Capturing Sunbursts

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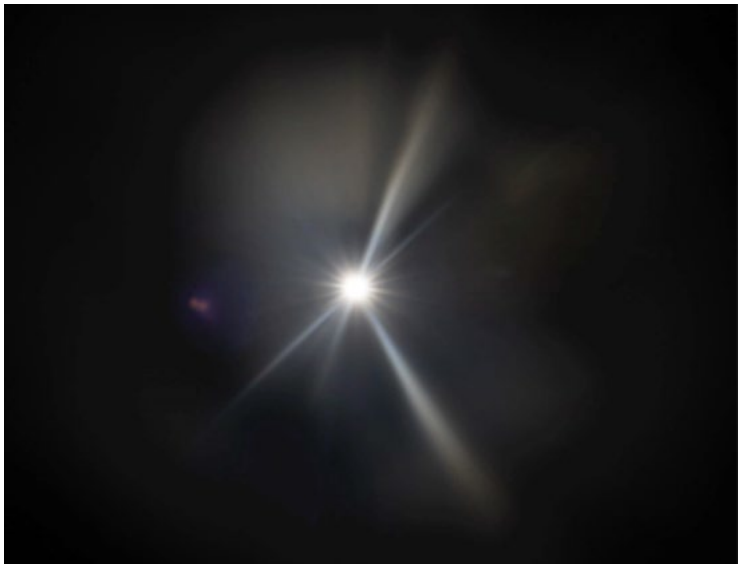
In a separate lesson, we talked about how to combine multiple images together in order to add sunbursts to your photos. This is commonly seen in landscape and travel photography. In this lesson, we're going to look at how we can capture sunburst images that you can then use for these composites. You can also use these images within masks in Photoshop. You could even animate them in order to add a sparkle that moves across something like text.



This is the type of sunburst image that can be used to composite into other photographs.

In order to make these sunbursts easy to overlay, the sunburst itself must be very bright and the background must be solid black. This is what allows us to use a blending mode (Screen mode) that makes black areas disappear while everything brighter than black remains visible.

Shooting Sunbursts (Timestamp 1:05)

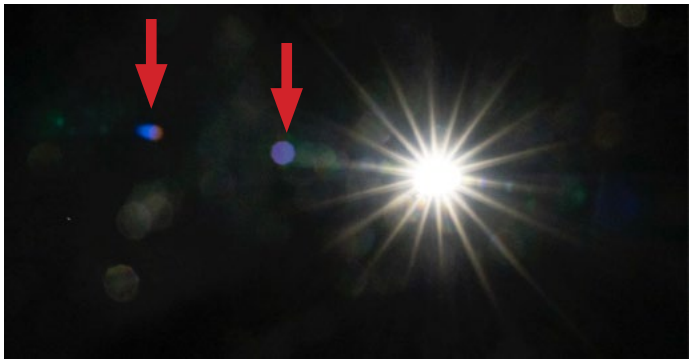
The sunburst images can be created by pointing a flashlight directly into the camera in an otherwise dark scene. If shooting outside, aim for at least an hour before sunrise or an hour after sunset. Mount the flashlight in an area that doesn't have anything around it that the light could reflect off of. Then, look for the location where the beam of the flashlight is hitting and position yourself (the camera) in that spot, with the lens pointing directly into the light beam. This is what will create the lens flare, aka sunburst. It's also a good idea to use a tripod so that you don't have any motion in the light beam.

When creating the sunburst images, I mounted the flashlight on a tree and placed the camera on a tripod, with the lens pointing directly into the light beam.

Camera settings Use a very low ISO in order to prevent noise. Set your camera to manual focus and focus the lens so that the front of the flashlight is sharp. Note that the aperture setting also has a large effect on how things will be rendered. The higher the f-stop number, the more of a sunburst shape you'll get. This will also create more of a pronounced shape of the aperture in the light flares. The lower the f-stop number, the rounder the flare will be. The same is true when you're shooting in regular daylight, when the sun is in your shot. If you shoot using a small aperture, like f22, then the sun will appear as a sunburst.

The higher the aperture number, the more of a sunburst shape you'll get.

The position of the light source within the frame will really make a difference. If the light source is off center, you may end up with little colored flares that extend from the central sunburst. If the sunburst is centered, those little colored flares will appear in the middle of the light source and will therefore not show up (because the light source is so bright).



