

Composition Case Study #03

ADVANCED COMPOSITION

This is a pretty neat photograph that could be used in any number of commercial applications.

It may not be perfectly composed, though, depending upon the end use.

If the photographer wanted the man to be the subject and a viewer to finish their journey through the composition on him, then this image could use a little help.



If the man is secondary to a broader concept, then the image is probably fine just as it is.

Why is that? Why is the man secondary as the image is currently presented?

A viewer's eyes tend to migrate immediately toward the brightest space within the frame and/or a point of high contrast and/or an area of high color saturation, all of which are occurring along the top of the mountain behind the man.

In addition, warm colors advance and cool colors recede.

The man is literally right on the edge of becoming negative space. That's how little an impact he's making within this photograph's current version.

For example, if this were in an advertisement that said, "Come Visit Us in Utah!" the man would be secondary to the overall message of 'the natural beauty of Utah.'

For that particular message, the subject would be the landscape; the man would be a focal point,

and the story would be "come travel to Utah and see the natural beauty."

Now, let's change the concept for the photo's use.

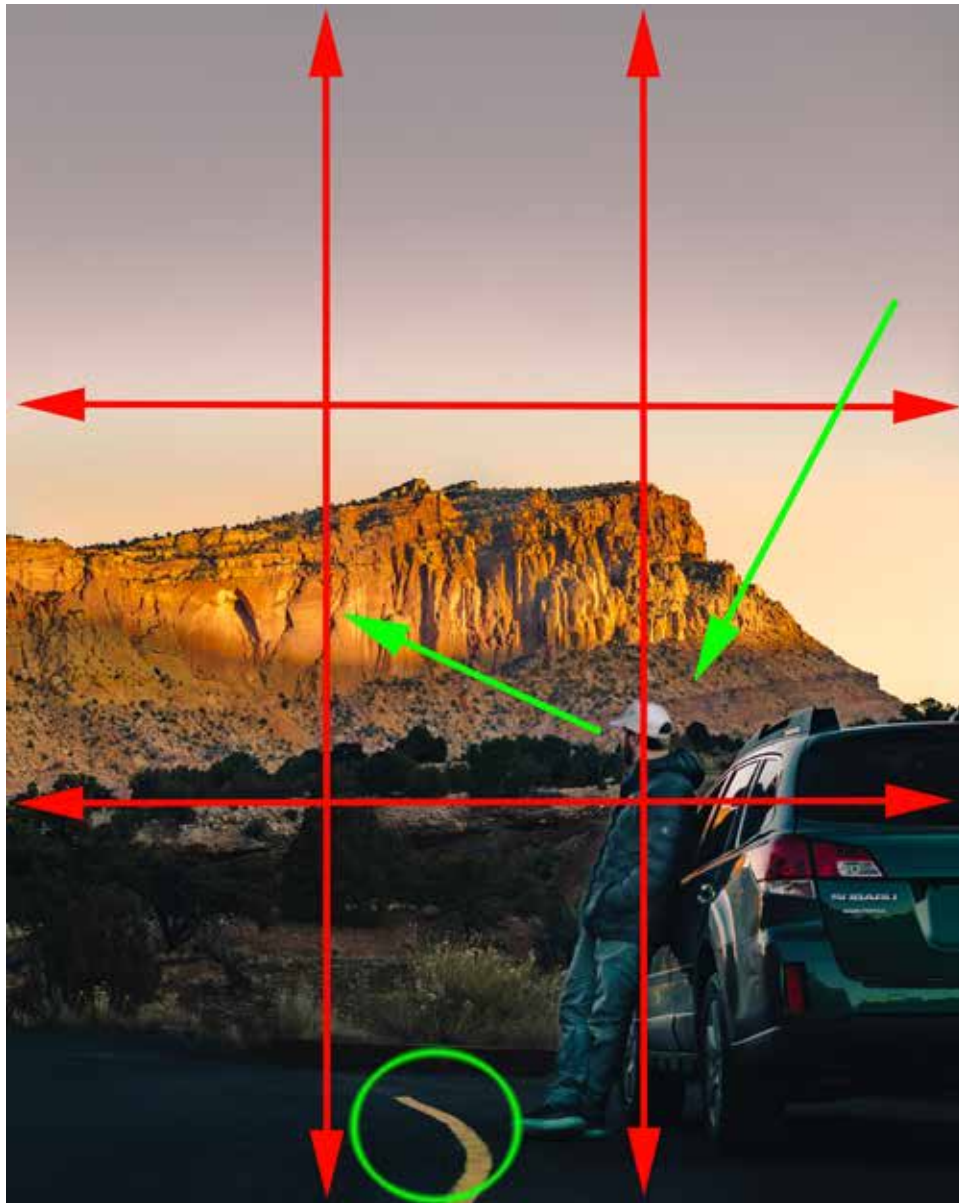
The photo is going to illustrate a magazine article on the benefits of saving for retirement while one is still young.

In this case, the man is the subject, the location is negative space, and the story is about the man's life.

For this message, the image would need a bit of massaging (from a composition point of view) to really meet the needs of the client and make the man the clear subject.

If this shot were created strictly for artistic purposes, it could be left alone (though I personally think that some post-processing might make it a bit more interesting and clear for a viewer).

Post-processing may just bring this composition to life, so let's take a look at that.



The photographer definitely used some rules and tools of composition. It's this analysis of the photograph above that leads me to believe that the man was the intended subject:

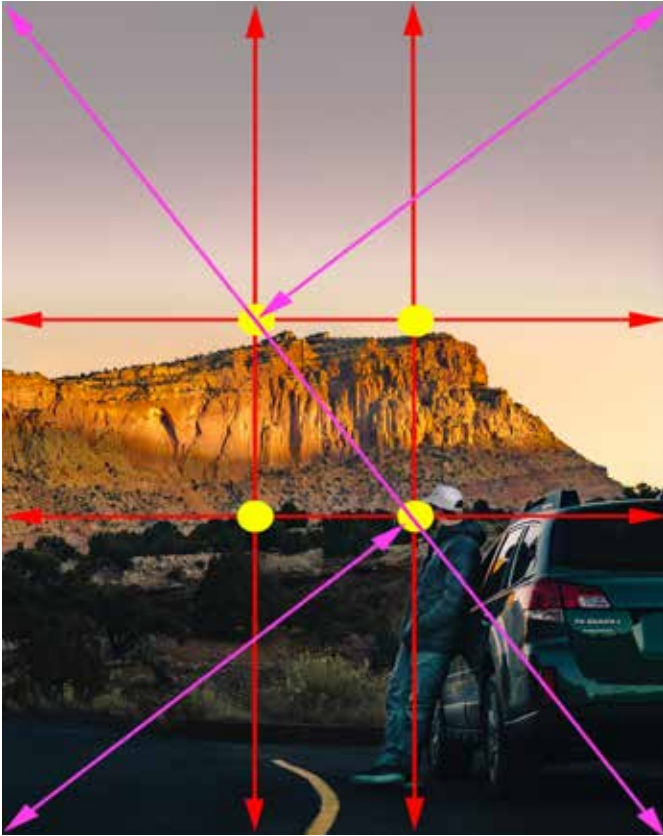
- The man holds the position in the sweet spot for the Rule of Thirds.
- The yellow line in the road is positioned to lead the eyes toward the man, but not past him.
- The white hat attempts to provide a focal point.

The line of sight directs a viewer into the picture (more on this in a moment).

Given all of that, you would think that the man would easily carry the greatest amount of visual weight. But he doesn't.

This is important.

The power of brightness and contrast can be overwhelming in a composition.



This image reveals a couple of important revelations.

The man is on a yellow dot – a sweet spot – and that is good. However, so is the ridge of the mountain in the background. In fact, it occupies two yellow dots!

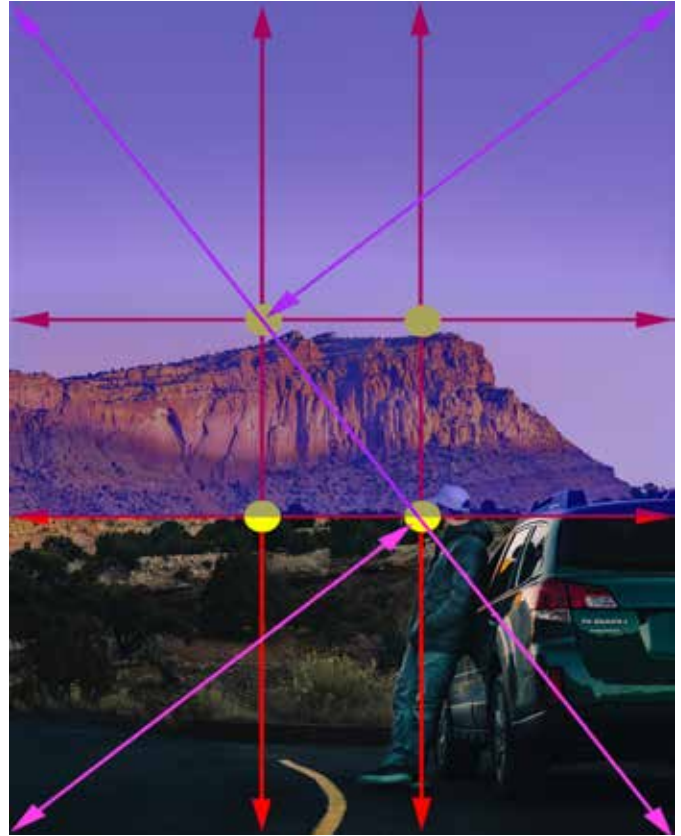
There is no triangulation to the composition to help provide balance or direction through the picture.

According to the Golden Ratio, the man and the background are carrying equal visual weight!

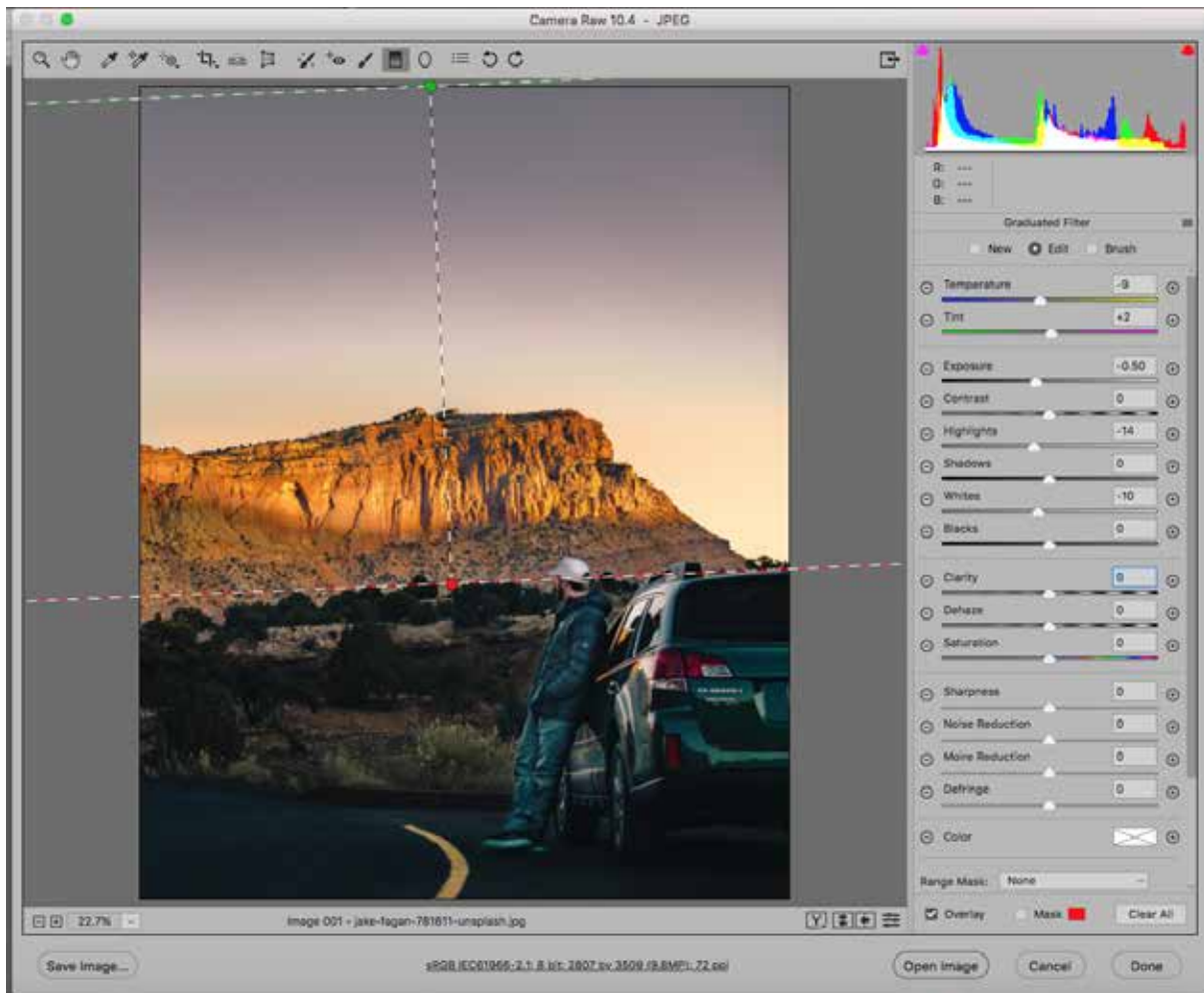
In the process of creating this picture, how would one correct for this?

