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Tourist Removal Composite

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In this lesson, I'm going to demonstrate how you can eliminate tourists from your photographs by creating composite images. When you're shooting in a popular tourist location, it can be difficult to get a clean photo of a scene without any people in it. I experienced this a lot during my last trip to South America.

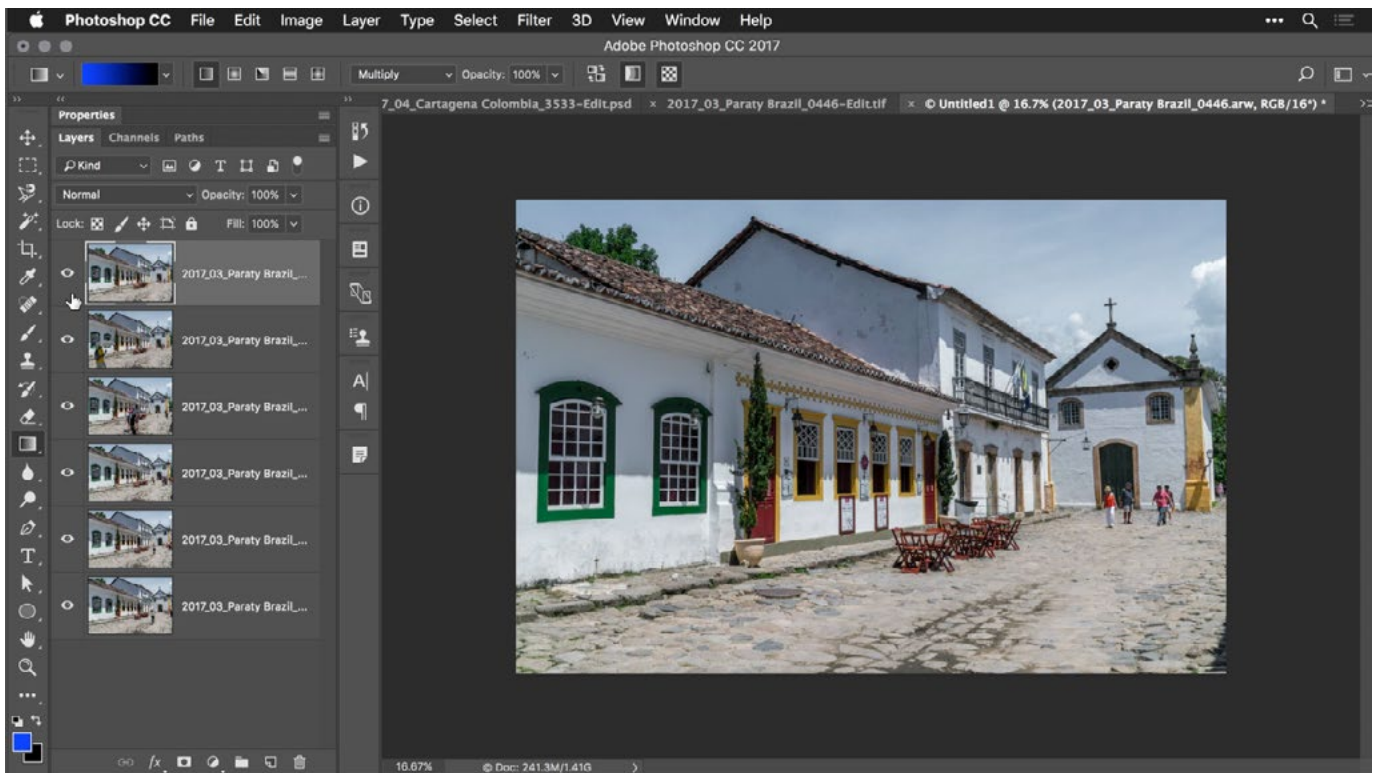
When I know that I'm going to be able to capture a scene without a single person in it, I will take multiple exposures of the same scene, where the people are in different positions in each exposure. For example, If there is a person standing in front of the doorway to a building, I will take the shot, wait for them to move somewhere else, and take another shot when that doorway is clear. I will do this for all areas of the frame, making sure that I have clean views of the individual areas. It doesn't matter how many shots I need to take, but I try to keep the camera steady and in the same exact position for all exposures. I will also lock the exposure so it's consistent between shots.



I wanted to create a tourist-free image of this scene, so I captured several exposures, each with the people in different positions.

