

workshop

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Photo-editing

tips & tricks

By now most of us have discovered the rewards of digital photography, but it takes almost no time at all for your snap collection to become so unwieldy that locating images is a chore. Dave Johnson shows you how to take back control of your photo album

With digital cameras you no longer have to buy film, think in terms of 24-exposure photo sessions or pay to process any crummy shots. That probably means you're taking more photos than ever before, shooting the same scene from three different angles and generally getting a lot more creative than you ever did with your film camera.

But all this photography has a down side: your hard drive probably looks like a digital version of the back of your garage. It's filled with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of photos. Some of them live in logically named folders; others are

strewn all over the place, virtually impossible to find. In the following pages we'll show you how to organise your collection once and for all.

And what about the pictures themselves? It's great having the ability to instantly delete any photos straight from the camera that don't come out quite as they should, but it would be better still if you could take consistently better images in the first place. So we've also included advice on how to improve your portrait photography – one of the hardest genres to master – and how to make your subjects really stand out.

Blur and delete backgrounds

Most image editors let you select a portion of your digital snap and edit it separately from the rest of the photo. In our example we've used Paint Shop Pro (www.jasc.com). Open the image and select the Freehand tool, which looks like a lasso. This has several modes, accessible via the Tool Options dialog box. If you can't see the box right-click the Tool Palette and choose Tool Options. Smart Edge lets you trace an irregularly shaped object such as a person's body.

There's no need to select the area perfectly first time. Draw a 'lasso' around the edge you want to trace. When you get to the limits of what will easily fit in your lasso, hold down Shift, click a little further along the edge, stretch out the lasso again and repeat until you've traced around the subject.

Once the subject is fully selected (ensure you haven't selected a lot of the background in the process) go to the Selections, Invert menu to change the active area to the background. Choose Blur from the Effects menu. Repeat the Blur selection a few times to increase the effect.

You can take things one stage further by deleting the background altogether. Rather than inverting the selected area of the image or applying a blur effect, copy your subject as a new image file. If your lassoing tools were wide of the mark and the cutout of your subject far from accurate, pasting it on to a white background will highlight this.

To disguise the rough spots add a soft boundary around your picture. Choose Selections, Modify, Feather and enter a small number of pixels. For a 640x480 pixel image, choose two pixels and click ok. Larger images may need three or four pixels to get the same effect. You can find out a photo's dimensions by accessing the Image, Image Information pane. When you're happy with the results choose Edit, Copy and then save it as a new image file.



↑ As you can see, our cutout of this monkey is very rough. We've used the Feather Selection dialog box to add a soft boundary to the edge of the picture. For the size of our image, three pixels is about the right amount

Give it your best shot

Take portraits the digital way

There's more to taking a good portrait than asking someone to say 'cheese'; focus, lighting and background are all important. Working digitally gives you an added advantage as you can tweak elements such as the focus and background in ways that would be difficult or impossible with a traditional camera.

The one area that must be in focus is the eyes as they are the focal point of any portrait. Point the camera at your subject's face, lock the exposure (usually by pressing the shutter release halfway down and holding it there with light finger pressure) and then take the picture.

Try to avoid relying on an electronic flash as photos tend to suffer from hot spots and harsh contrast. Portraits, in particular, come out better taken in natural light. Position your subject with the sun off to the side and set the flash to Fill or Force mode to eliminate any shadows.

Finally, what about the background? Most portraits emphasise the subject by having a blurred background. Set your camera to a small aperture value like f/2

or f/4 and this will automatically blur the background for you. Alternatively, having taken your picture and downloaded it to the PC you can use an image editor's masking tools to select and blur the background (see *Blur and delete backgrounds* above).

Make light work

Low-light shots (and even some taken in good light) tend to come out with a green tint. Some digital cameras – especially older and cheaper ones – have terrible colour accuracy. If so, you'll need to fix each photo once it's downloaded to your PC by using your image editor's colour balance, tint and saturation tools.

But you may be able to fix the problem at source: consult your manual for how to adjust white balance as this is a common culprit. You might even have accidentally selected an effect such as Tungsten, in which case resetting the white levels should help. Alternatively, whenever lighting is likely to be an issue, manually select the white balance settings rather than letting your camera automatically choose how your pictures are captured.

Crop top

What you see through your camera's viewfinder often doesn't tally with the amount of distracting background clutter in the resulting picture. This is where cropping images comes into its own. Your photos will look much more powerful once you've chopped out the bits you don't actually need. Use the picture frame-shaped tool to select the area you want to keep and press Enter to lose the rest.

