

Ultimate Guide to Post-processing in Adobe Lightroom Classic CC

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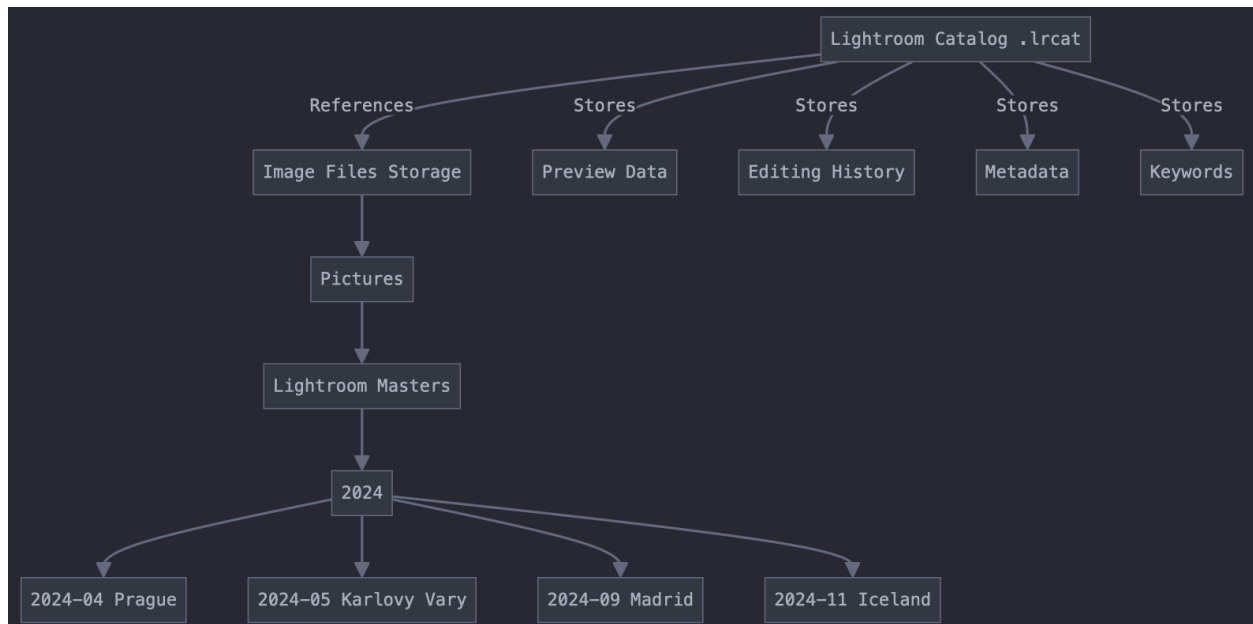
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Lightroom Catalog and File Organization

Lightroom Catalog: The Database Approach

The Lightroom catalog is like a sophisticated library card system. Instead of modifying your original photos directly (like Photoshop does), Lightroom creates a catalog file (.lrcat) that:

- Stores all editing instructions as text recipes
- Remembers where your photos are stored on your hard drive
- Keeps track of all metadata (ratings, keywords, titles)
- Maintains preview images for faster browsing



How It's Different from Photoshop

- **Photoshop:** Opens files directly and saves changes to the original files (or new copies)
- **Lightroom:** Never touches your original files; all edits are "non-destructive" and stored in the catalog

My File Organization System

Here's the file organization system I recommend and personally use:

- Create a main folder called "Pictures" or "Lightroom Masters"
- Inside, organized by years (2024, 2025, etc.)
- Name each shoot folder using this format: YYYY-MM Location
 - Examples: 2024-04 Prague, 2024-11 Iceland

Why this works:

- Date prefix ensures chronological order
- Location name makes content instantly clear
- Multiple trips to the same location get separate folders
- Quick to implement, easy to maintain
- Perfect for travel photography – each folder is one trip or shoot

