Post Processing 101

So, you've taken an image you're happy with but feel it needs a little more 'punch' to be picture postcard perfect ? How do you do it ?

For the beginner this can be very daunting and the thought of learning this whole new craft can seem very complex. There are several ways to accomplish the desired result but here I will describe a simple way you can get a little more life in the image and do so without degrading it.

First, you will need an image-editing program. There are many different programs available and some work well and are simple and some are very complex. For my examples here, I have used Photoshop CS2. This is an incredibly powerful image editor and the industry standard.

For those starting out Photoshop can seem totally perplexing, however, it also has some very simple tools to make life easier. Don't worry, I'll keep it simple and the techniques I describe can apply to any programs that have these basic tools. If the program you have does not have these tools, I would suggest you look for something better. I would recommend that you get the best editor you can as, over time, your skills will develop and there is a huge amount of on-line information you can gather.

Many people do things like just adjust contrast and brightness and this can work although many times, if not done carefully, it will destroy highlight detail.

The old rule was "Expose for the highlights and let the rest take care of itself".
If you really understand what you're doing, this works but this can be confusing for the beginner and, in truth, can lead to all the rest of the scene ending up dark.
It can also be more difficult if your camera does not have features like Auto Exposure (AE) Lock or Spot metering or, you're not sure how to use them.

It is important to remember that if an image is properly exposed then most Post Process (PP) adjustments should be simple and done subtly. As an aside here, to help preserve highlight (brightness) details, I always have my cameras set to - 0.7 Exposure Value (EV). Remember, it is easier to recover some shadow detail than attempt to recover non-existent highlights. Once they're gone, they're gone.

To help understand exposure, fairly simply, it is measured in an image as a range from 0 (Darkest) to 255 (Lightest). When we apply this to a colour image, we measure this across the three colour channels red (R), green (G) and blue (B) (known as RGB), it becomes 0, 0, 0 to 255, 255, 255. We should not assume that 0 = black and 255 = white. In reality, 0 = no detail as does 255. Also remember that many stock image libraries will not accept images where highlight detail is greater than 248, 248, 248 and shadow is less than 4, 4, 4.

So, let's take a look at the image as it was taken straight from the camera and how it looked after some fairly simple adjustments.

This is the original image taken with a Sony H1 camera. The effect I was trying to get was to draw the eye towards the building and sky with the waves as our converging points.

This is the completed version.

The original image is somewhat pleasing but lacks a little ‘punch. Also, a couple of annoying things are that the horizon line and building are not straight and to the left and right are objects that detract from the scene. Notably, the ‘cell’ phone tower on the right.

In the PP’d version, not a huge difference but enough that the scene has a little more life and the distracting parts are gone.

As mentioned before, in-camera EV was set to - 0.7. Other settings I prefer are to keep sharpness, saturation and contrast turned down. This will vary for each camera and each individual. Best to try a few settings yourself and see how they affect image outcome.

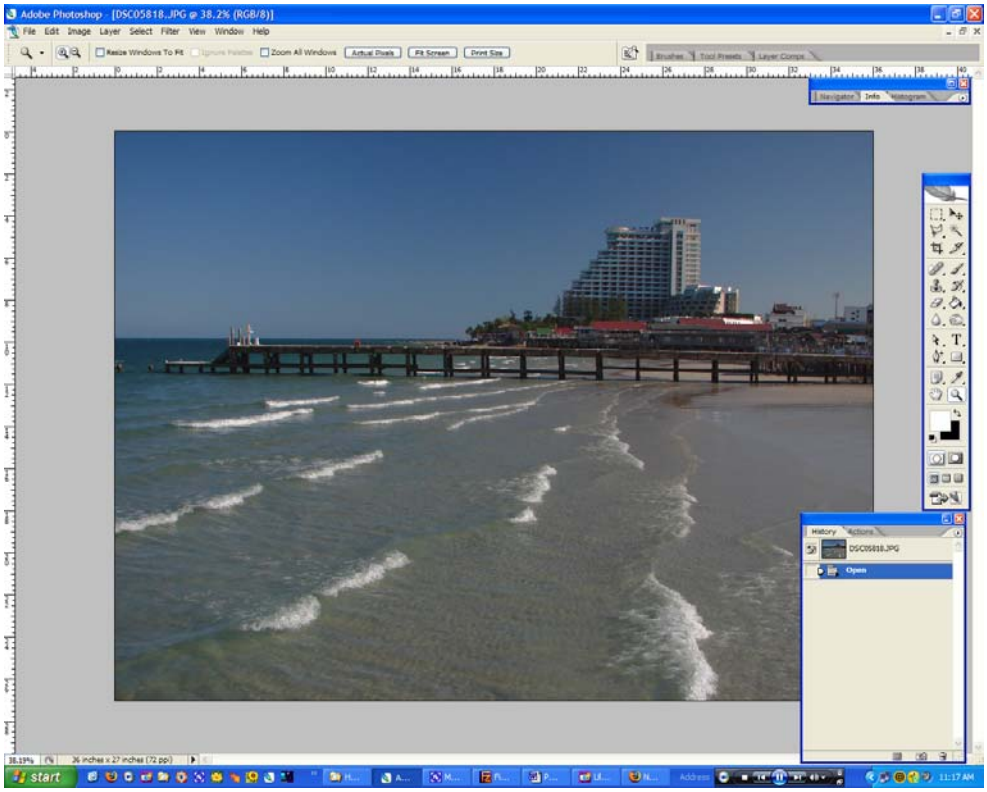
Ok, so what did I do ? The steps applied here are quite simple :

1. Adjust contrast
2. Adjust levels
3. ‘Highlight’ sea area
4. Darken sky
5. Adjust horizon
6. Crop slightly
7. Straighten building
8. Resize image
9. Save image

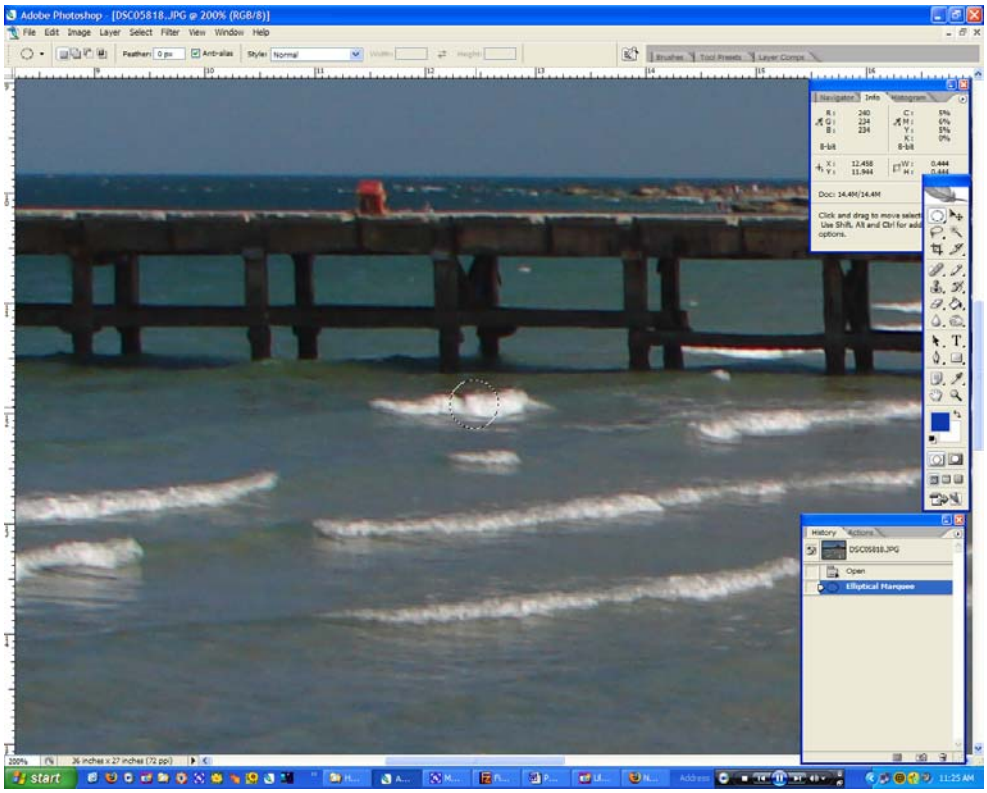
Let’s look at this in a little more detail. On the following pages I will describe the steps and show screen shots from each step.