If the light source is off-center, you'll get more little lens flares extending from the light.

When shooting these images, you might want to take several photos, positioning the light source in all sorts of locations within the frame. This will give you a variety of sunbursts and therefore more options when overlaying these on your images. It's also important to note that different lenses will produce different effects. For example, I found that one of my lenses produced much more haze around the light source.

As you're shooting, be sure to review your images and make sure that the sunburst is not extending to the edge of the frame. If the sunburst is cut off by the edge of the frame, you will be limited in where you can place it in Photoshop. (You wouldn't want an abrupt edge to be visible in your image, so it would need to be placed along an edge of the frame.) If the sunburst is whole, you can place it anywhere within the composition.

You can also experiment with how close you are to the light source and the angle you're shooting from the light source. When you start to shoot from different angles, you will start to get more interesting shapes and flare effects extending from the center of the sunburst.

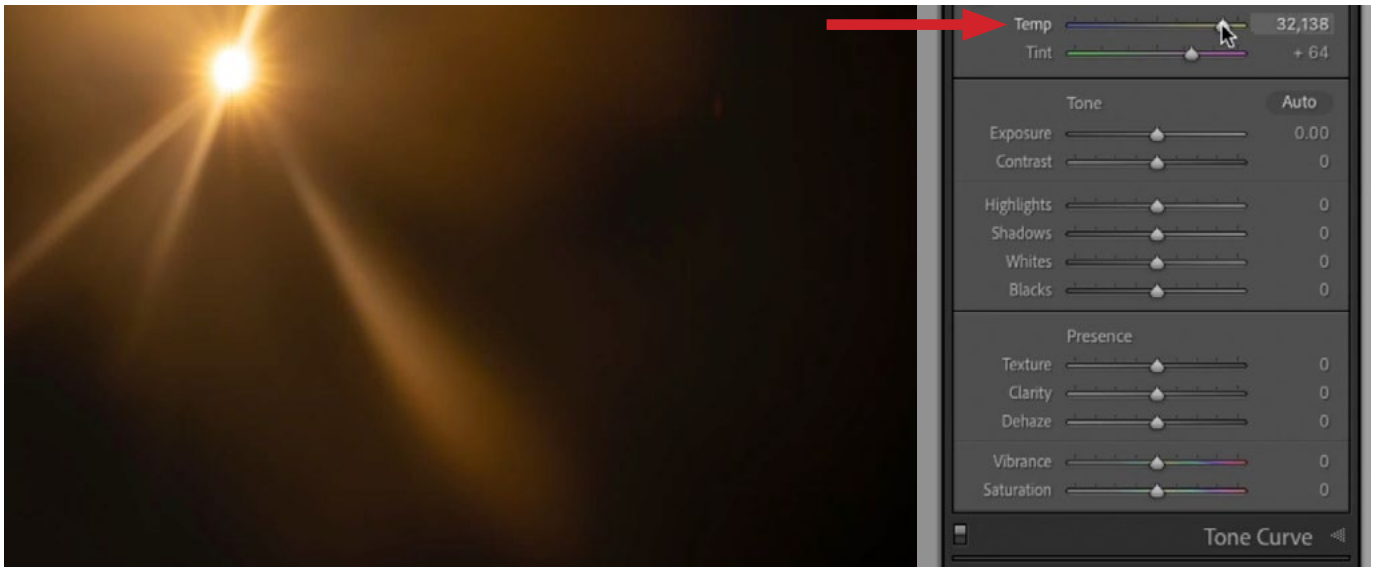
Shooting from different angles can create interesting flare effects.

Processing the Sunburst Images (7:46)

Now let's look at how you should process these sunburst images in order to make them ideal for compositing into other photos in Photoshop. I am using Lightroom in this lesson, but you can just as easily use Camera Raw, as the adjustments are the same.

Adjust all images at once After loading all of the images into Lightroom's Library Module, select all of them by using the keyboard shortcut Command+A (Ctrl+A on Win). You'll want them all selected so that the adjustments you make will affect every image. Then you can transition to the Develop Module.