▼	Folder	Pictures	3787
▼	Folder	Lightroom Masters	3450
▶	Folder	2020	6
▼	Folder	2024	3444
▶	Folder	2024-04 Český Krumlov	21
▶	Folder	2024-04 Kutná Hora	94
▶	Folder	2024-04 Prague	61
▶	Folder	2024-04 South Moravia	194
▶	Folder	2024-04 Telč	118
▶	Folder	2024-05 Karlovy Vary	119
▶	Folder	2024-05 Prague	119
▶	Folder	2024-06 Krkonoše	152
▶	Folder	2024-06 Prachov Rocks	77
▶	Folder	2024-06 Prague	4
▶	Folder	2024-07 Grossglockner	197
▶	Folder	2024-07 Prague	17
▶	Folder	2024-08 Dresden	345
▶	Folder	2024-08 Prague	151
▶	Folder	2024-09 Dresden	166
▶	Folder	2024-09 Madrid	715
▶	Folder	2024-11 Iceland	406
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▶	Folder	Lightroom Mobile	337

Pro tip: Stick to this system from day one. The sooner you start, the easier it is to maintain, and you'll thank yourself later when looking for specific images from your travels.

Remember: This system has proven effective for dozens of my workshop participants, from beginners to advanced photographers. It scales well whether you have 100 or 100,000 images.

Folders vs Collections

Folders

- Show where your photos actually live on your hard drive
- Each photo exists in only one folder

- Follow my YYYY-MM Location structure I showed you earlier
- Are essential for storage organization

Virtual Collections

- Don't physically move your files
- The same photo can be in multiple collections
- Perfect for organizing by theme, project, or rating

Let me explain this with a simple analogy from my library. Think of your photo library as a physical library of books.

- **Folders** are like **actual bookshelves** - each book (photo) can only be in one physical place
- **Collections** are like **reading lists** - the same book can appear on multiple lists without moving it from its shelf

Let me show you how I use this with my Turkey 2023 trip:

- My actual photos live in folder "2023-09 Turkey"
- I created several collections for different purposes:
 - "Turkey - 4-5*" where I keep my best shots
 - "Turkey 2023 - selection" for my presentation
 - "ImagenAI - Turkey 2023" subset with my AI-enhanced photos
 - "Sony - Turkey 2023" for camera-specific files

My Pro tip: I recommend using collections for:

- Portfolio pieces
- Client galleries
- Photo projects
- Best-of collections
- Processing variations (color, black and white, AI-edited)

This way, my best sunrise shot from Turkey can be in my "Best Landscapes," "Portfolio," and "Turkey Selection" collections while physically staying in its original 2023-09 Turkey folder.

Important: Whenever you need to move the actual RAW files on your drive, do it in Lightroom, or update the folders' location in Lightroom immediately after moving the files. If Lightroom loses reference to the files, you won't be able to work with them, and your Lightroom catalog will become unusable.

My Photo Renaming Template

Let me explain why I always rename my photos during import and how I've set up my template to keep everything organized.

Why rename photos?

- Camera filenames (like DSC_1234.ARW) don't tell you anything useful
- Multiple cameras create duplicate filenames; the same camera creates duplicate filenames once it reaches _9999.ARW and then it starts over)
- My template instantly tells me when and where I took the photo
- Makes it easier to find specific photos, even outside of Lightroom

My Template Structure:

YYYY_MM_DD-HHMMSS-Location-0001.ARW

(Example: 2024_11_25-141215-Iceland-0001.ARW)

This tells me:

2024_11_25	Date of the photo
141215	Time (14:12:15)
Iceland	Location
0001	Sequence number
ARW	Original file format

How to Set Up My Template:

1. In the Import dialog, go to "File Renaming"
2. Click "Template Editor"

3. Add these elements in order:
 - Date (YYYY) + "_"
 - Date (MM) + "_"
 - Date (DD) + "-"
 - Hour + Minute + Second + "-"
 - Custom Text (location) + "-"
 - Sequence # (0001)
4. Save it by clicking the drop-down menu with Preset and Save current settings as new preset.

Filename Template Editor

Preset: Import Rename 2021

Example: 2024_07_04-101215-Dresden-0001.ARW

Date (YYYY) ▾

_

Date (MM) ▾

_

Date (DD) ▾

-

Hour ▾

Minute ▾

Second ▾

-

Custom Text

-

Sequence # (0001) ▾

Image Name

Filename

Insert

Original filename

Insert

Sequence and Date

Sequence # (1)

Insert

Date (YYYY)

Insert

Metadata

Title

Insert

Dimensions

Insert

Custom

Custom Text

Insert

Cancel

Done

Pro tip: Save this as a preset (I call mine "Import Rename 2021") so you only need to type the location name for each import.