Please remember that there are several ways to achieve these results, however, I always like to keep it as simple as possible.

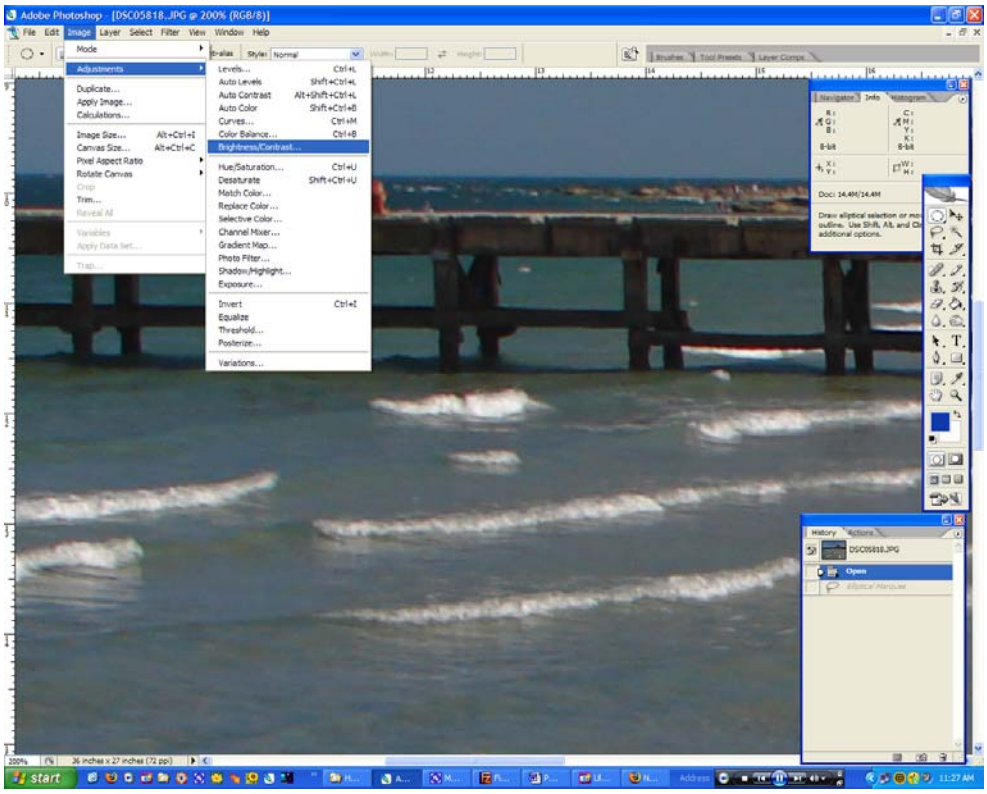
First, I have opened the original image in Photoshop.



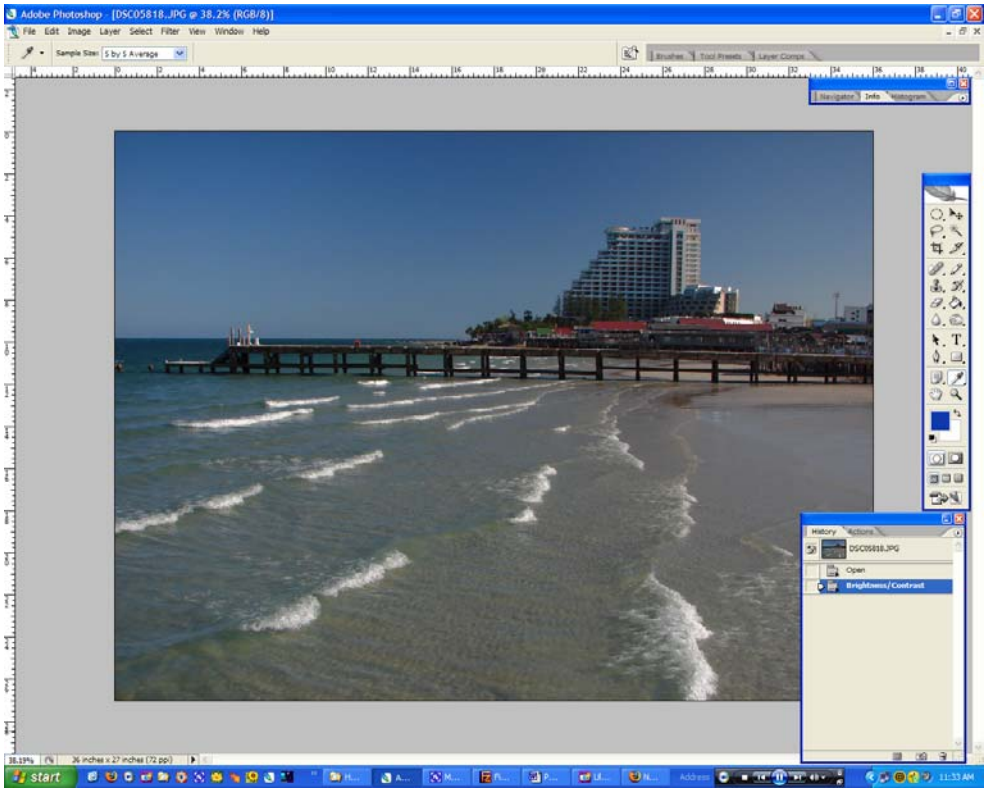
I have then enlarged the image to 200% and measured the brightest part in the wave area. The values are in the ‘Info’ box at the right 240, 234, 234.
(Please note : I used an Elliptical Marquee but this is for illustration purposes only)