↓ It's best to cut out distracting background clutter from a busy photo



Overexposed and over here Underexposure can ruin an otherwise great photo, so boost the brightness to give it some life. Your image editor's gamma control is designed to brighten the darkest parts of a picture without overexposing the spots that are already bright enough. You'll usually find this tool under the Colours or Image menu. Whatever level you choose, keep an eye on the evolving picture as you don't want to overexpose the photo either.

Shine a light

Flash photography can cause people and animals to look demonic. It's easy to lose the red-eye effect and many editing programs can do it for you automatically. In Paint Shop Pro the tool is accessed under Effects, Enhance Photo, Red-Eye Removal. Zoom in to the offending area and circle it, press Enter and it should disappear.

If your basic image editor doesn't have an auto-correction tool, simply zoom in on the eyes and paint over the red with a natural-looking shade of black or blue. You don't have to be Picasso to eliminate red-eye convincingly. When you zoom back out, the eyes will be small enough that your brushwork will look more than adequate.

Get organised

Find that picture in seconds

Renaming your snaps is one of the fastest ways to organise your collection. This is less of a chore if you do so as you load each set of photos on to your PC. When you download snaps from your camera to a PC, filenames are goobledygook. Right-click each file in turn, choose Rename and call it something more meaningful.

Under Windows XP you can type in all or part of the name to search for by clicking Start, Search and choose the Pictures, Music or Video option. Under Windows 2000, Me or 98, go to Start, Search, For Files or Folders (Me) or Start, Find, Files or Folders (98). In the field that appears under 'Search for files or folders named' (Me) or 'Named' (98), type *cat* – note the asterisks before and after the search term.

Rename batches of pictures at once

If your system runs Windows XP it's simple to rename batches of photos. You may not have time to rename every image, but at least you can make it easier to find a specific photo by naming all of them after, for example, that trip to New York during which they were taken.

Select the images, right-click and choose Rename. Type a new name for the images and press Enter. Windows renames all the selected files and attaches a different number at the end of each one to tell them apart.

To batch-convert photos using an earlier version of Windows, you'll need a specialised program like ACDSee (www.acdsystems.com) or Jasc's Image Robot (www.jasc.com). A similar option is provided in well-known photo editors such as Adobe Photoshop (www.adobe.co.uk).

Purge the pictures

If you want a digital photo collection that is easy to search and maintain then you need to mercilessly discard all snaps that are out of focus and poorly composed. Be disciplined and delete any pictures of people without heads or ones that contain ghost-like blurs.

Order, order!

You could store all your images in My Pictures, but to find the snap you're after in a hurry organise your photos into folders and subfolders. Right-click anywhere within My Pictures and choose New, Folder and name it appropriately – by date, location, subject matter and so on.

Employ a manager

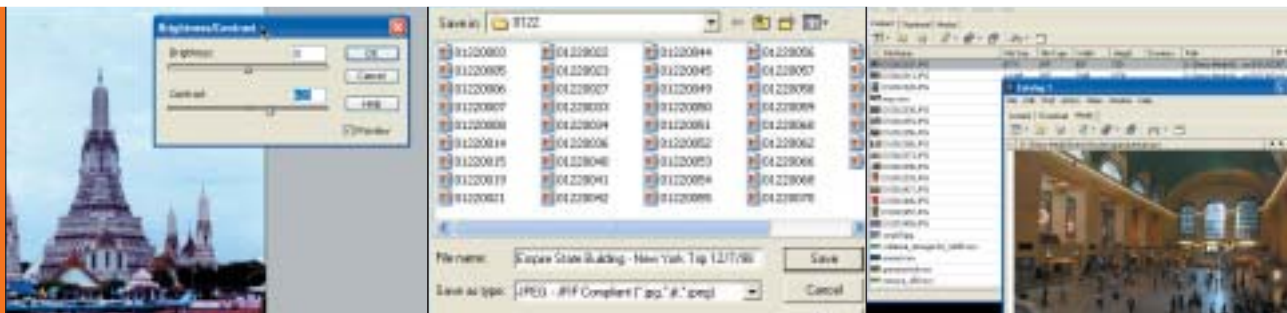
Riffling through folders and waiting for thumbnail images to appear onscreen can be a slow process. Instead, consider a photo-management program such as Jasc's Paint Shop Photo Album (formerly known as After Shot), Adobe's Photoshop Album or iView Media (www.iview-multimedia.com), the LE version of which is free on our cover disc this month. Alternatively, download Preclick Photo Organizer from www.preclick.com/download.

Paint Shop Photo Album lets you enter multiple keywords for easy text-based searches that help you find an image even if you can't remember what you called it. Photoshop Album, on the other hand, links photos to tags based on places, people and events, helping you track down a snap in seconds.