Follow the video I made for Wendy and Allison:

<https://www.loom.com/share/b59699b6e8fb4785a0795ca75f5e6e2b?sid=64bcdcaf-5cce-40c8-9663-ce9b72feb2b1>

This naming system has saved me countless hours when searching for specific photos.

Using Editing Presets

Think of presets like cooking recipes - they're saved combinations of editing adjustments that can be applied to your photos with a single click.

What presets actually do:

- Store specific settings from the Develop module
- Can include anything from basic exposure to complex color grading
- Never change your original photo - can be removed or modified anytime
- Can be applied during import or later in editing

Why you may want to use presets:

- Save time on repetitive adjustments
- Give you a quick starting point for editing
- Help maintain consistent style across a photo series
- Great for learning how different settings work together

Types of presets I recommend:

- Basic adjustment presets (exposure, contrast, basic tone)
- Style presets (color grading, creative looks)
- Purpose-specific presets (black & white, landscape, portrait)

I'm not a fan of presets that many creators sell online to mimic their style. But I do use presets in my own way.

I like the idea of non-destructive workflows, and **before merging photos in panoramas or HDRs**, I reset all adjustments except for:

- Remove Chromatic Aberrations
- Enable Profile Corrections

Why I do this:

- The resulting DNG file is as close to RAW as possible
- No "baked-in" adjustments that I might want to change later
- Every merged photo starts from the same baseline
- Maintains maximum flexibility for future editing
- Truly non-destructive workflow

Together with this guide, I'm sharing with you (link below) three presets I use:

- **No edits** - it resets all global edits, it doesn't remove local adjustments (filters)
- **CA+Lens corrections** - It only applies "remove chromatic aberration" and "enable lens profile corrections." I apply this before stitching panoramas or HDRs, so the stitched panorama (or stacked HDR) is as "RAW" as possible, and I apply the regular adjustments to the stitched photo.
- **Import settings** - edits I like to apply on every photo I import

Warning: Be cautious with presets you download online. Many are designed for specific lighting conditions or camera types and might not work well with your photos.

Pro tip: Don't just blindly apply presets. Use them as a starting point, and then fine-tune the settings for each specific photo. Every image is unique and might need different adjustments.

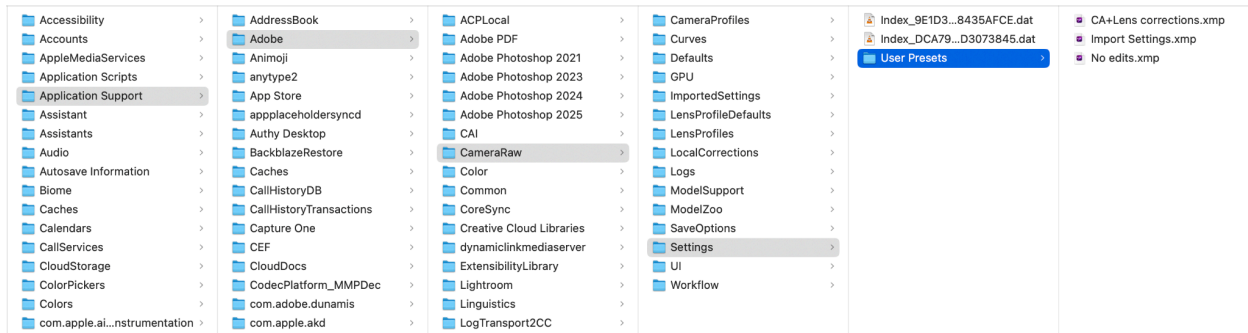
Do you want to advance? Start creating your own presets once you develop your editing style. They'll be tailored to your photography and way of working.

Download and Import My Presets

1. Download my presets:
<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/y0zwrxmkb5w1lfpdtitg/LR-Editing-Presets.zip?rlkey=77zI9roz55tmufg1oo78gdaf7&dl=0>
2. Unzip it
3. Import the presets (refer to the [Adobe page](#) if you need more help):
 - Import automatically by selecting File → Import Develop Profiles and Presets... and choose the .xmp files.
 - Import manually - and copy the files to:
 - On a Mac: Macintosh
HD/Users/<username>/Library/Application
Support/Adobe/CameraRaw/Settings/User Presets

■ On a PC:

C:\users\\AppData\Roaming\Adobe\CameraRaw\Settings



This is the folder structure in macOS where I'm copying the presets.