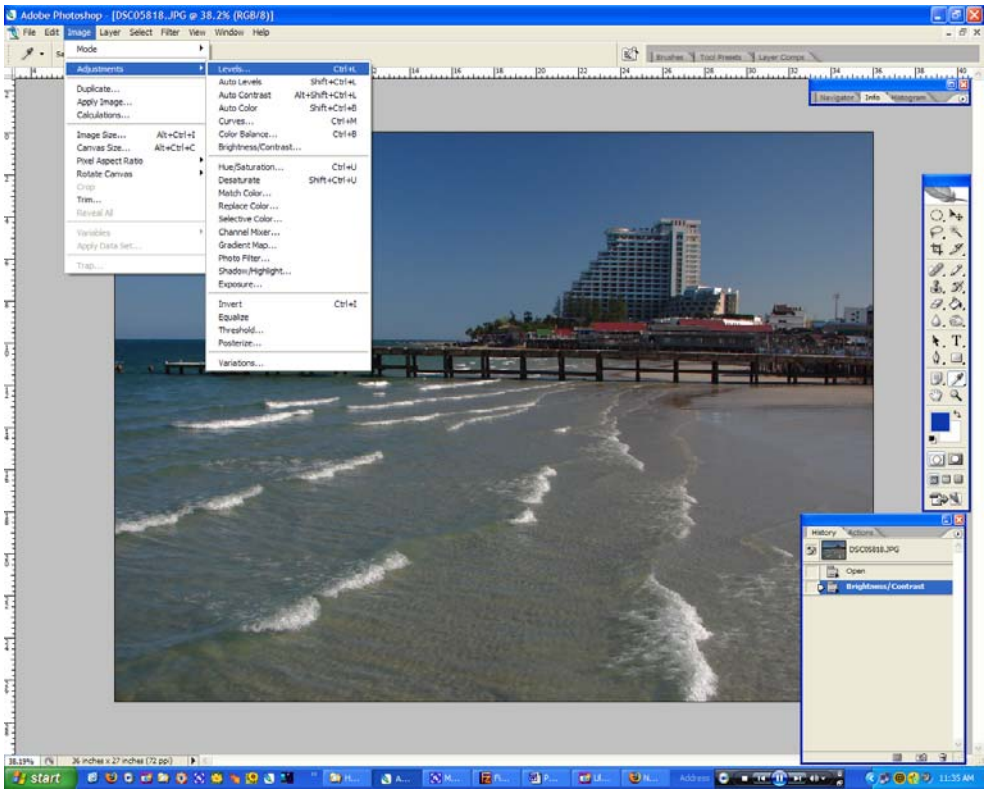
My next step is to adjust contrast being careful not to lose highlight details. To do this I use the contrast tool found under Image, Adjustments, Brightness/Contrast.



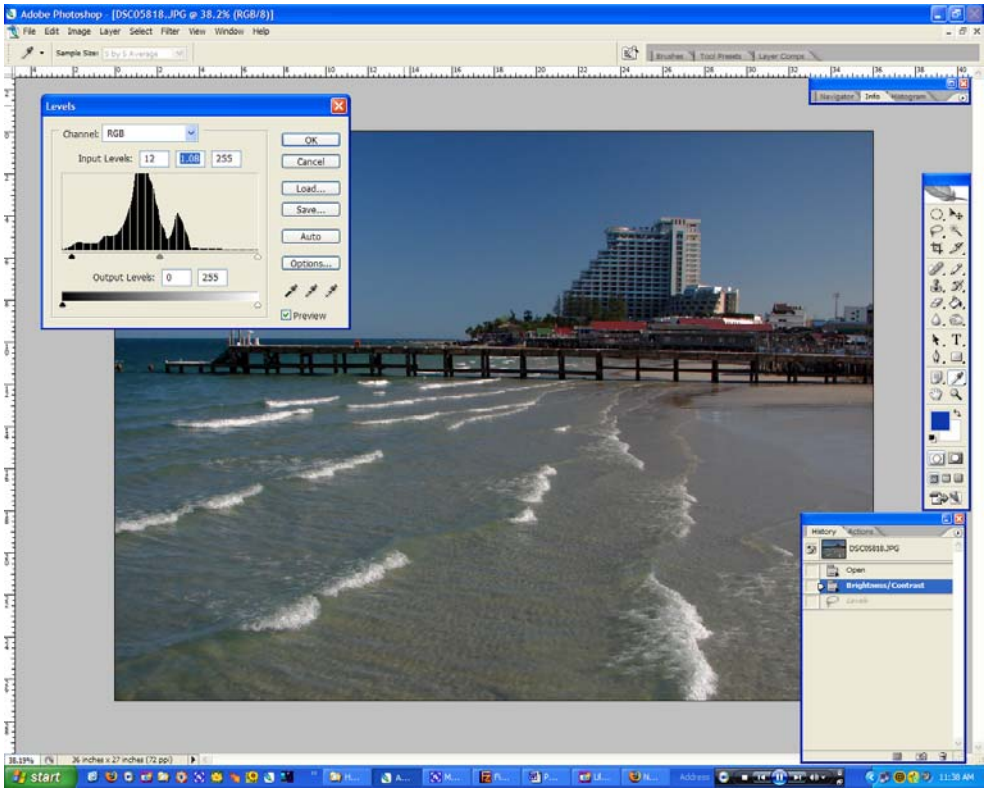
It is best not too be too heavy handed and here I have adjusted with a value of +10 and this has pushed my highlight values, in the same area from 240, 234, 234 to 252, 237, 237. Remember, we don't want to overdo this.



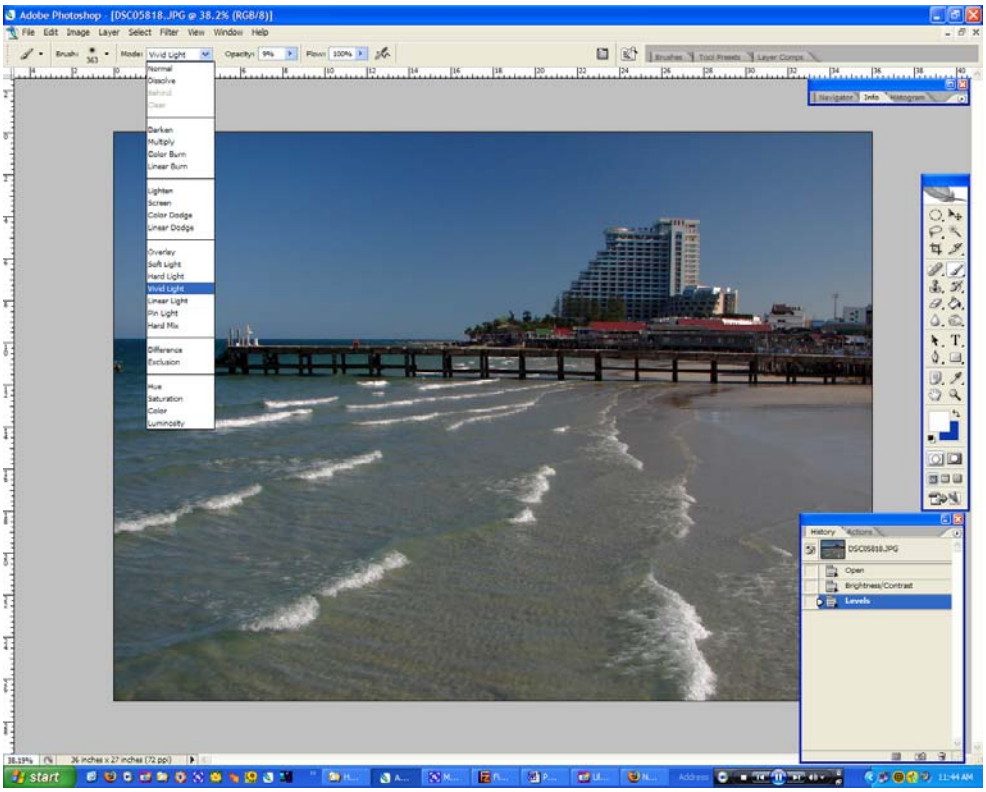
I will now use the Levels control to gain a little more contrast and ‘lift’ the image without losing detail. This tool is found under Image, Adjustments, Levels.