I would probably have done a change of lens focal length, or a change in the camera position, to reduce the visual weight of the background.

However, now that the shot is created, adjustments need to be made in post-production.



The photographer did make use of one other composition concept: the 1/3–2/3 concept, as illustrated in this image. 1/3 was given to the foreground and 2/3 were given to the background. What creates that division? Brightness, contrast, and color balance create that division.



I am now going to **rearrange** the composition using post-production techniques.

My goal is to shift the visual weight from the background toward the man, so that he clearly stands out as the subject.

I want to accomplish this without changing the overall feel, mood, or story of the original image.

I'm going to accomplish all of my changes in the Adobe ACR window so that they are completely reversible.

Remember, there are multiple possible uses for a photograph like this. As a photographer who wishes to earn money from their images either part-time or as a full-time professional, you want to preserve the original image file as often as possible.

We are going to alter this photograph, but there may be other potential needs down the road that would require a different composition.

We want to be able to undo what we've done!

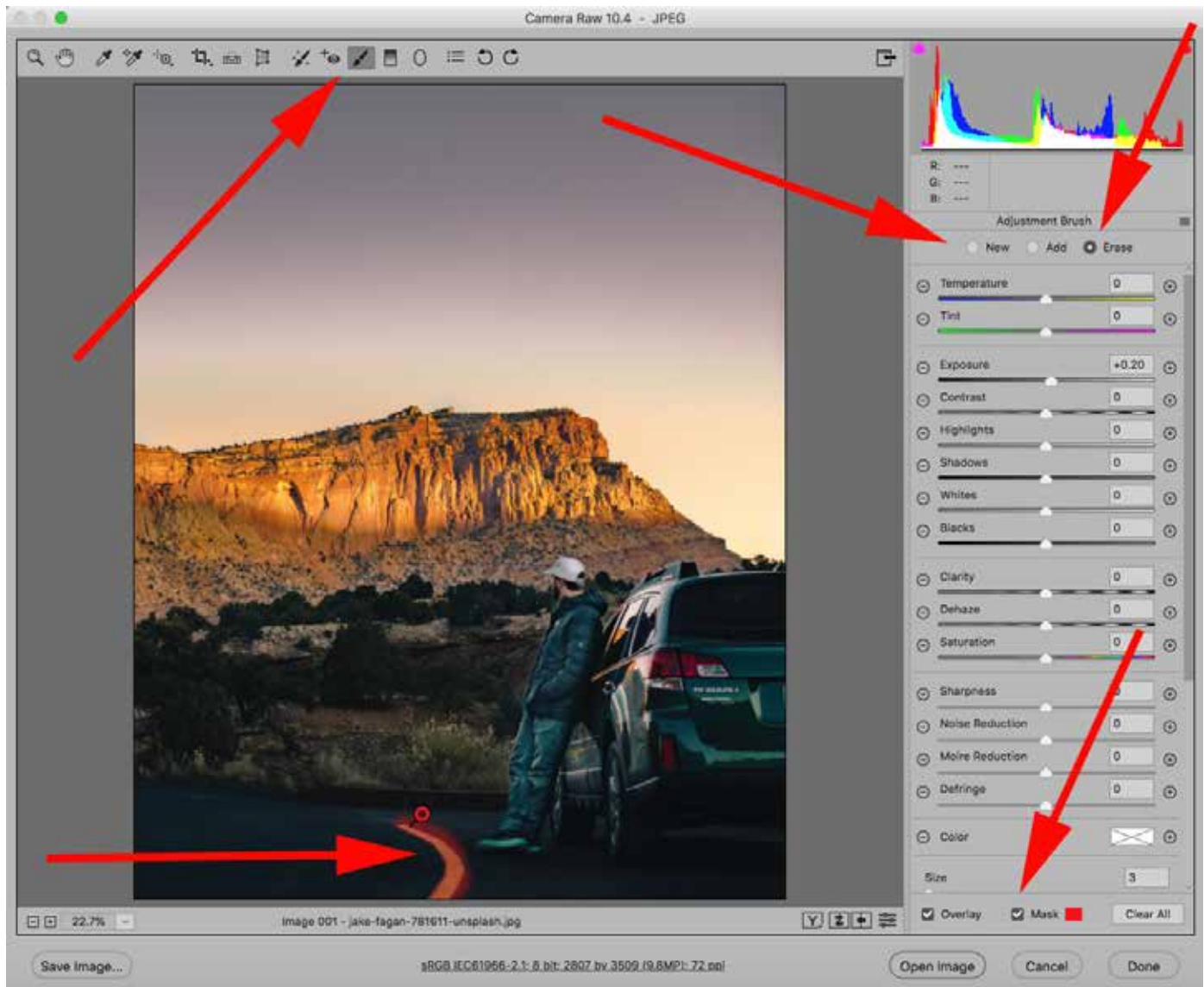
In the image above, I am using a gradient mask to reduce the exposure on the sky and the mountain, and to also make a slight color balance adjustment.

You'll note that my changes throughout this case study are generally subtle. I want to reduce the brightness value and contrast range of the background.

I also want those changes to look real!

Going too far in post-production will make an image appear faked. We don't want that!

Think subtle!

