imaging workshop
Localised burning

Overexposure can mean the death of even the most carefully composed digital shots.
Darren Lock explains how Photoshop's Burn tool can be used to save the day

■ *We've used the Dodge tool and a variety of brushes to reduce the glare on the skis in the original picture (bottom). It's a simple process that has a very subtle result.*

ON THE DISC

○ *Image Workshop files: Localized burning.tif, Localized burning (altered).tif*

Here's the scenario. You've spent a day out shooting or have been given the task of capturing a family event. The pics look fine and dandy on your digital camera's monitor, but when you get them home and open up the images on a 19-inch monitor you see that some areas look overexposed.

These lightened areas are often caused by reflective surfaces or the camera's flash bulb. Such occurrences often can't be avoided in a moment of spontaneous creativity, but thank heavens for Photoshop – we can put these problems right and rescue a ruined snap with a little insider knowledge.

In this tutorial, we'll use Photoshop's Burn tool to fix problem exposures. When used with the airbrush palette, it can create interesting and subtle tonal effects, and it's also possible to create custom brushes for precise burning. With our help and a little practice you'll be able to fix pics quick with minimum fuss and maximum effect, and you'll never be afraid of reflective surfaces or overexposure again.

A brush with creativity

If you feel that the brushes in the pre-defined palette are limiting, it's possible to create your own custom tools for precise results. To do this, click on the Brushes palette from the tab on the right of the screen and click on the Create New Brush button. You'll then be asked to give your new brush a name. Select the custom brush from the menu and click on Brush Tip Shape to alter the shape and angle. Work your way down the menu list, configuring the size, weight and texture attributes for the tool. The finished brush can be used for dodging and burning as well as normal painting tasks.
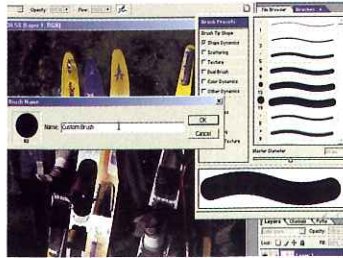
■ *Can't find a preset brush that does the job? It's a simple task to create custom tools in Photoshop, and you can also save settings and carry on working with them later.*

I spy Eyewire

If you're looking for some more techniques for altering the contrast and brightness of your pictures, or feel that you haven't quite got the hang of the dodge, burn or sponge tools, check out the Eyewire Web site at **www.eyewire.com/tips/photoshop/**. It has some excellent Photoshop tutorials as well as a guide to getting the most from the aforementioned tools.
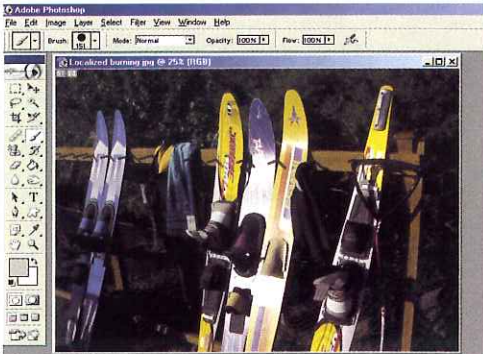
1 Rise and shine

This is the picture we'll be working on. As you can see, the shot is fine apart from the overexposed areas on the skis where light has been reflected. It doesn't ruin the shot, but it's possible to tone down these overexposed areas and shift the emphasis away from the bright patches.

2 Tone it down

We're going to use the standard Burn tool to take the edge off some of the reflections on the skis. Click on the tool in the palette, then work over the bright areas of the photograph with gentle strokes to increase the contrast. You'll need to be careful with the mouse to avoid streaking.
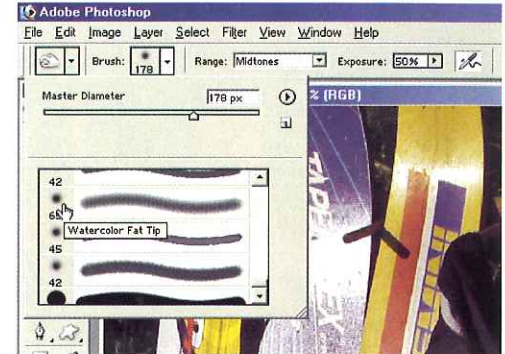
3 Handle with care