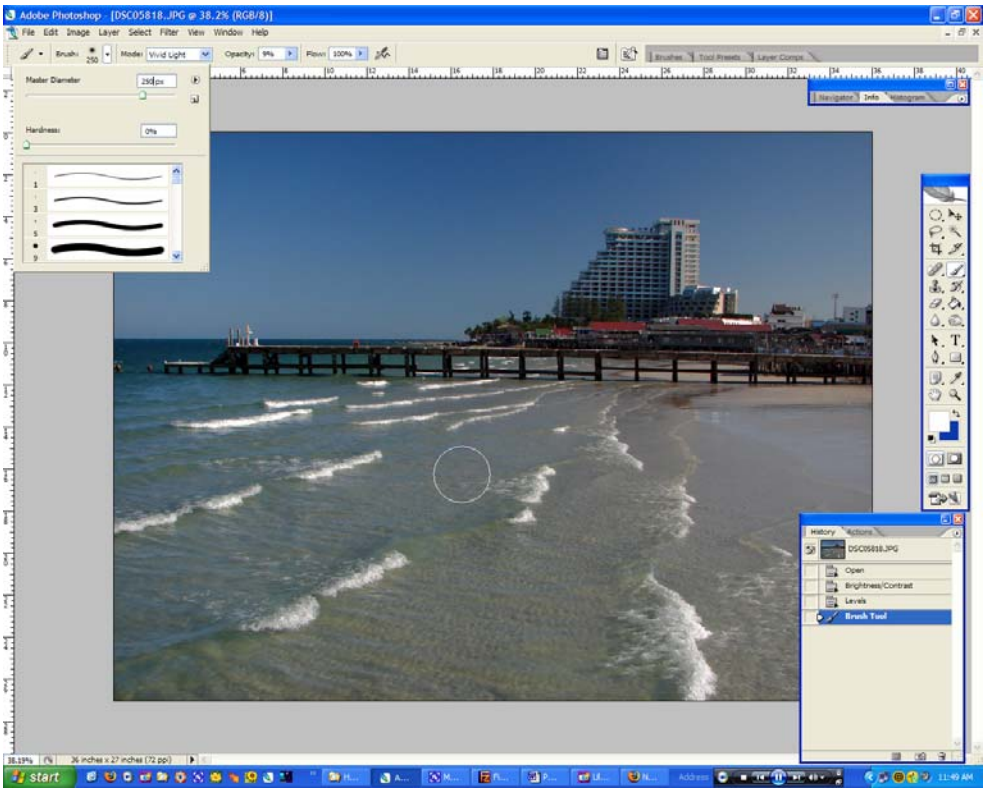
For this image, I have moved my left slider (shadows) to a value of 12, the middle slider (midtones) to 1.08 but have not touched the right slider (highlights).



To get a little more brightness in the sea area, I have selected the brush tool from the tool palette, to the right, and then selected ‘Vivid Light’ from the drop down menu. An Opacity value of 8 or 9% is enough.
(Please note : I have used white as my foreground colour for this step)

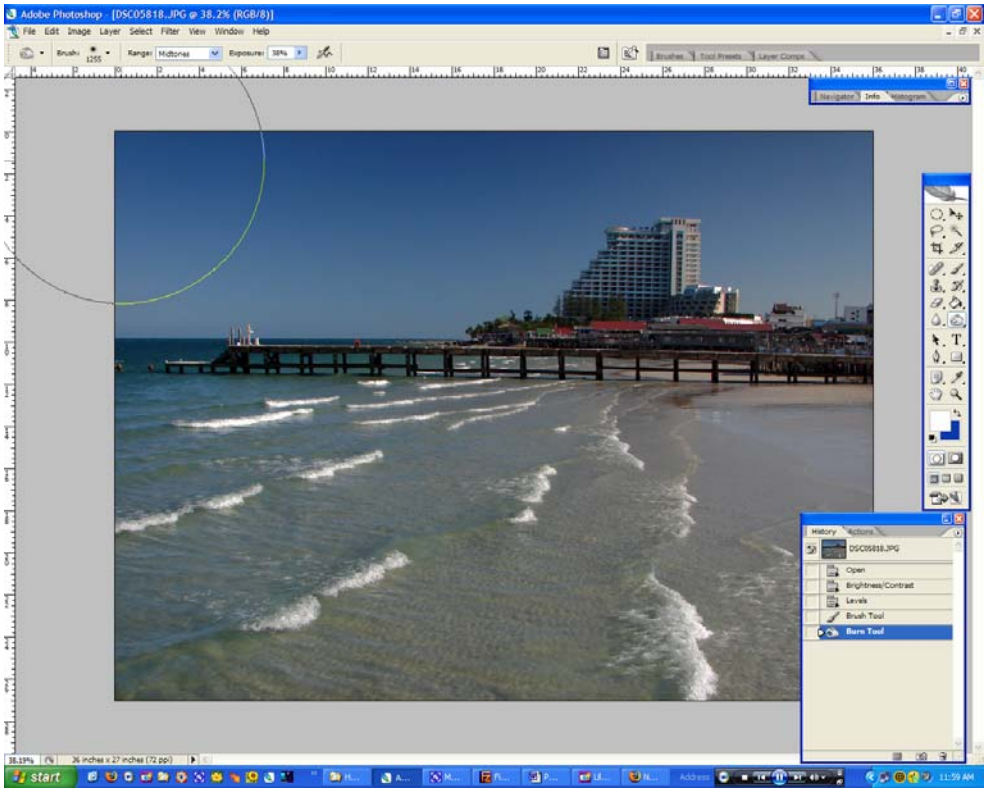


Next, I select an appropriate brush size for the area and ‘paint’. In this case I have moved the brush between the white parts of the waves and also the sand area.



I like my skies not to be too bright (personal choice) so here I am going to darken the sky a little. I have selected the ‘Burn’ tool from my tool palettes and set an Exposure level for Midtones of 38%.