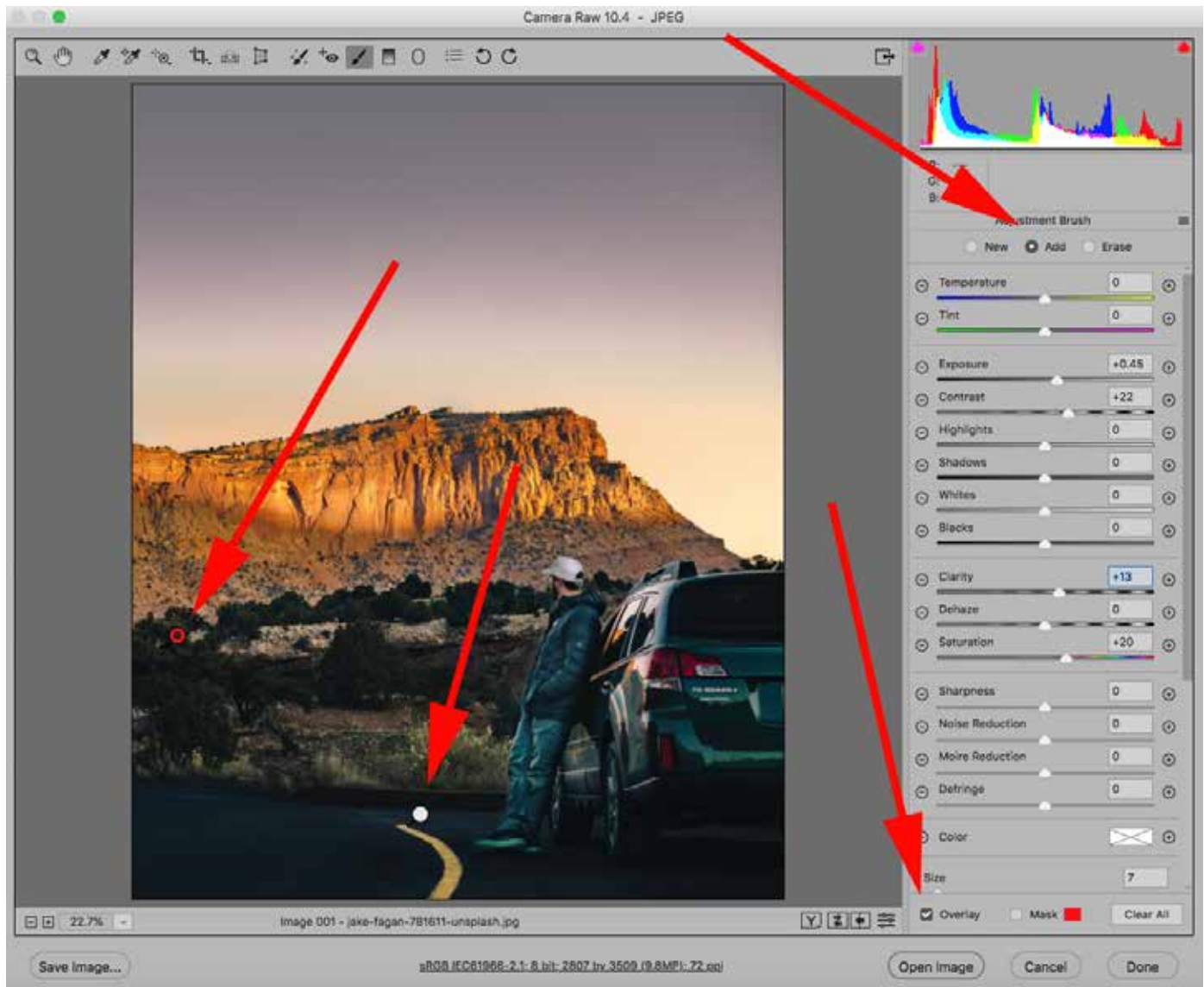


The yellow line on the road was meant to provide a leading line toward the subject. However, it isn't accomplishing that task very well. It is too dark and too dingy in color to compete with the mountain, so I'm going to make some adjustments to it.

First, I need to make a mask. I'll do that with the Adjustment Brush.

- The Adjustment Brush is located where the upper red arrow is pointing.
- I make sure that the 'Mask' box is selected so that I can see the mask as I create it.

- Since this is my first Adjustment Brush mask on this photograph, it will default to new.
- I size my brush to paint the mask. However, I often over-paint the area and must clean up the edges using the 'Erase' brush. You can see where I have already cleaned up the left edge of the mask painted over the yellow line. I'll now clean up the rest of the mask.
- If I need to make a new mask, I must make sure to check the 'new' radio button. If I don't do that, I'll actually be making changes to this existing mask.



In this image, you can see how the yellow line on the road is now brighter and more distinct in color.

Now, I must create a new second Adjustment Brush mask.