Once I've loaded the images onto my machine, I will adjust them and then load them as layers into a single Photoshop document. If I am going to adjust the images in ACR, I will select them all in Bridge, go to the main menu and choose File > Open in Camera Raw. All of images will appear as thumbnails on the left side of the interface. Because the images are going to be used in a composite, they all must be adjusted the same way in order for the final result to look natural. To ensure that the adjustments affect all of the images, I'll click on the little menu in the top right corner of the thumbnail panel and choose Select All. Then I can work with the adjustment sliders and the changes will be reflected in all of the images. If I had been making the adjustments in Lightroom, I would make sure that the adjustments affect all selected images by using the Sync/Autosync button in the bottom right corner of the Develop Module.

After making the adjustments, I will merge the images by selecting them all in Bridge, going to the main menu and choosing Tools > Photoshop > Load Files into Photoshop Layers. (In Lightroom, I would select all of the images, go to the main menu and choose Photo > Edit In > Open as Layers in Photoshop.)



All of the images have been loaded as layers in a single Photoshop file.

Photoshop will open and all of the images will be loaded as separate layers in one Photoshop document. Since I shot the photos hand-held (without using a tripod), the images will not match up perfectly. We need the images to match up in order for this technique to work so I will select all of the layers and then go to the Edit menu and choose Auto-Align Layers. When the dialog appears, I will leave it at the Auto setting and click OK. After using the Auto-Align feature, there may be some empty canvas space around the edge of the frame, and that was the case in this example. I simply used the Crop Tool to eliminate it.



The Auto-Align Layers feature is used to make sure all of the images are lined up properly.

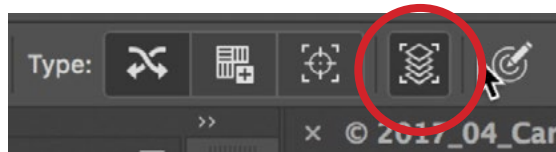
Now I need to figure out which of the layers contains the cleanest version of the image (the one with the fewest tourists.) I will turn off the visibility of all layers except for the active layer and then I will quickly cycle through the different layers by holding down the Option key (Alt on Win), then using the Bracket keys ([]) to move up or down in the layer stack. Once I found the cleanest image, I moved that layer to the bottom of the layer stack in the Layers panel.

I will then turn on the other layers, one at a time, determining which one will help the most in removing the unwanted people from that bottom layer. I will move that layer directly above the bottom layer in the layer stack and add a layer mask to this layer. Because I want to start with a black mask (a black mask will hide everything in the layer) I will hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) while clicking on the Layer Mask icon at the bottom of the Layers Panel.

Next, I will paint on the mask with white, using a soft-edged brush to reveal the parts of the layer that will hide the tourists. In this case, the bottom layer contains people in front of the doorway and the overlying layer does not, so I will paint over that area to hide the people. I will then temporarily disable the layer mask in order to view the entirety of the layer and decide if there are any other areas that could be used to hide the tourists in the underlying layer. To quickly (and temporarily) disable a mask, hold the Shift key and click within the mask thumbnail in the Layers panel. Do the same thing to re-enable the mask.

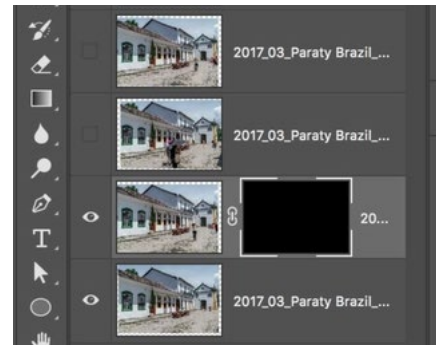
Then, I will go to the next layer up, turning the visibility off and on to see if it would improve the areas where the people are. It looks like it will help to hide those tourists in the bottom layer, so I will repeat the process I just completed. I'll add a layer mask by holding Option key while clicking on the Layer Mask icon (this will create a mask that is black, hiding the entire layer) and I will then paint with white only in the areas that I need.

I'll repeat the process with the remaining layers, using layer masks to reveal only the areas that will prove of use in eliminating the tourists from the scene. In the end, I ended up with one small area that still has part of a tourist that I couldn't remove using other layers. In a case like this, you might have to do some minor retouching. I'll create a new, empty layer above all of the visible layers in the Layers panel and I will activate the Spot Healing Brush.



When using the Spot Healing Tool on an empty layer, the Sample All Layers setting must be turned on in the Options Bar. In some interfaces, it may appear as a check box instead of an icon.