Save disc space

Rather than cluttering up your hard drive, archive your old photos on CD-Rs. Don't use CD-RWs as they're more expensive and you might accidentally erase important pictures, since those discs can be reused.

Even CD-Rs get damaged, though, so make two copies if you want to play it extra safe. Most CD-writing software lets you create photo discs. As with those stored on your PC, don't forget to label the disc for easy retrieval.



↑ Our photo is underexposed so we're altering the contrast

↑ Number crunching: give your files more meaningful names

↑ iView Media's Catalog system maps and tags all your media files

Share images online and by email

Once you've edited your photos to perfection, it's natural to want to email your handiwork to friends. But too often we pay little regard to how large the attached file is.

It's all very well sending a high-resolution image if you know the recipient has a generous email inbox and a fast web connection, but what about those who are stuck with a stingy webmail account and dialup access?

An alternative is to store your photos online. You can then email your mates the link to the site where they can view and download pictures. Depending on whether you opt for your ISP's online photo album or a third-party application, the service may be free or cost a nominal amount.

Another way of getting high-quality copies of your photos to a circle of friends is by sending them on disc. Many camera stores offer a service whereby film-based snaps are burned to a disc and it's the same with digital photos. You can send

your friends a CD of images and, if they don't have a photo printer, they can take the disc to a film developer.

Distributing images on disc makes sense, as this way you can create the perfect package – send single images, a group of photos or even a complete slideshow with music and text.

If you want to make a multimedia slideshow try a program like PhotonShow. The \$29 basic version is inexpensive, but it lets you combine digital images with a wide assortment of clever backgrounds and slideshow themes. You can add voice narration and MP3 music and it comes with a range of image-editing functions so you don't need to invest in a separate package to make your pictures look their best.



To download our step-by-step guide to getting your digital prints online, turn your browser to www.pcadvisor.co.uk/printplus

Get editing

Get an angle on things

Rotating pictures can be a pain if you have a lot of photos. Again, Windows XP applies a batch-processing approach. Open a folder containing digital images and select the photos you wish to rotate. (To select pictures that aren't adjacent to each other, click each photo while holding down Ctrl.) Right-click and choose to rotate them clockwise or counter-clockwise.

Windows 2000, Me and 98 don't offer the batch-rotation trick, but most image editors do. Usually you'll need to choose Image, Rotate and select from the resulting options.

It's all gone askew

In the rush to take a photo, you don't always get the camera perfectly level and that adds up to photos with a slightly

askew horizon. Look for an option in your image editor that lets you rotate the picture by degrees. Enter a very small value, like one degree to the left or right.

If you have Windows Me or XP, double-click a picture to open it in the Picture and Fax Viewer then click the Rotate Clockwise or Rotate Counterclockwise buttons at the bottom of the screen. Ctrl, Z will let you undo any editing or you can adjust the rotation degree-by-degree until it's right.

Adding text to photos

You can add a caption to identify people, location or the date of the event using almost any image editor. Find the Text tool in your program's Tool palette. Enter the caption you want and set the font and size to your liking. Use a chunky font as skinny ones are hard to read.

Some paint programs, like Paint Shop Pro, require you to click on the photo in the spot where you want the text to appear before you can type your caption. Other programs, like Adobe Photoshop Elements, let you type directly on the picture. Either way, don't forget about the Undo tool.

Cut your photos down to size

If all you ever plan to do is attach your images to emails or paste them into digital documents and online photo albums, you're wasting a lot of hard drive storage space by keeping pictures in their 3Mp (megapixel) glory.

In Paint Shop Pro choose Image, Resize then enter the pixel size you want in the Resize dialog box (other image editors will have a similar function). If you're likely to want to print out your photos at some stage, archive the high-resolution versions to disc.

Don't hurt the originals

Compressing photos you're going to use for email or other online purposes is fine, but for all other images don't delete, resize, colour-adjust or otherwise mess with the originals. In this case, save changes to copies of your originals using the File, Save As option.

Be a showoff

When you want to share your pictures with friends and family, don't just copy a handful of them to a CD-R or floppy disk – create something with a bit of panache. PhotoParade Maker (www.photoparade.com) and PhotonShow (www.izotope.com) let you incorporate photos into a slideshow. You can add MP3 tunes as a soundtrack and specify titles, captions, closing credits and other elements. Presentations can usually be sent to friends and family via the web or on a disc while the original images stay safely on your PC for use in other applications. ■



↑ In Photoshop Elements you can rotate an image a degree at a time



See this month's cover disc for a selection of fully working and trial image-editing packages