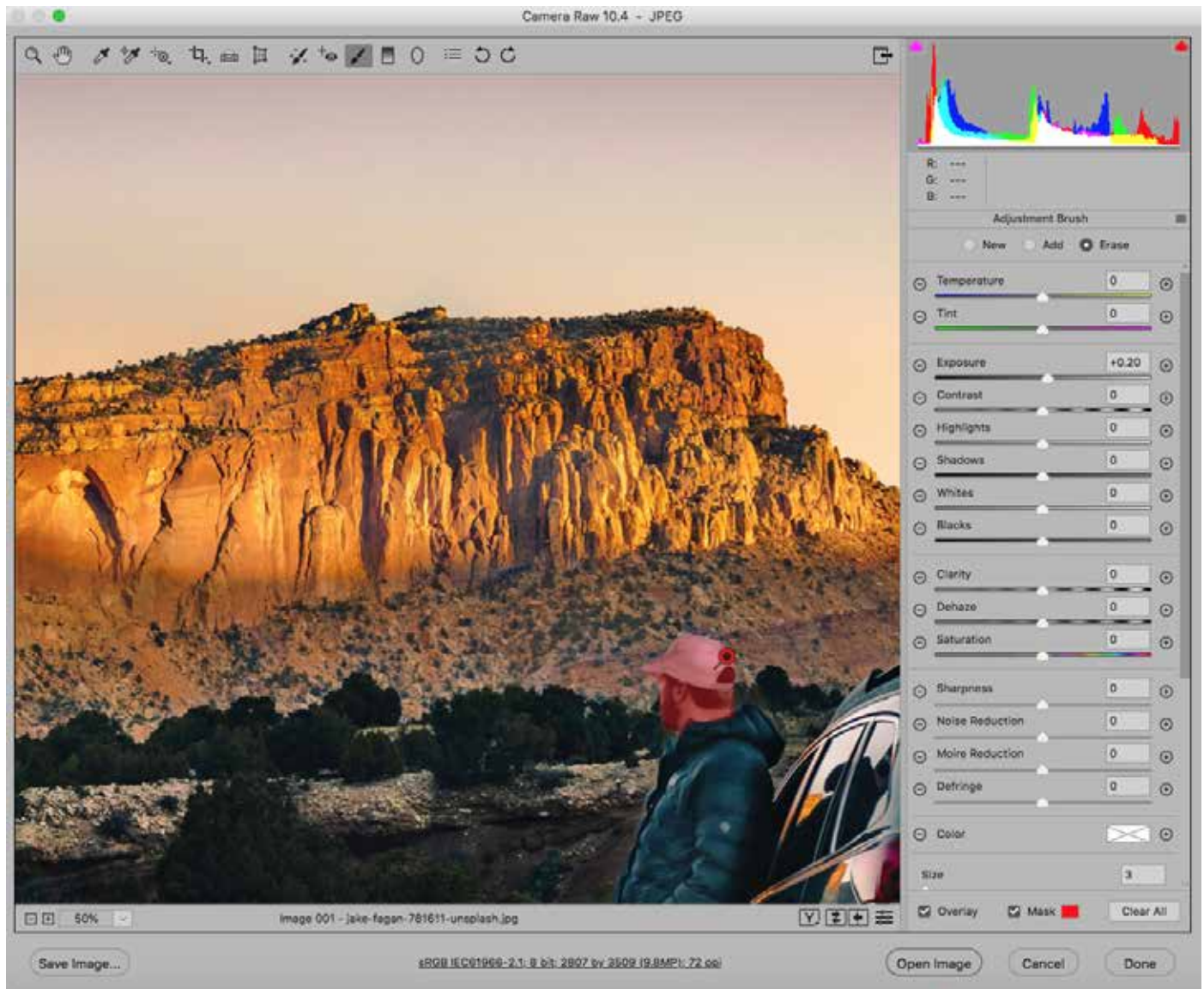
- When creating multiple masks, make sure to have 'Overlay' checked.
- Before creating the second Adjustment Brush mask, check the 'New' radio button (seen in the upper right-hand side of the image above). As soon as I release the mouse button from painting the mask, the radio button (in the upper right) defaults

to the 'Add' button. Make sure you're adjusting the correct mask!

- When a mask is not selected, it will appear as a white pin.
- When a mask is selected, it will appear as a red pin.

My second mask added Exposure, Contrast, Clarity, and Saturation to the landscape below the mountain and above the road.

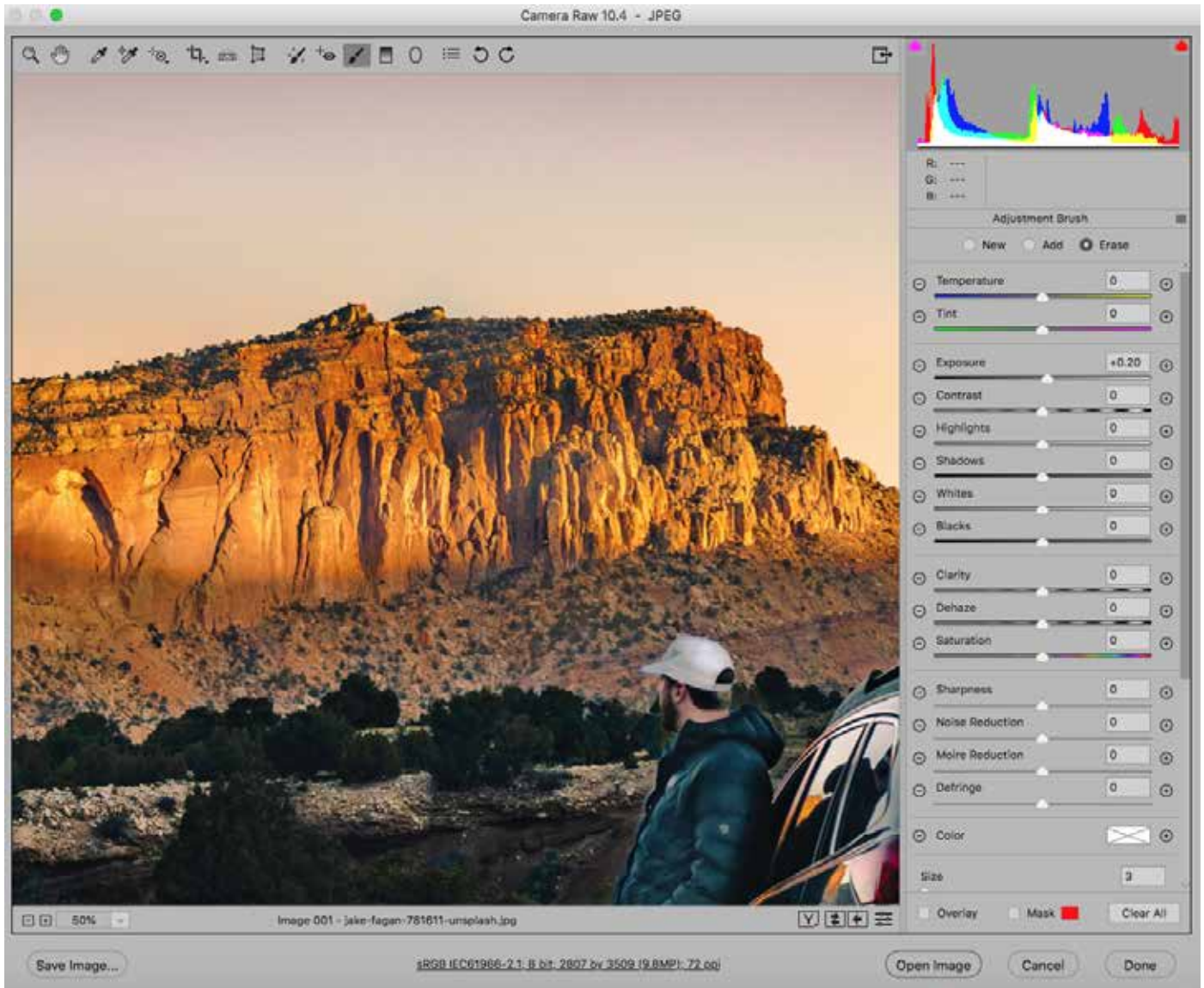
The purpose of this composition change was to give the man's line of sight something meaningful to be looking at.



