

RAW vs. JGP – A Photographer's Dilemma

By Darrel Priebe, TOPCC Photo Group

I am a firm believer in the powers of RAW. To change the white balance, exposure, color balance, or other factors, while maintaining the highest possible photo quality, nothing beats Raw images.

But time is the most precious commodity I know of, so I shoot in JPG for most of my casual and fun events. Why? Because I can process and post 20 pictures to the internet from JPG's in one-fourth the time compared to RAW images. Why is it faster to process JPG's than Raw files? I'll describe my post-shooting workflow and you'll see why JPG files can be processed so much faster than Raw.

The first reason JPG is faster is because, in addition to compressing the file, JPG also adds some sharpening and color adjustments to the photo, which are usually quite favorable. Of course, purists will want to make these changes themselves in Photoshop, where they have control over the process, but for most occasions, I am happy with the enhancements added to JPG's by my Nikon's computer-chip settings. After all, those clever Japanese engineers know a few things about cameras and computers. Again, these changes need to be made to all photos shot in Raw, and that takes time. And Raw files tend to take more time to open, process and save because of their larger file size.

My latest discovery also helps speed up the post-processing in the digital darkroom. I change the Optimize Image camera settings in my Nikon DSLR from Normal to Vivid. Many cameras, even point-and-shoots, have a similar setting, so check your camera's manual to find out. This setting adds some color saturation and contrast to each picture, but not too much. With the Vivid setting, I don't have to make the usual adjustments to each picture that I perform in Photoshop, which are to create layers to adjust the tonal range, the contrast and the saturation of each picture.

My Workflow: With the Vivid camera setting, processing pictures in Photoshop from the computer to the web site requires only four steps: First I crop the picture if it needs it to create a more interesting composition. I cropped about half of the pictures I posted from the recent Photo Group Picnic which were often action shots taken on the fly of people having fun in wacky moments doing embarrassing things with eggs, water balloons and piñatas.

Second, I individually correct any picture that has a color-cast or is too dark or too light in places, or needs additional sharpening. Third, I set-up an action to put a frame around each picture with the copyright symbol and my name at the bottom, and then save the Photoshop .psd file.

Finally, I set up a second action to resize each picture for the web, and then save each picture as a JPG in a different folder, renaming them if I so choose. So after the first picture is processed and saved web-ready, the rest of the pictures need only a few individual adjustments, and a single mouse-click to initiate each of two Photoshop Actions! Each picture is now color-corrected, framed, copyrighted, and resized for the web quickly and easily. All of these

techniques are covered in the Photoshop tutorials on my web site:

www.DazzlingPhotography.com

Then its easy to upload the pictures to a web site, such as the TOPCC Photo Group on Yahoo! <http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/TOPCCDPS/> which was a suitable site for the picnic photos of our camera club.

Shooting in Raw files takes considerably more time for post-processing because, in addition to the above four steps, an initial adjustment must be made in Photoshop's Camera Raw to choose each picture's exposure setting, and possibly make other changes if needed. This all takes time. While batch-processing a group of pictures in Raw is possible, for color accuracy the pictures should be taken under the identical white balance and exposure settings, circumstances which are infrequent in my experience shooting ever-changing scenes with people on-the-go.

Next I have to create three layers for the Photoshop adjustments of tonal-range, contrast and saturation. Also, more (really all) pictures require sharpening in Raw since none was applied in-camera, like it was for JPG's. Other cons to shooting Raw include the following. Computer hard drive space is consumed much faster in Raw, since I now have a folder for large-sized Raw images, as well as one for Photoshop PSD images, and one for the smaller, resized-for-the-web JPG images. And of course, Compact Flash cards are also consumed much faster when shooting in Raw than in the highest quality JPG format. A 2GB CF card stores 224 fine quality JPG's, but only 120 Raw images on my Nikon D-200, a 10.2 megapixel camera.

Despite the timely advantages of shooting JPG's, if I want the very best unprocessed image, and the ability to make exposure changes after shooting the picture, then I go with Raw. It's still the best format for the highest quality photographs. It just takes more time to process in Photoshop.

What do you think? And more importantly, what do you shoot and how do you process your images to post on the web? Email me at Darrel@DazzlingPhotography.com for comments or questions.