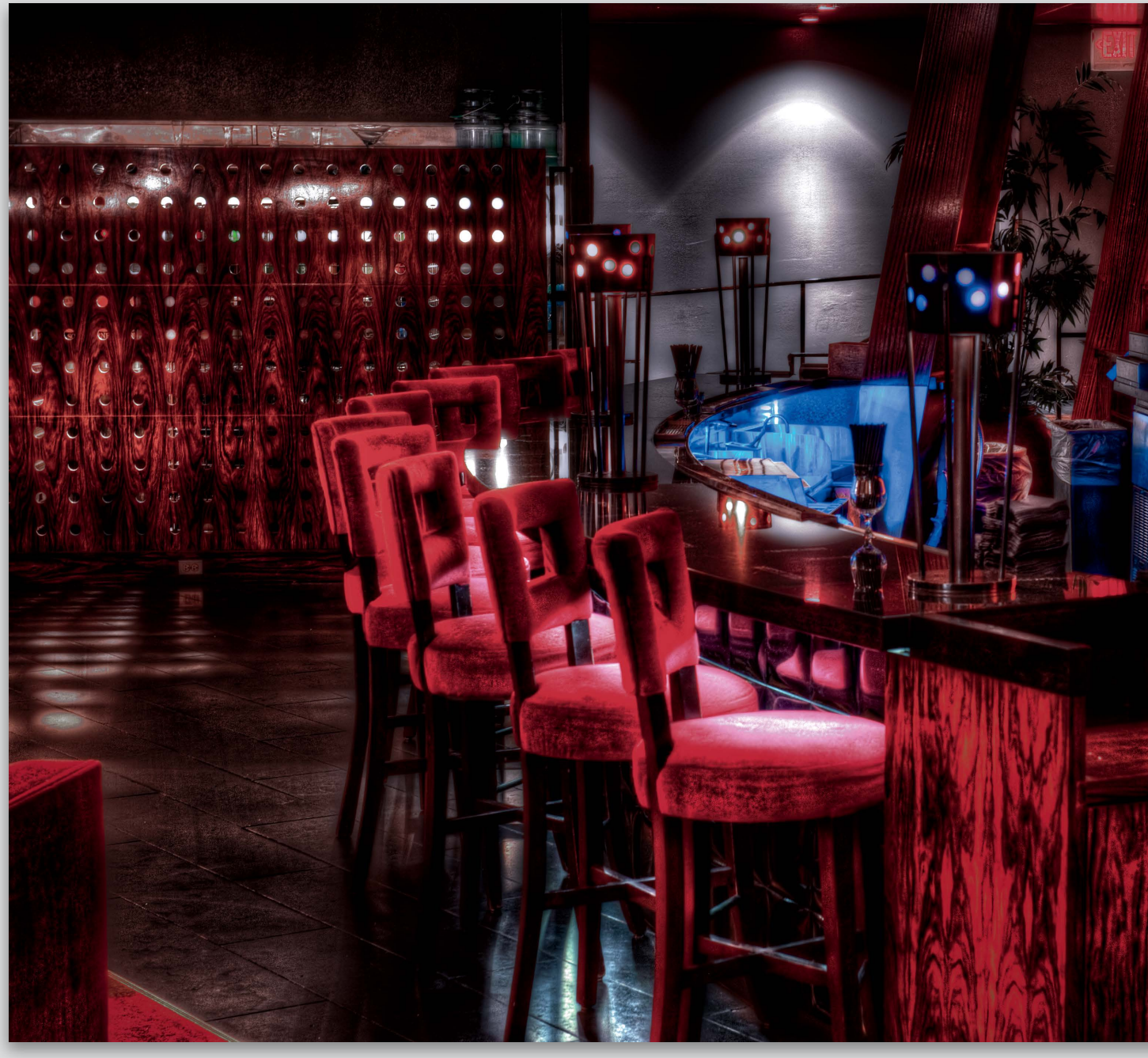
STEP 11:

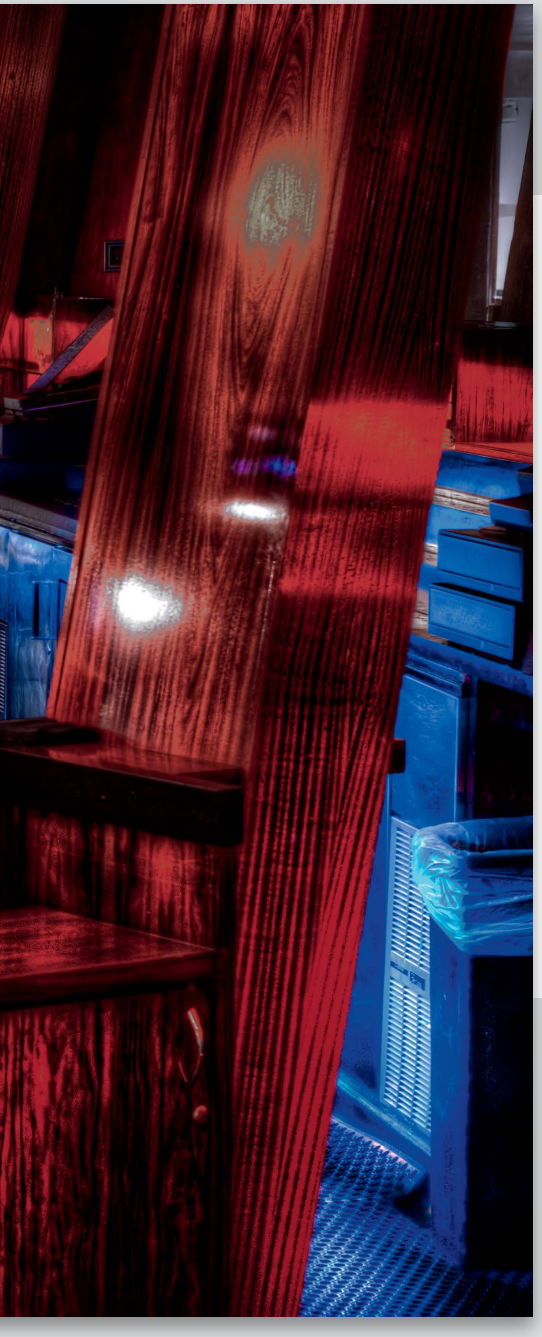
Then, invert your top Curves adjustment layer's layer mask and paint back in the effect on some of the mountains. Don't paint over too much of them—you want there to be patches of dark and light to match the sky above. This will also give the picture a lot more texture. Save the file, and you are finished.

If you got this far and thought to yourself, "Is it this easy?" Surprise! It absolutely is. The techniques are the same, but the results you get will be transformative!

BEFORE

AFTER


EXIT



It's Your Turn: The China Grill

In Chapter 2 of the first edition of this book, we took a look at another image from this shoot that I made at a Photoshop World Conference several years ago. While I was pretty happy with that image, I think that it had a lot of competing elements in it (if you haven't seen it, take a look at the first edition—it's got all different examples for you to work with).

This image has always been more of my favorite as it has simpler shapes and tones to it. The problem with making this image has always been just how electric the colors are to begin with. The chairs in this restaurant are a very deep red. Try adding those exposures together in HDR, and you're going to get something that's going to look really unrealistic.

Try to be a little more conservative in how much color saturation you apply to the tone map. You'll notice that you will overshoot the color very quickly. From there, make sure that you use Hue/Saturation adjustment layers liberally to correct those colors. Also, keep in mind that the walls have color, too, and those will need to be controlled. Some Curves adjustment layers will add some mood to the shot. Let's see what kinds of images you come up with!

Download this preset at:

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