The next adjustment is the most important from a compositional point of view.

I created a mask of the man's hat and head and then increased the exposure of that area.

Please note that the mask does not bleed off into other areas.



The goal with this adjustment is to make this portion of the frame (the subject) the brightest location within the space.

This has to be done carefully. Too much and it will look fake, and too little and it won't get the job done.

In a post-production situation such as this, I tend to err on the side of too little. I will then fine-tune

that setting as the last step in my post-processing procedure.

What has this step accomplished?

The hat is now firmly established as a focal point for the subject, which is the man.

The skin of the man is now bright and easily visible from the surroundings, and this drastically increases his visual weight within the frame.



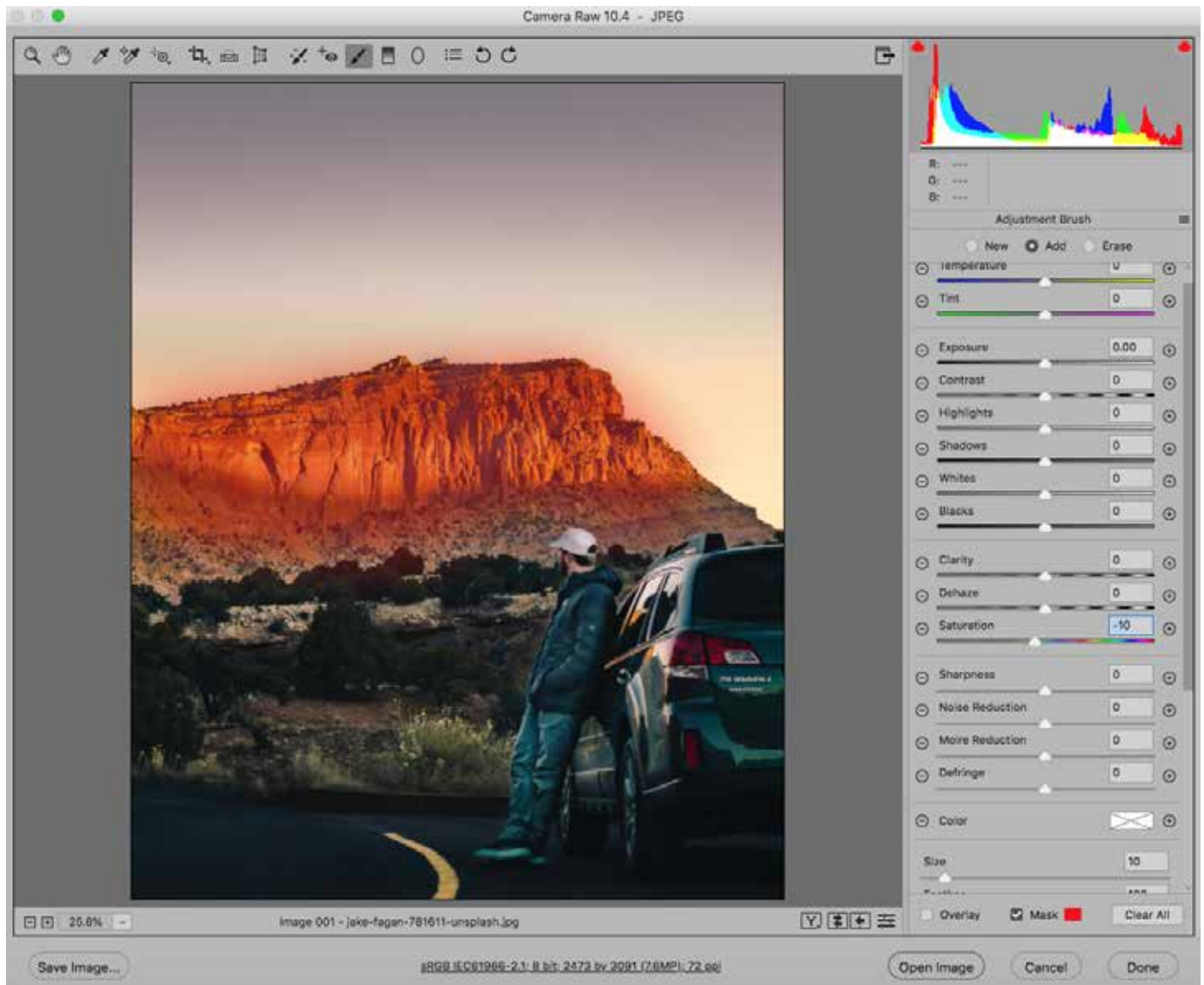
I can't radically change the color balance of either the foreground or the background without making the image look faked, so I still have my 'warm colors advance and cool colors recede' problem.

It will take several adjustments to try and overcome this.

The first step is to crop the image. This accomplishes two things:

- The subject will become larger within the space, thus reducing the effect of the 'warm colors versus cool colors' problem.
- The 1/3–2/3 concept will shift to 1/3 sky and 2/3 land.