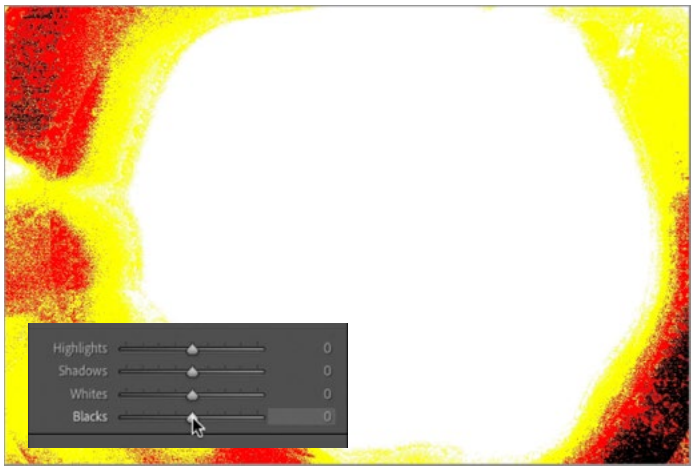
Use White Balance settings to control the color of the light If you were using the Auto White Balance setting, then the light source will appear to be white. These sunburst images will be used to actually replace the sun, so you'll want a little more warmth. The White Balance settings can be found inside the Basic Panel on the right side of the Develop Module. You can make the image more warm (yellow) by dragging the Temp slider to the right. Try to make it look more like the color of the sun (ideally at sunrise or sunset). You can also adjust the Tint slider to fine-tune the color of the light. I find that by increasing the Tint slider, it adds more of an orange hue to the light. This is of course a personal preference.

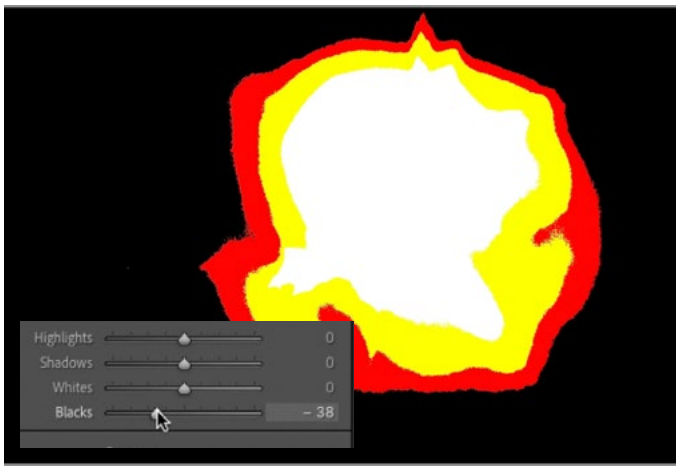


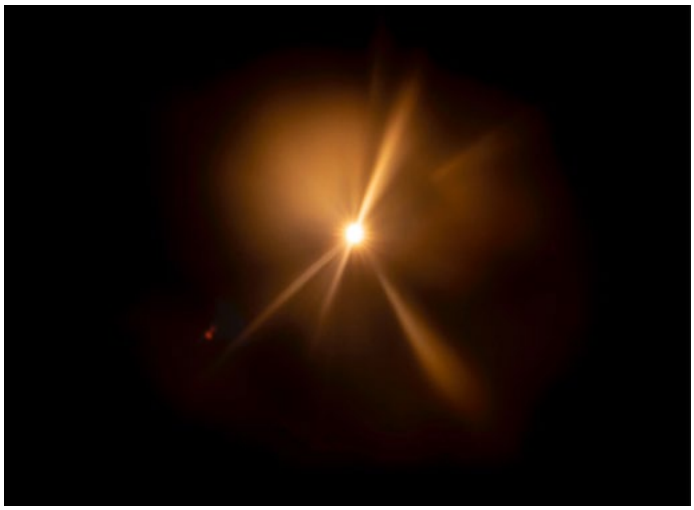
The Temp slider is moved to the right in order to add more warmth (yellow) to the light.

Control the whites and blacks The Whites and Blacks sliders can be used to control the brightest and darkest portions of the image. If you'd like a more focused center to the sunburst, you can drag the Whites slider to the left, therefore darkening some of those really bright areas. If you'd like a more blown-out center, you can move the Whites slider to the right.

Use the Blacks slider to ensure that there is black surrounding the sunburst on all sides. There is a trick for visualizing what parts of the image are truly solid black. Hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) while clicking on the Blacks slider and you will get a view that shows you what parts of the image are solid black. You can also adjust the slider (with the Option key held down) while viewing the image this way. Move the Blacks slider to the left until there is black completely surrounding the sunburst. This will give you the most versatility in where you can place the sunburst in your images.