If you find that the tool creates a stripy effect, try using a smaller brush and more fluid strokes instead of stilted mouse clicks. If this doesn't work, try using a different brush like the Watercolour Fat Tip brush from the palette. This will produce almost invisible strokes.
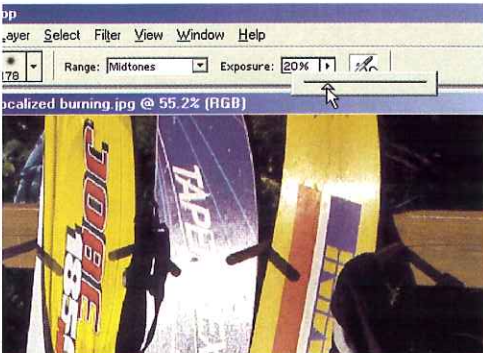
4 Dodging away

We're trying to dull down the reflected surface on the skis with Photoshop's dodge and burn tool – you can choose whether to adjust highlights, midtones and shadows using the box at the top. We've set the tool at 20 per cent exposure and have used even strokes to reduce the glare.

5 Remove the shine

Experiment with different brushes until you find one that can produce a steady, almost invisible stroke (it will depend on the photograph). Also, knock down the exposure to around 10 per cent so that you don't completely darken the area. With Highlights selected, you can now take the edge off the image.
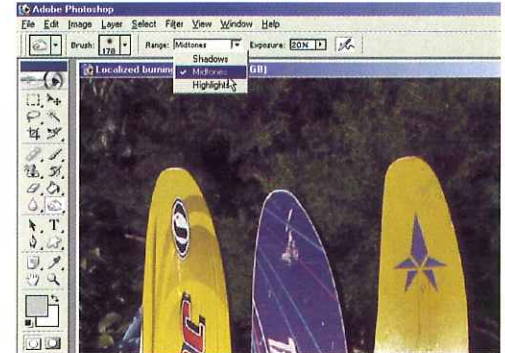
6 Colour boost

When using the Highlight burning option, you might find that the surrounding pixels may look a little washed out. This can be corrected by switching to the Midtone range and gently working the area until the colour is restored. Again, you don't want to be too heavy-handed with this technique.
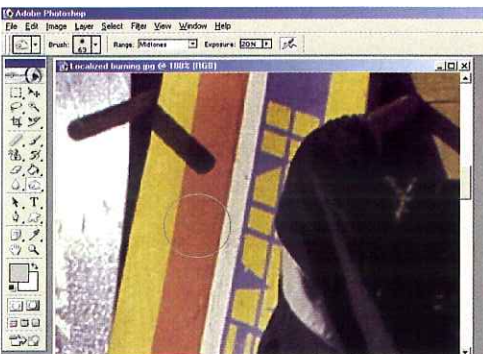
7 Replenish the colour

In our example we've used the same brush setting as before (a large Fat Watercolour Tip brush) and have set the Midtone exposure range to 20 per cent. In areas where there are small bands of colour, we've reduced the size of the brush and worked these areas individually.
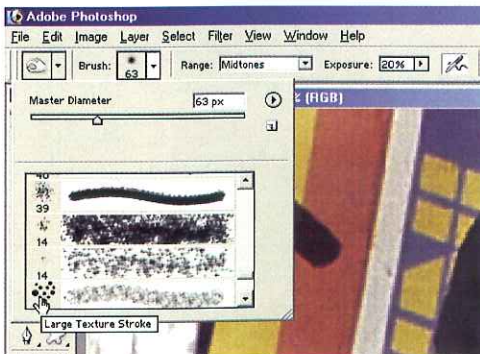
8 Brush to suit

When working in the Midtone range, try selecting a custom brush from the palette and altering the size of that brush so that it is suited to the area that you're editing. Use this to make small incremental adjustments to the Exposure settings so that the dodge effect isn't so apparent.

9 In the shadows

To give the image some extra depth, we've used a liberal application of the Shadow tool over the whole picture. We chose a smaller brush and used short clicks of the mouse, rather than wide strokes, aiming for a more localised and contained effect.

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10 Use the keyboard
Instead of using your mouse to constantly move the slider bar when adjusting exposure settings, you can use the numeric keys on the keyboard to enter an exposure amount. This is a great time-saver when making small adjustments to the same area.