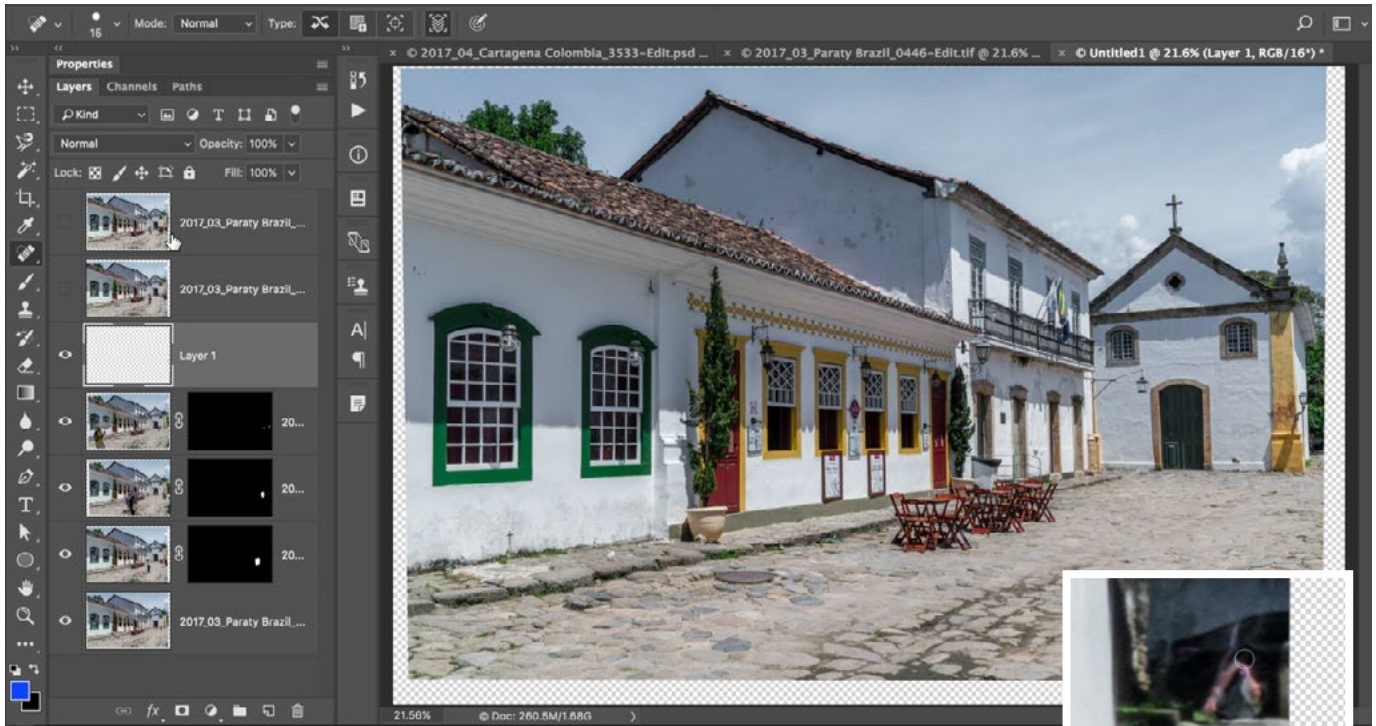
Since I'm working on an empty layer, I'll have to turn on the Sample All Layers setting, which appears as an icon or as a check box within the Options Bar at the top of the interface. Now I can use the Spot Healing Brush to carefully paint over the problem area, removing the small chunk of tourist that was left over.



A black mask has been added to the layer and we will paint with white to reveal parts of the layer that will hide the tourists.



The layer mask is being painted to remove parts of a person from the scene.



A new, empty layer was created above the visible layers and we are doing some final retouching on this layer.

At the end, I'll use the Crop Tool to remove any empty canvas areas surrounding the frame. Note that when the Crop Tool is active, there is a setting in the Options bar that looks like the Crop Tool icon with a little trash can over it. If this setting is turned on, it will throw away the information that's outside your crop handles, giving you a smaller file size. If, however, you think that you might want to re-crop the image in the future, it's best to leave this setting off. Before closing the document, I'll give the layers names so that I know what's going on in the image if I open it again at a later time. I will also discard any layers that aren't being used in order to minimize the file size.



Here is another example where multiple exposures were made in order to get a tourist-free image. In this case, I had Karen pose (at a time when there were no tourists directly behind her) and then I had her leave the frame and I waited until the tourists moved to a different location before taking another exposure.