

Long Exposure Case Study #6

POST-PRODUCTION FAILS (IMO)

by Kent DuFault

Long exposure photographs lend themselves to a fanciful and mystifying effect. Photographers often try to enhance that effect. I'm not here to judge. However, it's essential to understand when you're crossing a line, and you've now created something that is no longer realistic.

The image below (Image 001) is an example of a photograph that utilized long exposure and post-production to create an effect that has no basis in reality.



Image 001



Image 002

Image 002 is a post-production fail (IMO - In My Opinion). It wants to appear as reality. However, the edit has created unrealistic visual artifacts.

The first artifact is the halo along the tree line. When you get into post-production editing, watch out for halos. They are a for sure giveaway to a beginning photo editor or someone who doesn't

have a good handle on the post-production technique. The second artifact, and perhaps more forgivable, as many people couldn't identify it, is the light beam from the flashlight. No flashlight will, in reality, emit an intense beam of light, as presented in Image 002. The light beam was manufactured in post-production or at a minimum, was enhanced.



Image 003 - Photograph by Kent DuFault

This photograph (Image 003) of the St. Augustine Lighthouse in St. Augustine, Florida is also a long exposure, post-production edited, composite. This photograph was commissioned for a magazine cover, and it also has appeared in numerous publications as a stock photograph.

No one has ever questioned the authenticity of the image. Why? The photograph reflects realism. The moon is appropriately sized in comparison to the lighthouse, as it would be captured with the focal length of the lens that was used.

Secondly, the moon is appropriately out of focus. It also has a reflectance value very near to what the eye would see.

The light ray from the lighthouse was added artificially, just like in Image 002. Take notice of the level of transparency.

Now, go back and look at the flashlight picture. Also, look at the transition line between the light beam and the sky. The transition is soft and full. This photo represents how a light beam against a night sky would appear.

If you wish to create long exposure composites, become a student of light and lighting in low light situations, especially notice the transparency and gradation of light across different objects.



Image 004

Long exposures tend to create high contrast or can accentuate high contrast that already exists within the scene. What often happens is that highlight areas become burned out with a complete loss of detail.



Image 005

Blown highlights occurred in this seascape (Images 004 & 005). The highlights, where the red arrow is pointing, have become grossly overexposed and are lacking any detail. The overexposed clouds hurt the composition, as it strongly draws the eyes up and away from the beach.

Pro Tip: In long exposure photography, a slight underexposure will help you maintain detail in the highlights. **Shoot in the camera raw format** for maximum tone and contrast control on post-production. It's easier, and produces a better result, to open up the shadows in post-production versus trying to recover grossly overexposed highlights!



Image 006 - Photograph by Kent DuFault

In long exposure photography, areas within the sky will often overexpose, leaving it looking bland.