ABOVE: The Option key (Alt on Win) is being held down while we are moving the Blacks slider. The colored overlay shows what parts of the image are solid black.

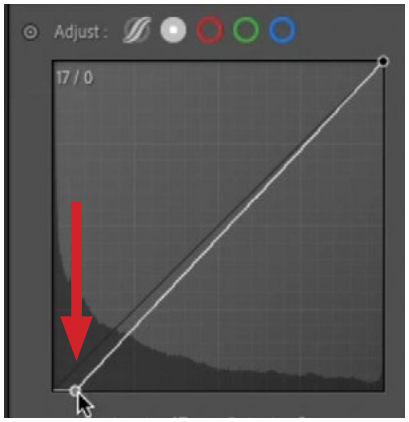
LEFT: After adjusting the Blacks slider, we now have solid black completely surrounding the sunburst.

Presence adjustments There are a few other adjustments that can be used to change the general quality and character of the sunburst. These can be found under the Presence category and I prefer to adjust the images individually when using these adjustments. (Instead of adjusting them all at once) If you bring up the Clarity slider, the starburst will become more defined, where you can see more detail. Bring Clarity down and it will soften the effect. If you bring up the Dehaze slider, it will force more areas to black and it will give you a more abrupt transition into those blacks. Move this slider to the left and it will really bring out the hazy look in the starburst. The Texture slider will work more on the really fine, hairline details. In the sunburst images, this may be the short little lines extending from the very center. The more of a sunburst you have, the more you will notice the effect of this slider.

The Clarity slider is being used to make the extending lines appear more well-defined.

After making these adjustments, I will look back at the images in the Library Module to determine whether I need to fine-tune the Blacks slider on any of the images individually.

TIP: If you ever find that you can not force the area surrounding the sunburst to become solid black by using the Blacks slider alone, you can also try using the Tone Curve. At the top of the Tone Curve Panel, make sure that the circular gray icon is selected. Then click on the point on the bottom left end of the curve line and drag it to the right. This will force more and more areas to black.

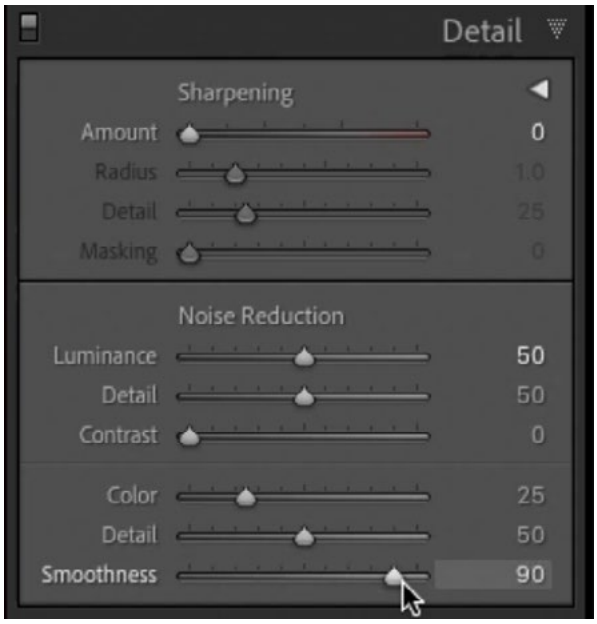


Moving the bottom left point on the Tone Curve will force more areas to black.