Photo import workflow

1. Insert the SD card, select in the menu File → **Import Photos and Video...** (often, the Import dialog opens automatically after inserting the memory card).
2. Navigate to Source. Use the **Copy mode**.
3. **File Handling:**
 - a. Build previews - Standard or 1:1 if you want to evaluate sharpness first
 - b. Build smart previews - allows you to edit photos even if your RAW originals are not available
4. **File Renaming:** Select the import preset you have created. Fill in the Custom text field and change the sequence number if needed.
5. **Apply During Import:** Select your presets in Develop Settings and Metadata.
6. **Destination:** Utilize the folder structure outlined above. If you are importing a new shoot taken in 2025 in Alaska, check the "Into subfolder" named "2025-09 Alaska", organize "Into one folder," and navigate to /Lightroom Masters/2025/. The new folder 2025-09 Alaska that is about to be created will show in the folder structure in italics; be sure you create it in the right folder.

Essential Lightroom Navigation Shortcuts

The three shortcuts I constantly use in Lightroom:

- **G** - Library Grid view (thumbnail overview),
- **E** - Library Loupe view (single image),
- **D** - Develop module (editing workspace).

These three keys are all I need for 98% of my work. They're easy to remember and perfectly placed on the keyboard for quick access.

Pro tip: Rest your left hand near these keys while working. They form a natural triangle under your fingers, making navigation feel instinctive.

Want to explore more?

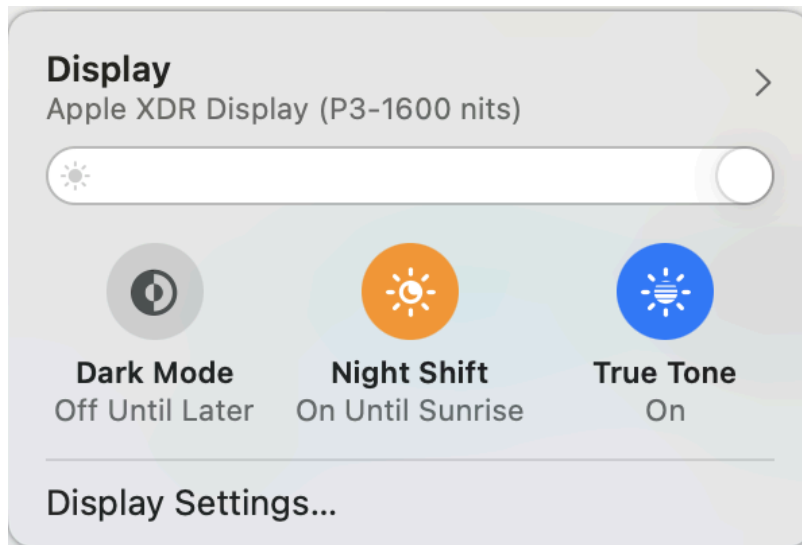
- Check Help > Keyboard Shortcuts
- Experiment with what works for you
- But master the three mentioned above first

Remember: Quick navigation = efficient workflow. These shortcuts will save you hours of clicking around.

Editing in Lightroom

White balance

- It affects the mood of a photo (cold vs warm), so use it wisely.
- If you use Night Shift on your Mac (or a similar app that changes the warmth of your screen), be sure to turn it off when editing White Balance because it will misinterpret the photo's colors, and you will end up with the incorrect white balance.



Exposure

- You want to avoid having clipped whites or blacks, so look at the histogram above the sliders to be sure you are not clipping either.
- You can hold down the Option (Alt) key and move the Whites or Blacks sliders to see the clipping. You can also see the clipped areas when clicking the triangles on the top corners of a histogram above.
- Vibrance is a “smarter” Saturation. My Vibrance baseline is +20; I usually go as high as 35. I don’t use Saturation unless I really want to make the color pop a little more. When combined with Vibrance, I don’t go higher than +10, usually just about +5.

Tone curve, Color mixer, Color grading

- I don’t use them, just sometimes the color mixer when I want to adjust the hue or saturation of a specific color (e.g., toning the greens to more yellowish, so they don’t look unrealistic and “toxic”).

Detail

Sharpening

- My go-to value for Sharpening is 45. If the photo is a little softer, I go as high as 55.