Image 007 - Photograph by Kent DuFault

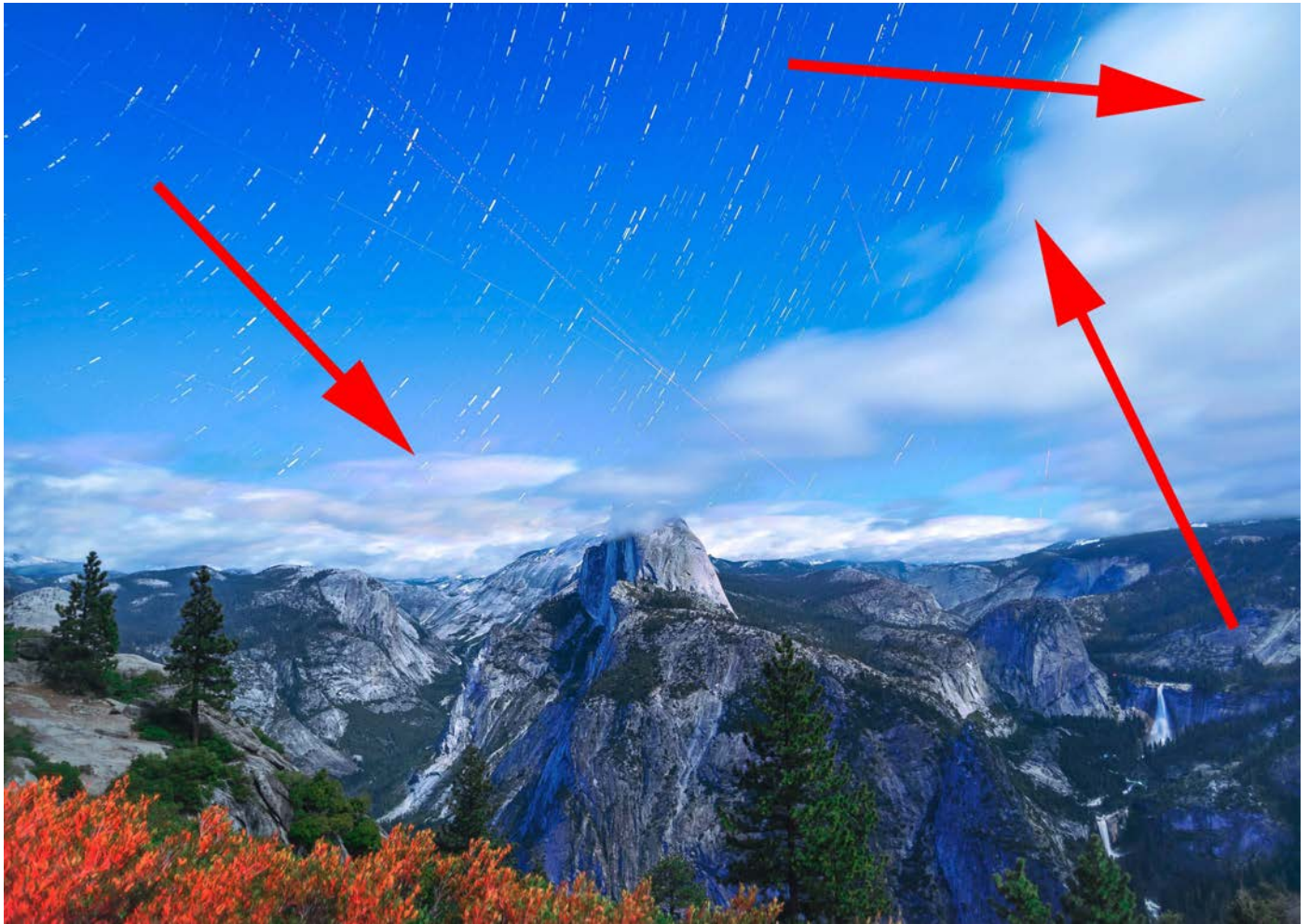
Resist the temptation to artificially reduce the exposure and tone of the sky in post-production. 99 out of 100 times, it will not work, and it will leave your picture looking even duller and more artificial, such as Image 007.

The best way to combat overexposed sky areas is to use a graduated neutral density or a tinted graduated filter in front of the lens at the point of taking the picture.