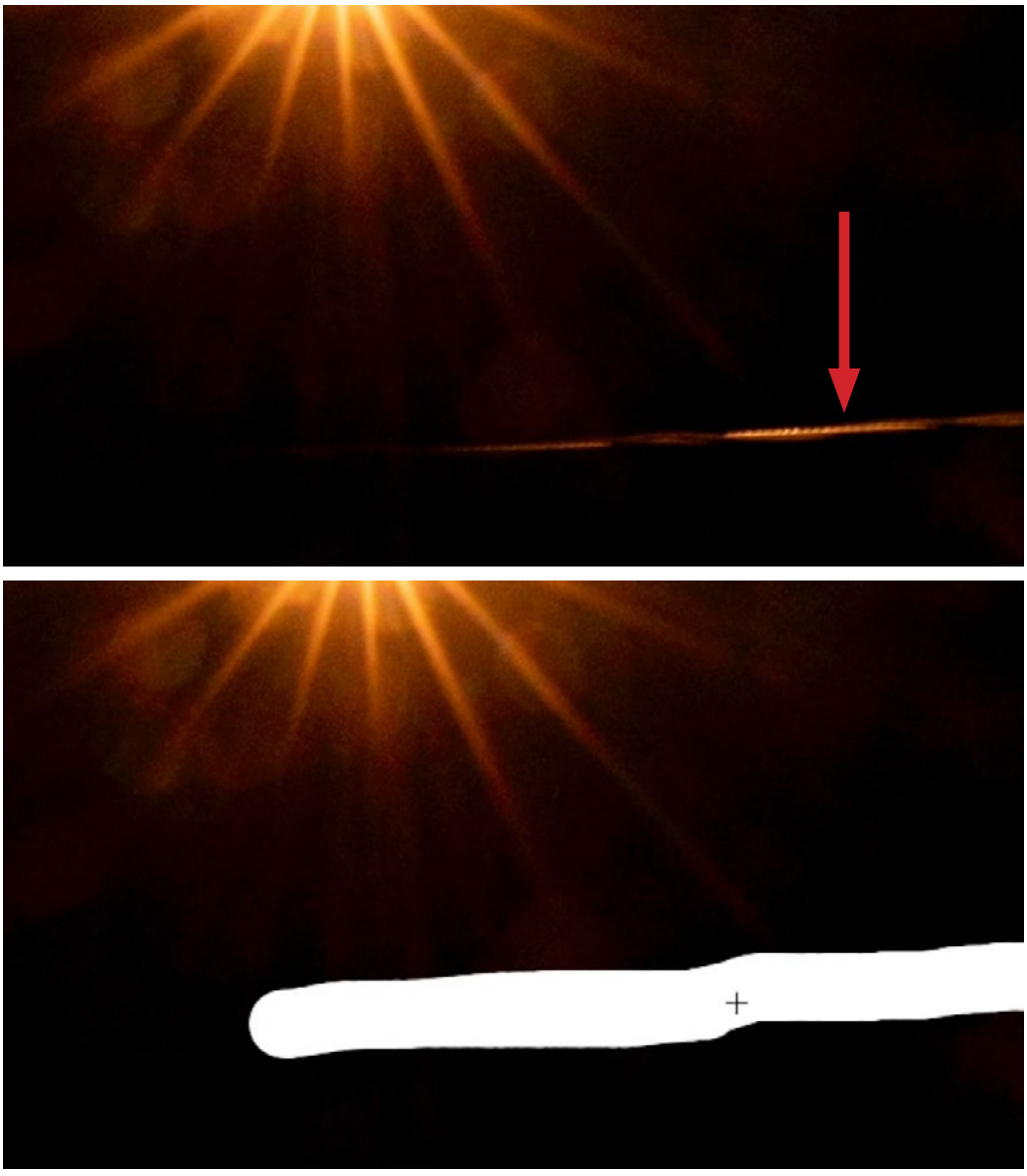
Noise If any of your images were shot at a higher ISO, then there's a good chance that you'll have a lot of noise. You can see this by zooming in on the image. You can correct for Noise under the Detail Panel in the Develop Module. Here, the first thing I would do is set the Sharpening Amount slider to zero as there are no details in these images that need to be sharpened and all it's doing is exaggerating the noise. You can also bring the Noise Reduction Luminance slider up until you get a smoother-looking result. If you find that there is a lot of variation in color (that may occur in blobs), you can increase the Smoothness slider, as this will attempt to create a more even look.

ABOVE LEFT: This image was shot using a high ISO setting, which resulted in a lot of noise.

RIGHT: The Sharpening slider was moved to zero and the Noise Reduction slider was moved up in order to correct for the noise. The Smoothness slider was also increased. This removed some of the blotchy, uneven colors.



Remove objects in background It's always best to avoid any light reflections on nearby objects, but there may be instances where a lit object shows up somewhere in the frame. If it's small and is not in contact with the starburst, you can try to remove it using the Spot Removal Tool, which can be found in the Toolbar beneath the histogram. With the brush active, make sure that it is set to Heal and that the Feather setting is fairly low. (These settings will appear beneath the Toolbar when the tool is active.) Then paint over the object. Lightroom will look at the area surrounding the object and try to replace the area with appropriate content.



A lit object showed up in the scene and the Spot Removal Tool was used to get rid of it.