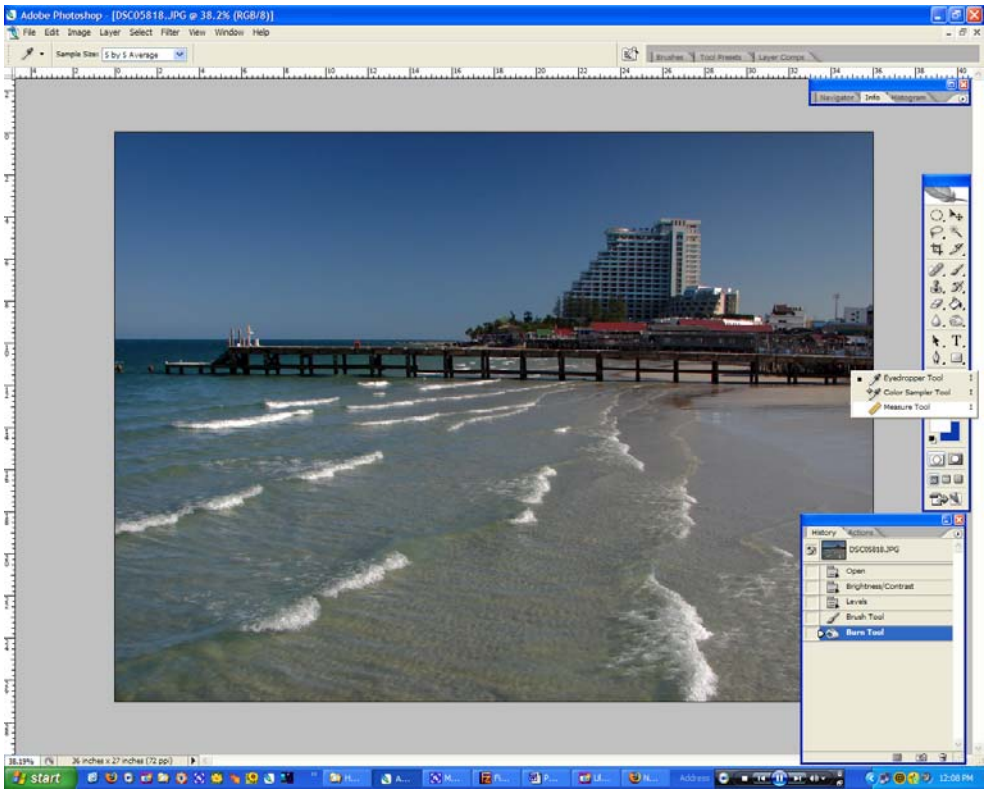
The brush size will be scene dependent and here I have swept the sky in an arc going from left to right and being careful not to get too close to the building.



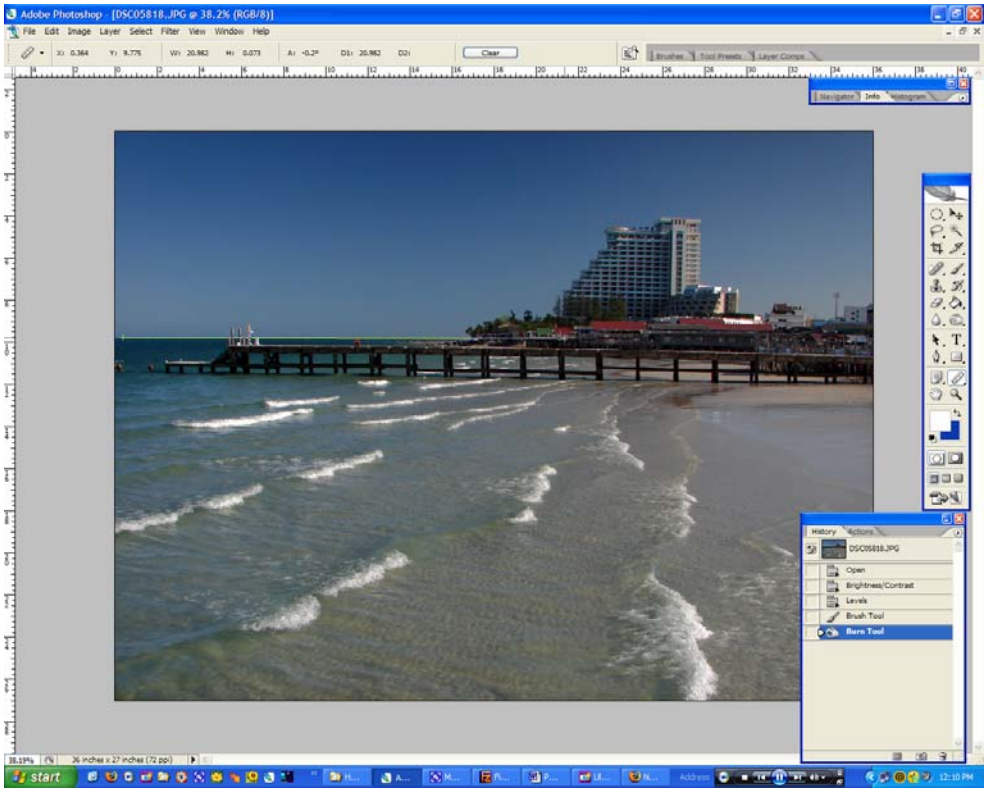
The image is starting to get a little more life to it now, however, there is nothing more distracting in an image than crooked horizons and, in this case, crooked buildings. Our next steps will be to fix these and remove some of the distracting detail.

Hope you’re keeping up so far.

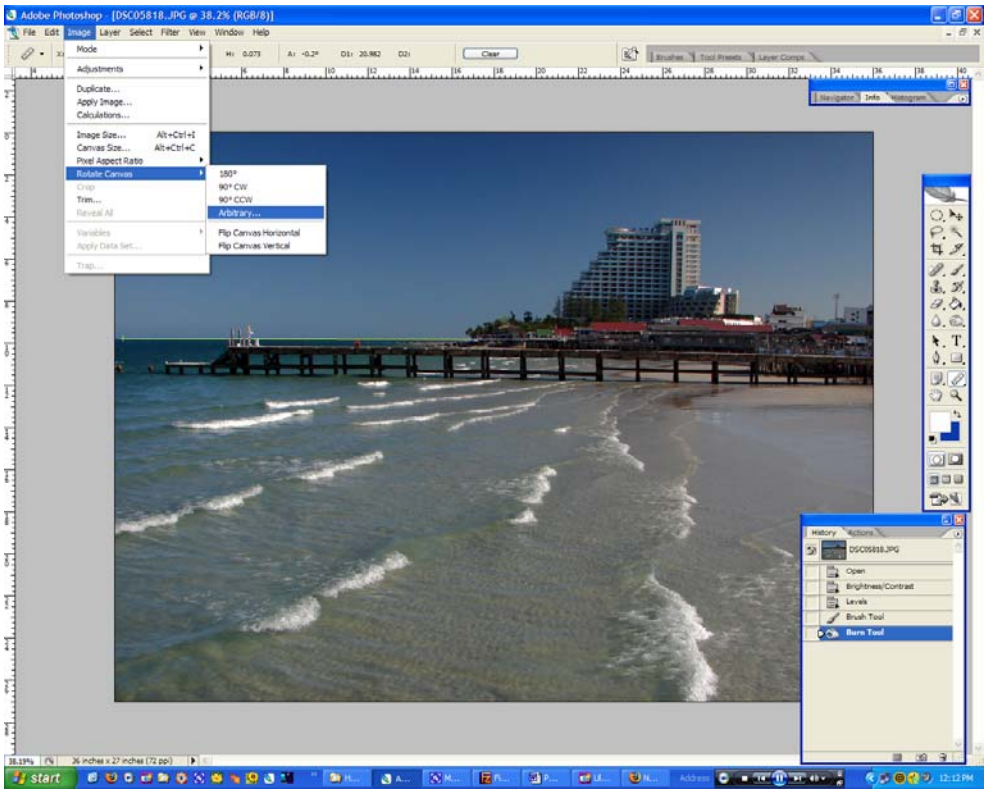
To correct horizon lines is very simple in Photoshop. To do this, I select the ‘Measure Tool’ from the tool palette (right click eye dropper tool).