- I set the Masking value to 20 as a baseline. Masking allows you to sharpen only some parts of a photo. What's white gets sharpened, but what's black doesn't.
- Oversharpening makes the photos look weird.
- You typically don't want to sharpen things out of focus (e.g., bokeh behind a person's face or water on long exposures, sky without details, etc.)
- To see the sharpening mask, press and hold Option on Mac, Alt on PC, and move the Masking slider.
- I don't move the Radius and Detail sliders in the sharpening section.

Noise reduction

- Every photo needs a little bit of noise reduction.
- My go-to setting is:
 - Luminance: 15
 - Contrast: 15
 - Color: 25 (typically +10 of what Contrast is)
 - I don't move the other sliders.
- When I shoot at ISOs higher than 800, I usually set the Luminance between 20-25 depending on the amount of noise.
- When I get a lot of grain, it is the sky (usually produced by pushing whites quite far). I set the Contrast to 25 and the Color to 35.
- When Luminance 25, Contrast 25, and Color 35 are insufficient, I use Denoise, which creates a new DNG RAW file.
- **Denoise:** When the photo has high level of noise (typically photos shot at 2500 ISO or higher with significant exposure/shadows boost), I use denoise to use generative AI to remove noise.

Lens corrections

- I always check:
 - Remove Chromatic Aberration
 - Enable Profile Corrections
- When I notice chromatic aberration (it looks like colorful banding (usually magenta or teal) along edges with high contrast), I try to remove it by going to the Manual tab,

clicking the color picker, and clicking on the area with the magenta/teal edge. It makes it disappear. Sometimes, you must balance it out because it can't be removed.

Transform

- The vertical lines usually converge when you photograph architecture with a wide-angle lens. This often doesn't look professional, and the best practice is to fix it.
- You can avoid it or help yourself in the first place when shooting:
 - Keep your lens focal plane parallel to the building. In other words, don't tilt your camera up or down.
 - Seek higher ground to avoid the previous point so you can shoot with a focal plane parallel to the tall building.
 - Shooting using a tilt-shift lens allows you to adjust the focal plane and avoid distortion. These prime lenses are quite costly, so they don't fit every photographer's workflow.
 - Shoot with a wide-angle lens and frame the scene wider to allow extra space for straightening the vertical lines. When you do that, you'll need to crop out some portions of an image. If you frame the scene too tight, you may have to crop something important.
- I use Auto for 80 % of my photos, which works fine. When Auto doesn't straighten the lines well, I use the Guided mode.
- When using the Guided mode, you drag straight lines along areas that should be straight (e.g., windows, gutters, building sides, traffic signs, street lamps). You do one on each side of the photo and possibly also horizontally. You can add a maximum of four lines.
- Once corrected using the Guided mode (rarely in Auto), you must crop the photo using the Crop tools (shortcut R).
- If you don't have enough space around the subject and you're cropping off important elements once fully straightened, you may have to let go of the perfect straightening to fit elements in. You can use the Vertical slider to worsen the straightening until the elements fit in.

Lens blur

- It allows you to blur the background while keeping your subject (e.g., a person's face) in focus