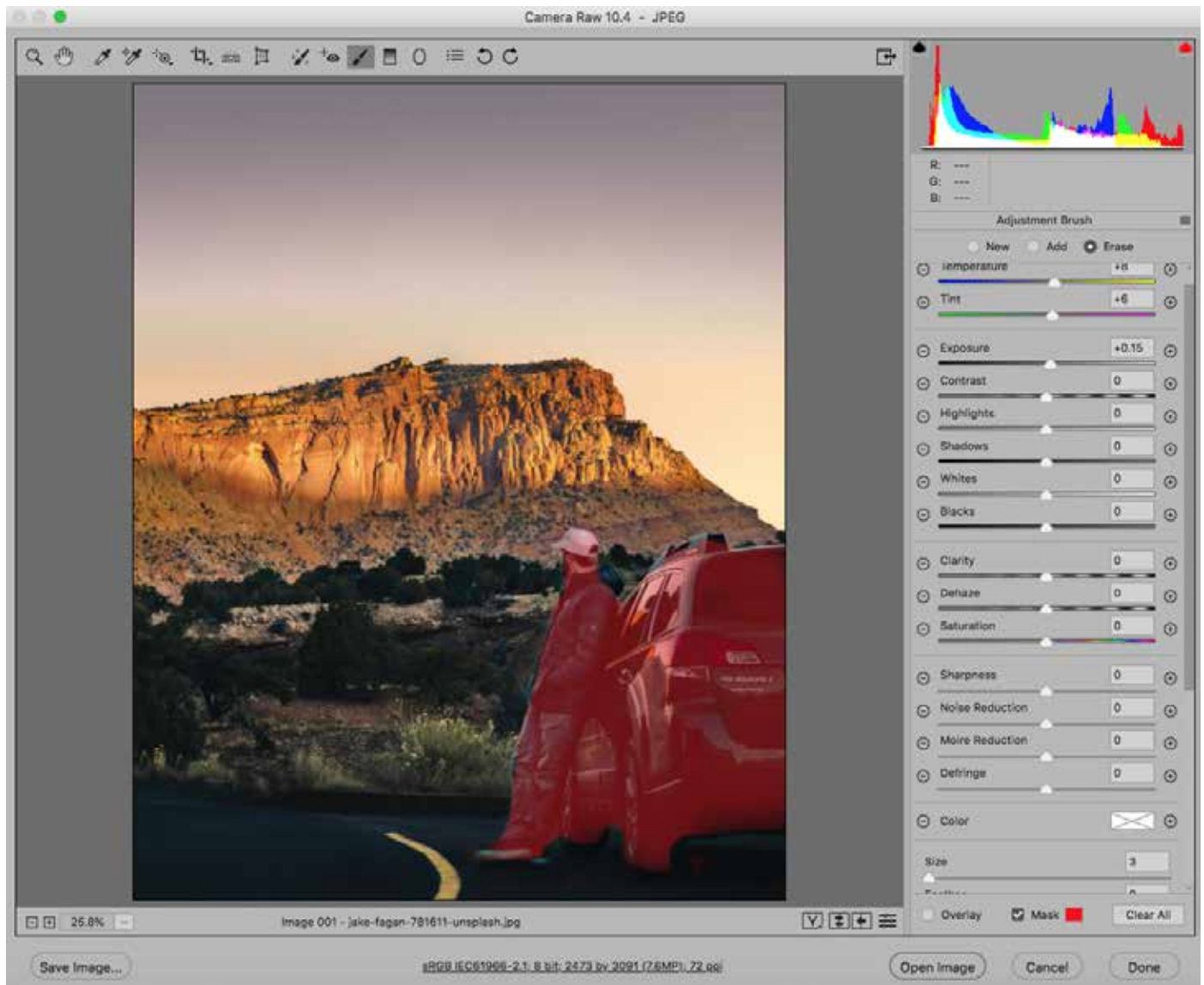
And at this point, I am also applying some noise reduction and sharpening.



In this image, I have now created a new mask of the mountain. I will clean up the edges using the 'Erase' brush to make sure my adjustments do not bleed over into the sky.

This is going to be a very subtle change. I'm going to slightly reduce the Saturation of the mountain area. This will help with the 'warm colors versus cool colors' problem.

Notice that all of the masking pins are not visible. This is because the 'Overlay' box is not checked. I will often toggle 'Overlay' and 'Mask' on and off to help me see what I am doing without any visual obstructions.



I am now going to work on the man and the car. The mask has been created and there is no bleed over into the other surrounding areas.

This adjustment also needs to be **very** subtle, or it will appear faked.

I'm increasing the exposure and adding a tiny bit of color balance adjustment to bring some warmth and brightness back into that area of the shot. This adjustment brightened up the man's clothing, particularly his pants and jacket.