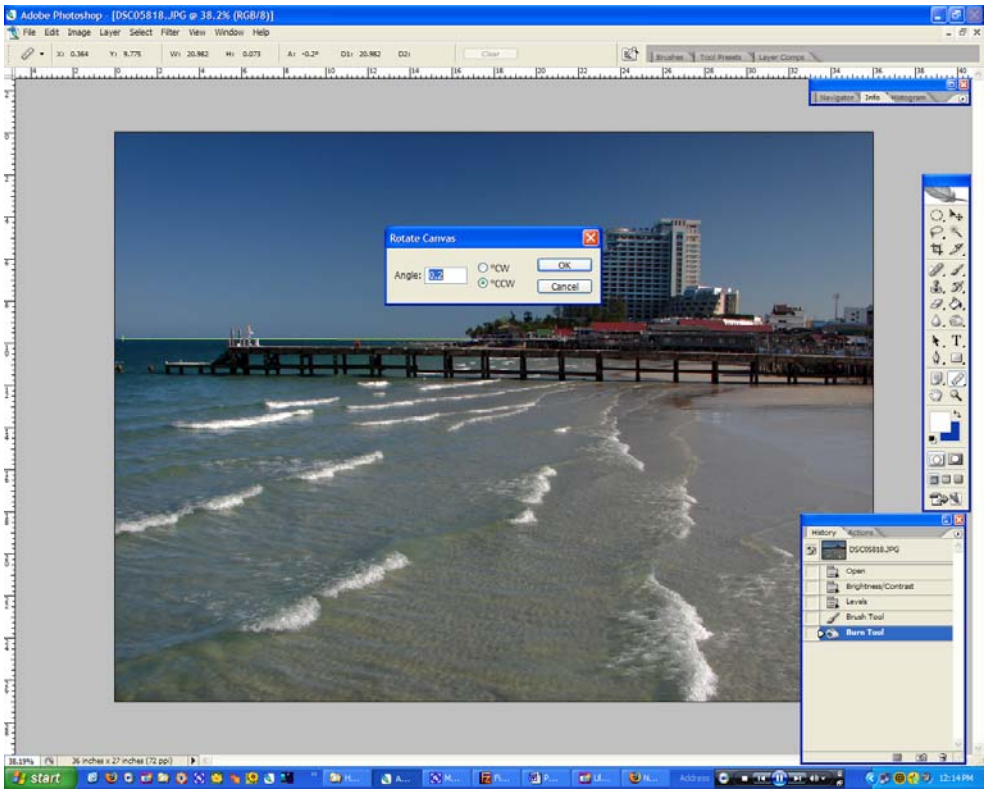
Next, I click at a starting point on the horizon and drag across the horizon.



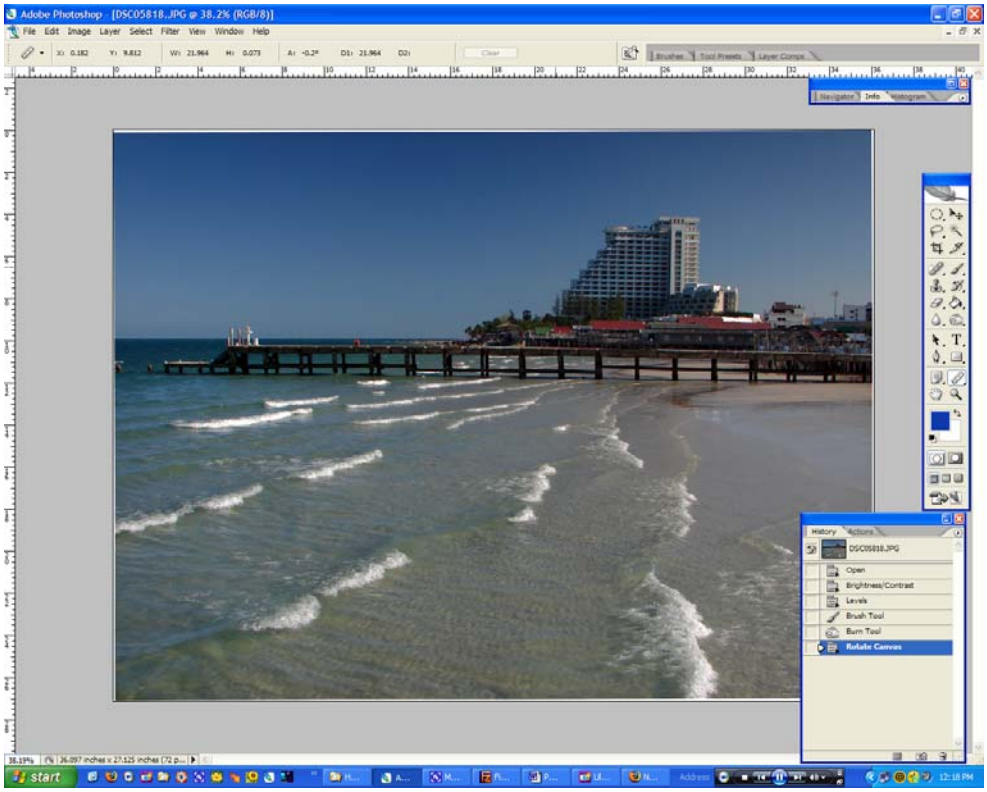
After this is done I will rotate the image. To do this I go to Image, Rotate Canvas, Arbitrary.



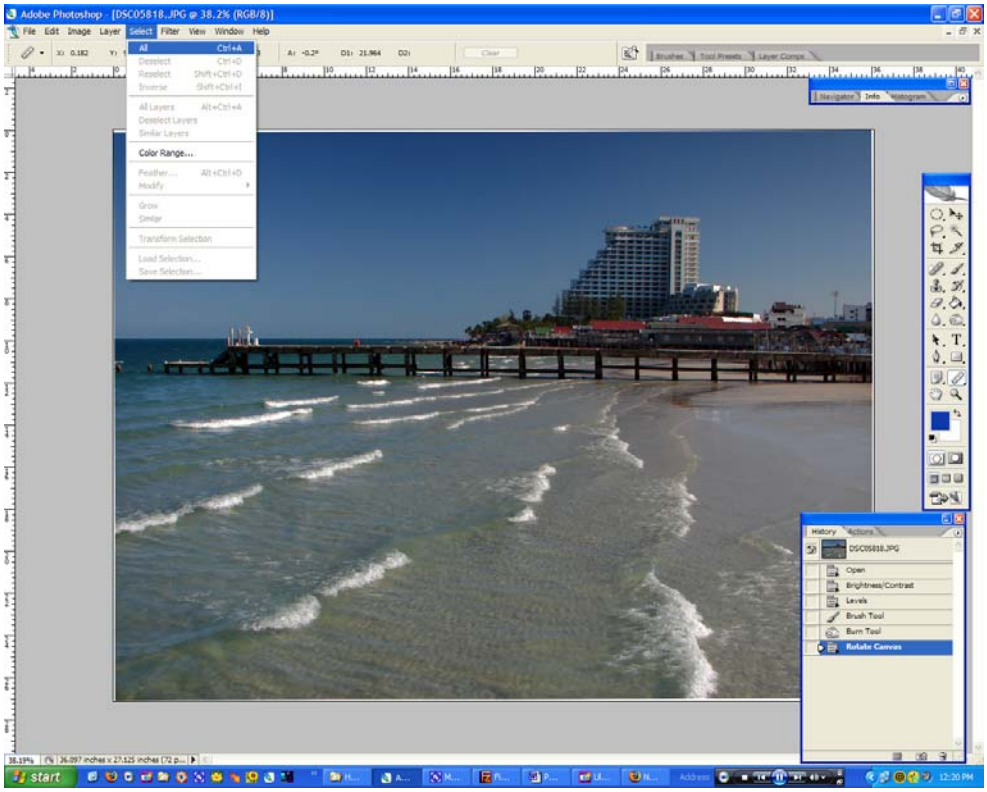
Once I select the tool a box appears showing me the angle, which Photoshop has calculated, as being what needs to be corrected.