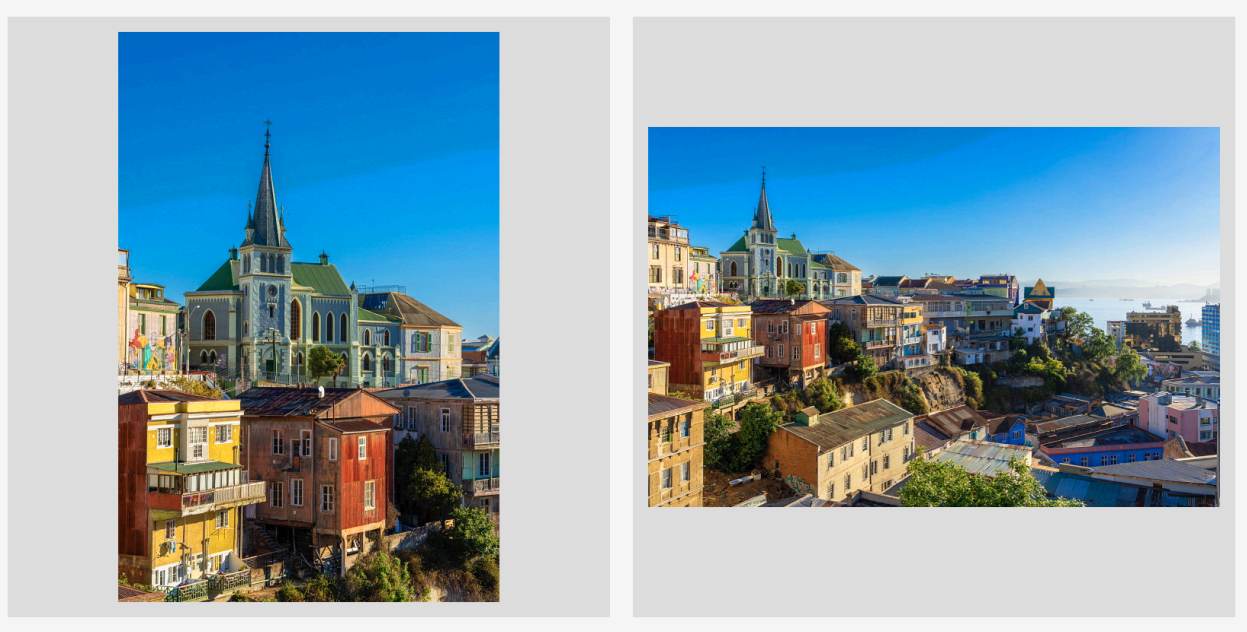
- Check Apply and choose the Blur Amount and style of Bokeh to your liking
- In case Lightroom didn't evaluate correctly what should be in focus and what should be blurred out, adjust it in the Focus Range.

Effects

- I don't use any effects anymore; I used to add a bit of vignetting (it darkens the photo's edges and brings more attention to your subject), typically about -10, but stock agencies don't care for it, and clients prefer vignette-free photos.
- If your photo has vignetting, you can remove it by going to the positive value (e.g., +10) and adjusting the shape of the vignette to remove it completely by using Midpoint, Roundness, Feather, and Highlights sliders.

Calibration

- This is a hidden gem if you like vibrant colors like I do
- I apply these on every photo I import:
 - Red Saturation: 5
 - Green Saturation: 15
 - Blue Saturation: 35
 - All hues: 0
- Especially the blue saturation can create beautiful, vibrant photos. This is a slider that you can max out to +100, and it's okay.
- If you're publishing your photos somewhere where they get an additional color boost, it may create a color banding that is not desired. You may need to pull back on the saturation of images exported for those websites as you can see on the image below.



Color banding showing in the sky. From Blue Saturation 60, I had to go to 35, because the website was further enhancing the saturation on their platform which led to the color banding.

Local adjustments

- Press Shift+W to enter masking options. Adding masks allows you to edit certain parts of a photo independently.
- I use the following masks the most often:
 - Sky selection (and inverted sky selection)
 - Linear gradient (press M)
 - Radial gradient (press Shift+M)
 - Select people
- You can stack multiple masks on top of each other to refine their shapes to fit your scene. You do that by adding or subtracting from a mask. Think of it as a theory of sets and subsets.
- Local adjustments are a powerful tool; I use it often to edit the sky and the rest of the photo separately or edit just the photo's foreground, etc.

Cropping and straightening

- Press R to enter this section.

- You can maintain a specific aspect ratio by clicking the lock and selecting the aspect ratio you want. 3:2 is the most common (and native to our cameras), I also use 2x1 and 3x1 for panoramas.
- You can click on the level and drag a line along the horizon to straighten it up. Actually, you can also drag a line vertically to straighten it horizontally (I use it when working with reflections).

Remove tool

- Press Q to enter this section.
- In Distraction removal, I use Dust → Apply on every photo to remove sensor dust spots
- I use two modes the most: Heal and Remove
 - Heal: Removing dust spots, sensor dirt, and blemishes
 - Remove: When Heal doesn't work well, I try Remove. It's better for removing larger objects but doesn't give you as much control as Photoshop does; check both Use Generative AI and Detect objects
- Check the Visualize spots (press A) and (almost) max out the slider to see the dust spots more easily.
- **Pro tip:** Keep your lenses and camera sensor clean to avoid a clean-up of dust spots in Lightroom. I clean my sensor at a camera shop, usually twice a year. When on a trip, I try to clean lenses every second evening.