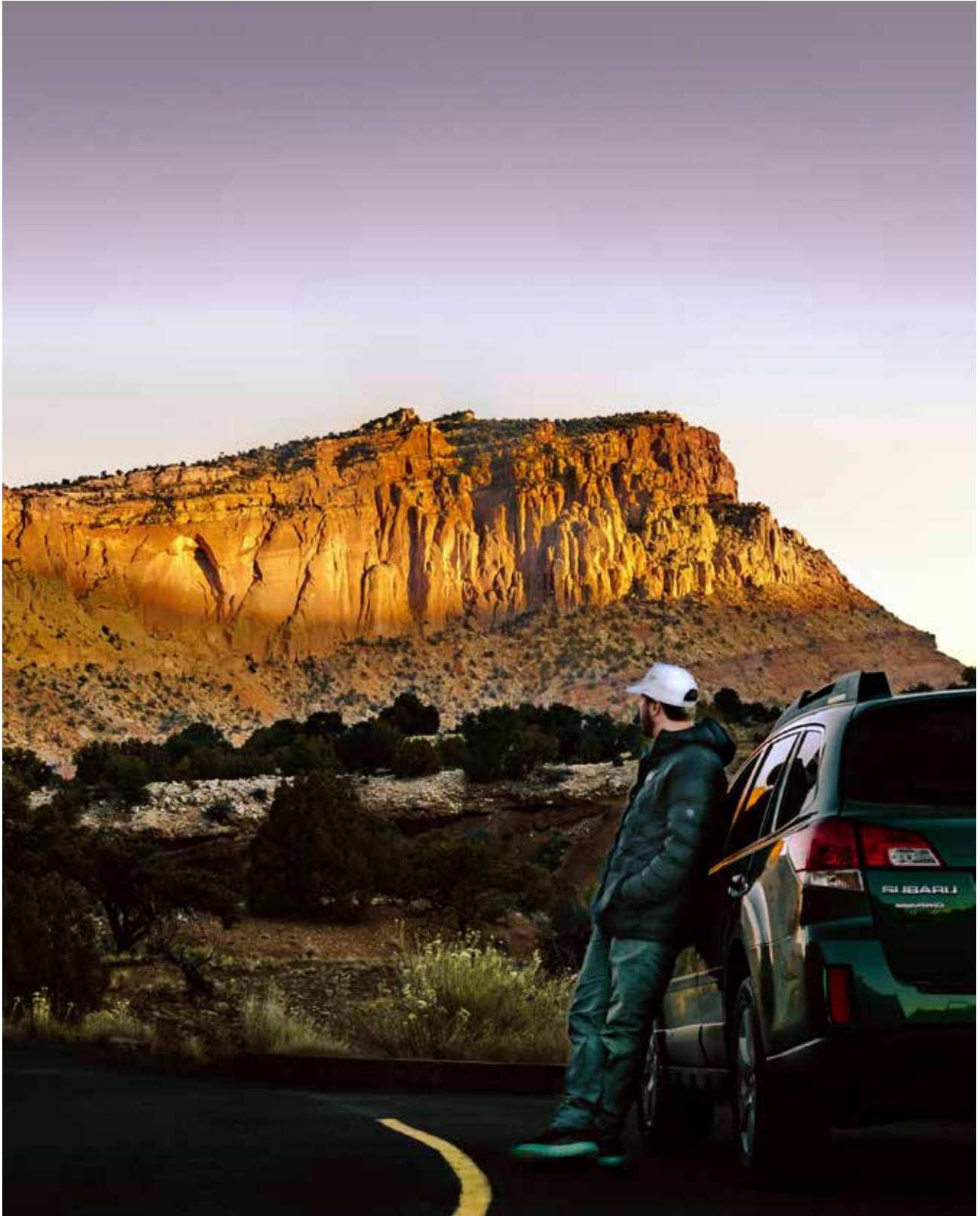


My adjustments from the original image look pretty good overall. However, the windows of the car became too bright. They are now reducing the visual weight of the hat as a focal point.

Maybe reducing isn't quite the right word. The windows are drawing away visual attention to the right of the subject, which I most definitely do not

want to happen. Unless this image is being used for a car ad, it is the least important element within the composition (in my opinion).

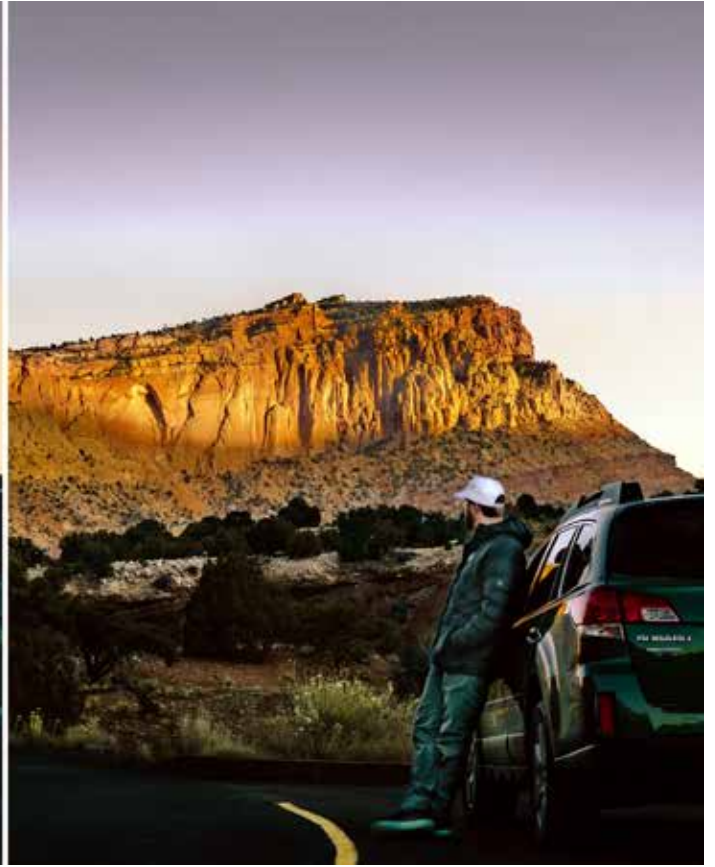
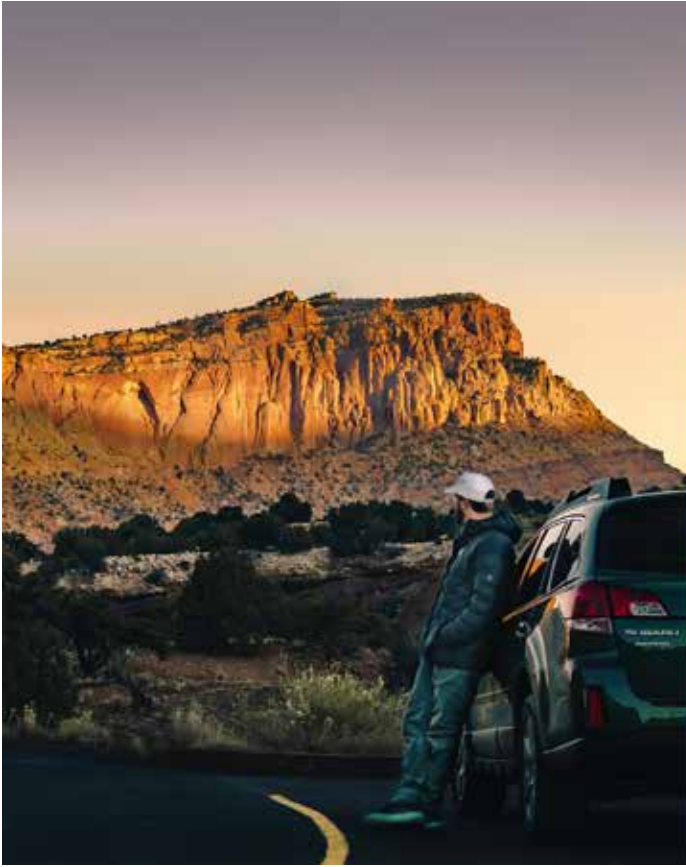
I painted a mask and reduced the brightness level of the window area.



One last touch was to add a bit of global contrast to the entire photograph.

This image is my final edit.

Let's look at a before and after example side by side.



The original image is on the left, and the edited version is on the right.

As you can see in advanced composition, subtle changes can have a huge effect!

My post-production edits have:

- established the man as the subject;
- completely rearranged the visual weight of several elements within the frame;
- established the hat as a focal point;

- beefed up the visual weight of the leading line to make it more effective;
- provided a 'place' for the man's line of sight to be looking at in the background; and
- shifted the balance of the composition from background to foreground, without changing the overall feel of the image, and most importantly keeping the original image file intact.