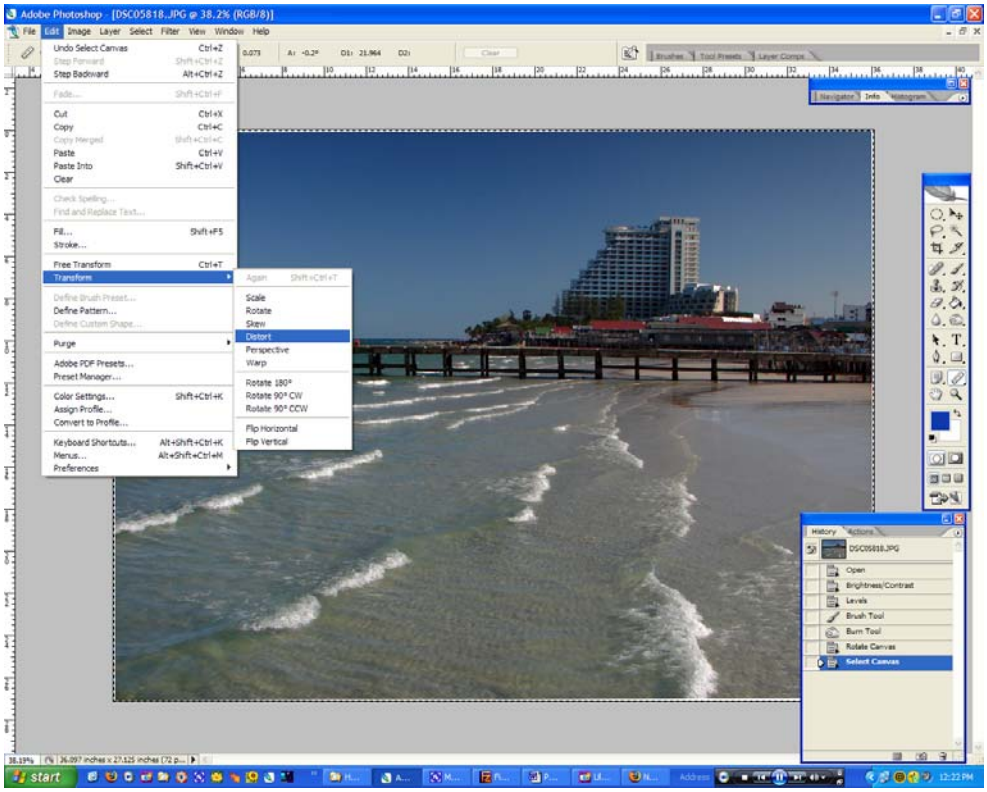
All I do is hit OK and it does the job for me automatically. Simple.



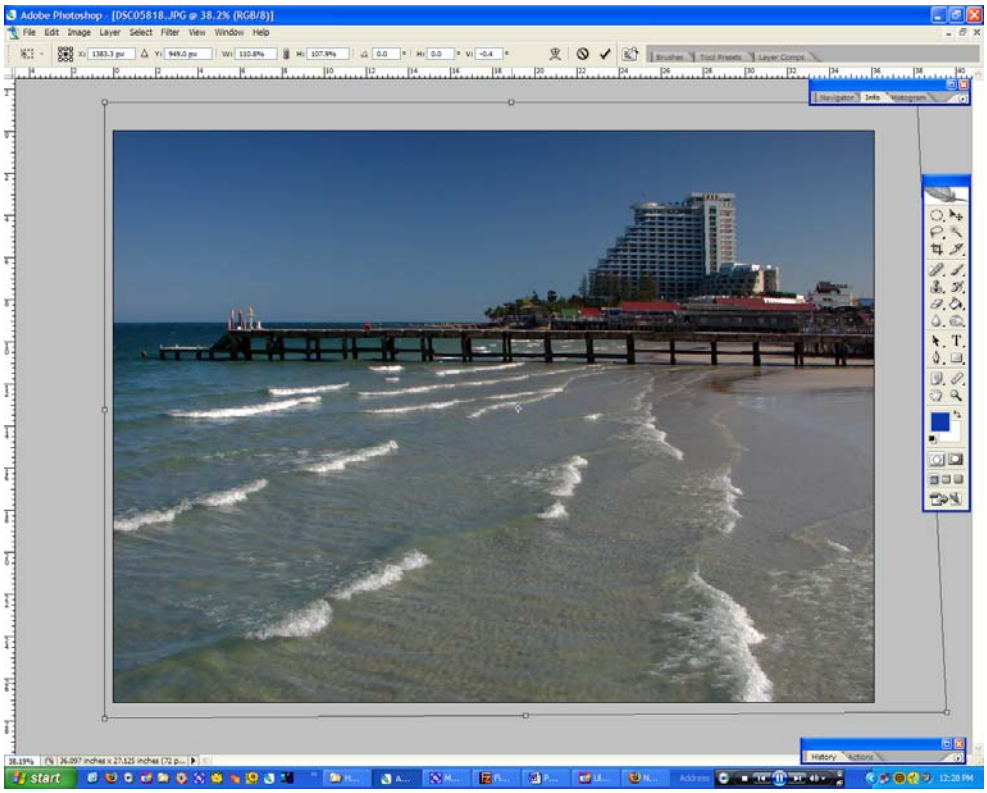
My next step is to get rid of my white areas and crop the image slightly. To do this I first need to select the image. This is done with Select, All.