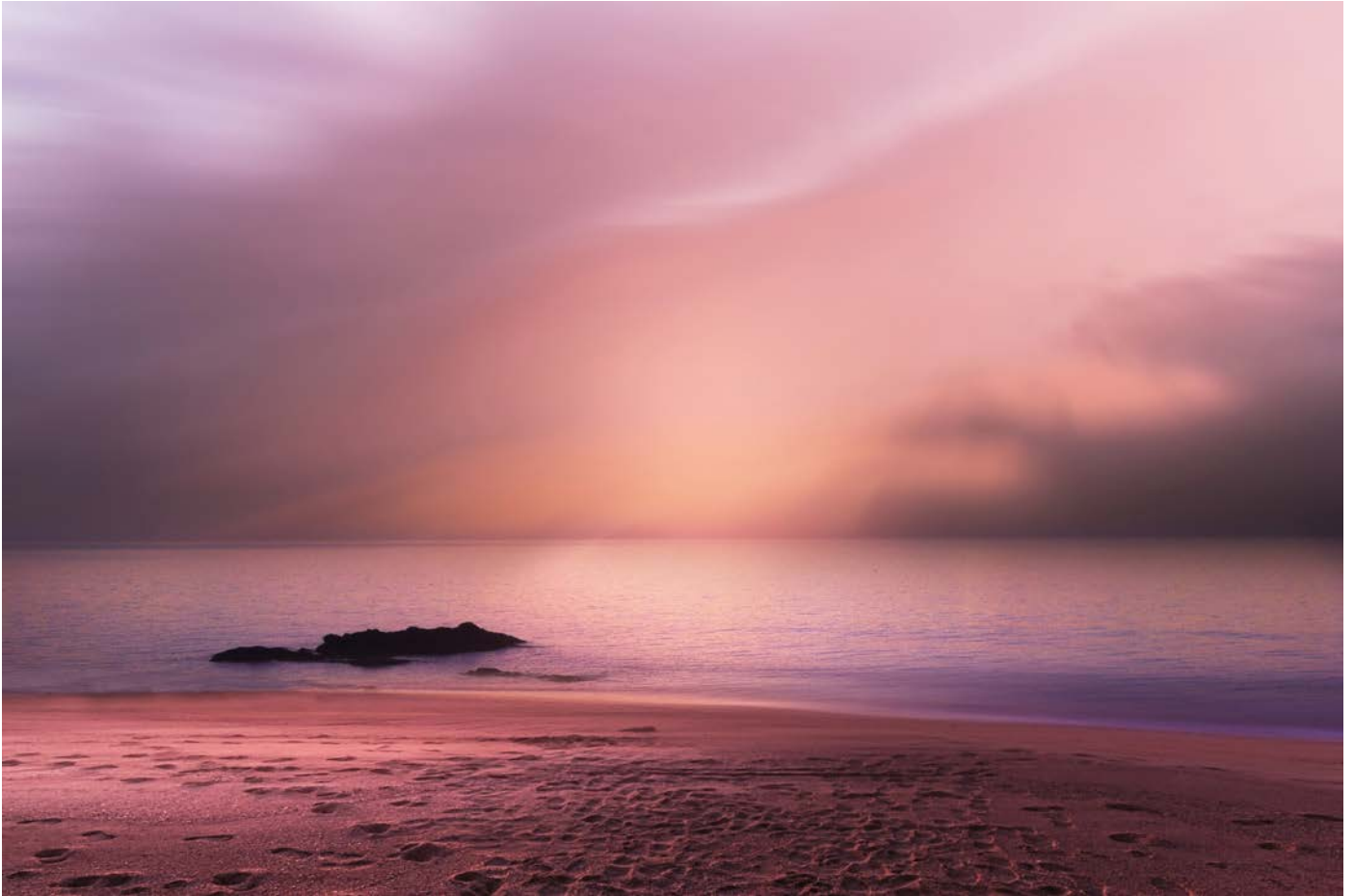


Image 008

Think about what it is that you're putting together. Image 008 is a complete long exposure composite fail! It would be impossible to record star trails in front of a fully lit landscape scene.



Look at the red arrows. They show a sloppy composite! The star trails appear below and in front of the clouds. You can be a better photographer and photo editor than that. Stay alert to the details.



This photograph is on the edge of being acceptable. Two things might have been improved.



Don't place lighter areas with higher than average contrast near the edge of the frame (red arrow). Lit regions near the border of the frame can draw the viewer's eyes away from your intended

subject. Secondly, if artificially adding a fog effect, be careful of the transition line. Fog rarely has a 'quick' transition. It can happen. But more often than not, it is a slow transition.



This photographer combined several long exposures with a short exposure. What's the problem here? In my opinion, it's a lack of composition. When you look at this photograph, your eyes wander, because there is no organization to it.

Whether your image is just a long exposure, or several, or a composite, don't forget to organize your composition.

Your Challenge

Plan several photoshoots that will utilize long exposure, but will also need post-production editing to finalize your vision for the picture. Use Image 003 of the lighthouse as your inspiration. Work towards realism. Study the lighting and the effect of the light on objects. Organize your composition. Try to tell a story with your shots. This Challenge is a tough challenge. It may take you several tries to get something pleasing. Don't give up!

Evaluation

What subjects did you choose? Did they challenge you? Did you consider including a human element? Have you shared your final images with several people? Did they notice that your effort was a composite? Do you feel that your work looks realistic? What would you do differently for your next attempt? Did you enjoy working out the problems with this Challenge?