11 Airbrush effects
With Dodge selected, you can also use the Airbrush option from the top menu. Click on the Airbrush icon to activate the function. This provides a much softer brush that's ideal for building up layers of highlight, midtone and shadow on your image.


12 Using layers
An alternative dodging and burning method is to use layers. Create a new layer by clicking Layer > New Layer. You will now have an identical layer that can be blended with the original image. We're going to paint a mask and alter the contrast by using the Colour Dodge layer blending mode.


13 Paint it away
From the General Blending drop-down menu, select Color Burn and choose a nice big brush with which to paint onto the layer. Select 50 per cent grey from the colour picker and paint onto the layer over the areas you want to transform. The area will be darkened slightly.
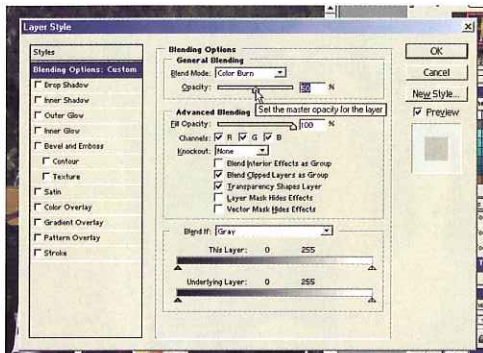

14 Changing tone
The great thing about using this technique is that once you've marked out the area to be altered, you can go to the main Layer Style/Blending Options menu and change the sliders to tweak the tone of your image. It saves time repainting and rebrushing your image with the Dodge brush.
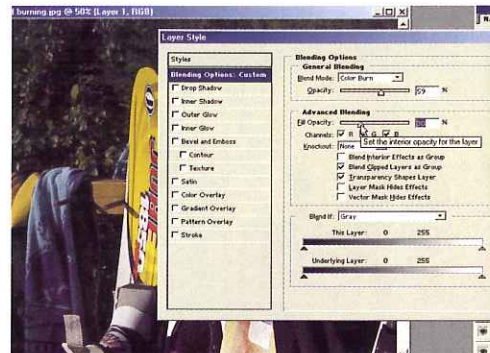

15 Opaque adjustments
To alter the tone of your image, adjust the Opacity and Fill Opacity to taste. You'll notice that the painted areas on the layer will start to change tone, becoming lighter as you decrease the fill and darker as you increase it. When you find a suitable balance, press 'OK'.
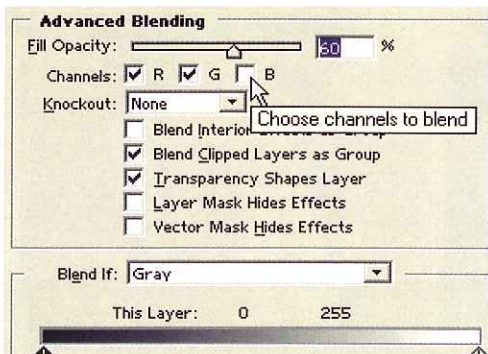
16 Advanced toning
The Blending Options menu can also be used to decide which channels you want to include in the blending process. Knocking out one or two of the colour channels will alter the final look of your image. Use this technique with care – heavy-handed adjustment can produce pretty weird results.
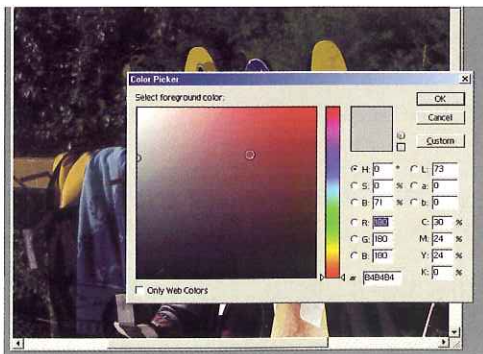
17 Different shades
If you're looking for a wider tonal range when making adjustments, try using a darker colour when painting the main layer blending mask. Alternatively, if you want to confine your efforts within a certain tonal range, reduce the grey level of the brush towards the white end of the scale.

18 Mix and match
A bit of experimentation will show that this method doesn't offer as much control as the Dodge brush in a localised area. If you use a combination of a Colour Dodge layer and the Dodge techniques described at the beginning, you can achieve a good trade-off and a smoother end result.