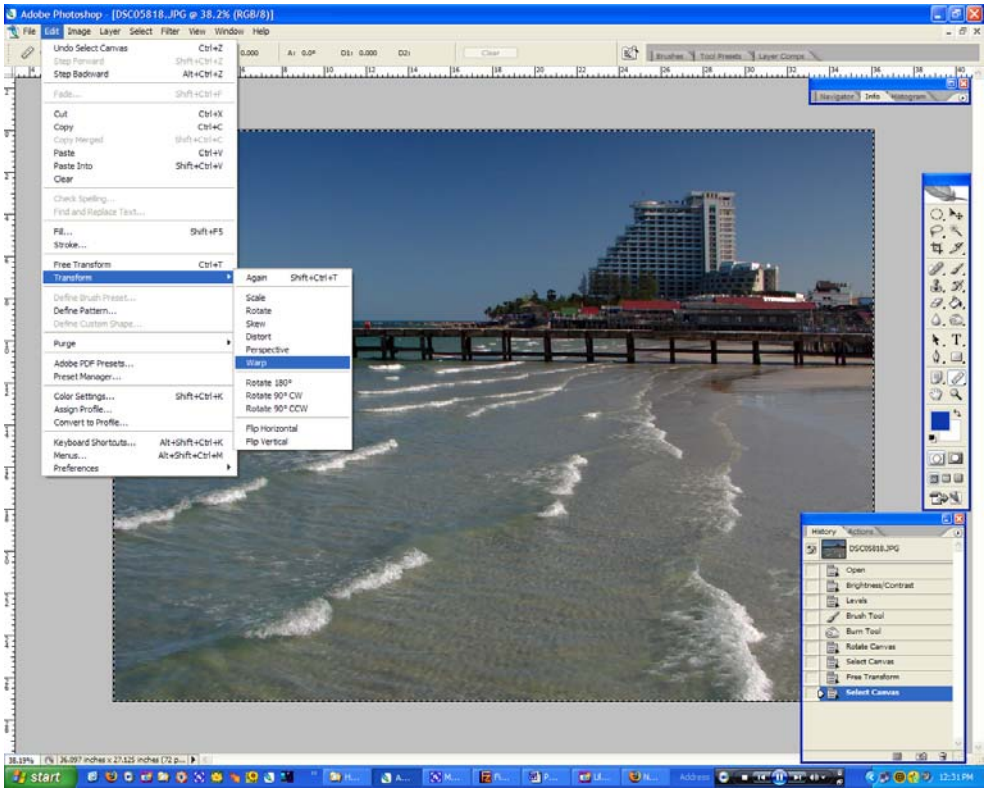
Once the image is selected I go to Edit, Transform, Distort.



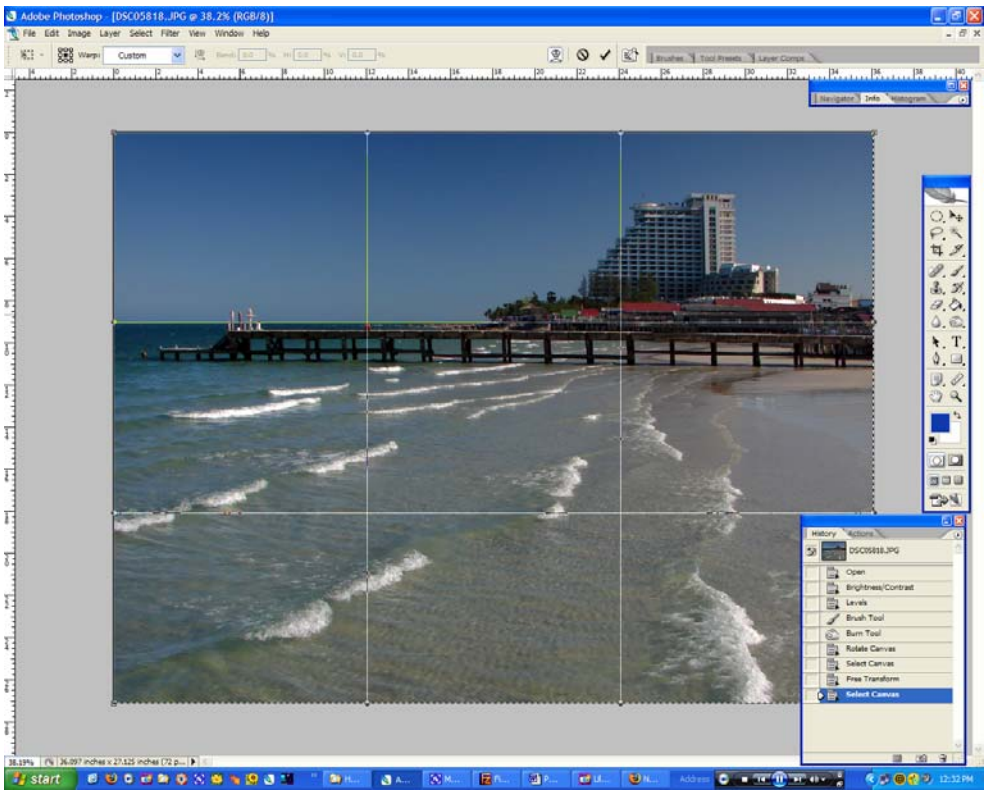
Little boxes will appear at the edge of the image and all I have to do is drag those to achieve the look I want. In this case, I have chosen to simply drag the sides out a bit and also correct perspective. I have also chosen to drop my horizon line slightly on the left.



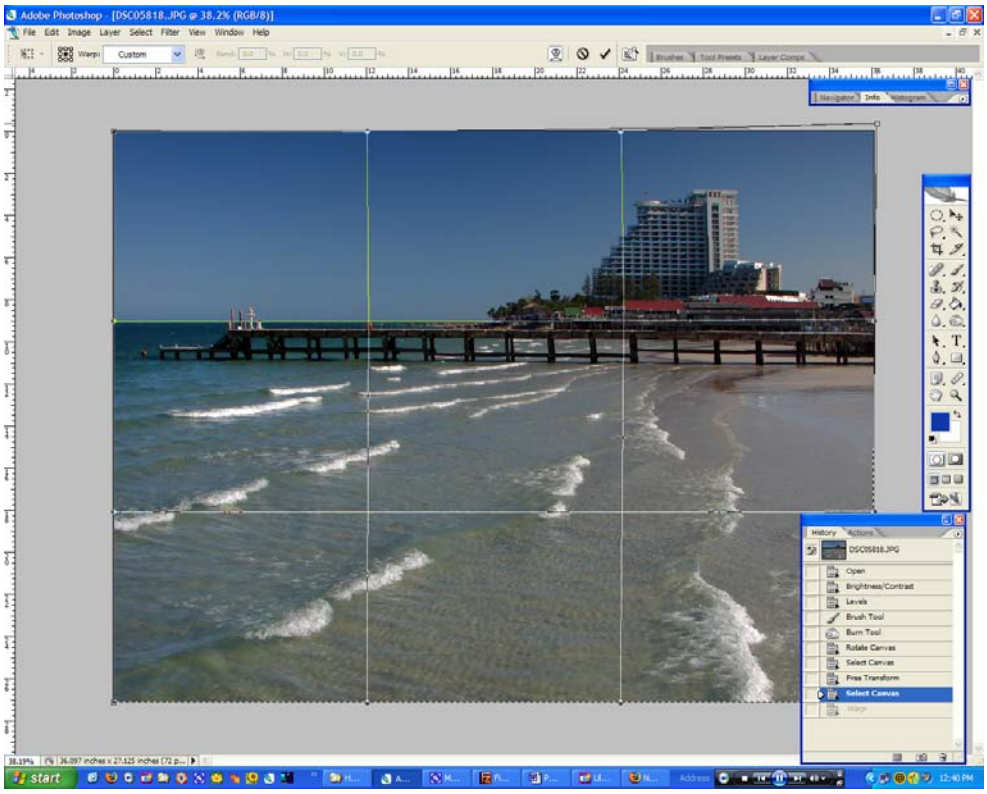
It’s all looking better but the building ‘bugs’ me a bit as it just does not look straight. Now, I’m going to use the ‘Warp’ tool to straighten it a little. I need to select the image again (same as before) and use Edit, Transform, Warp to fix it.



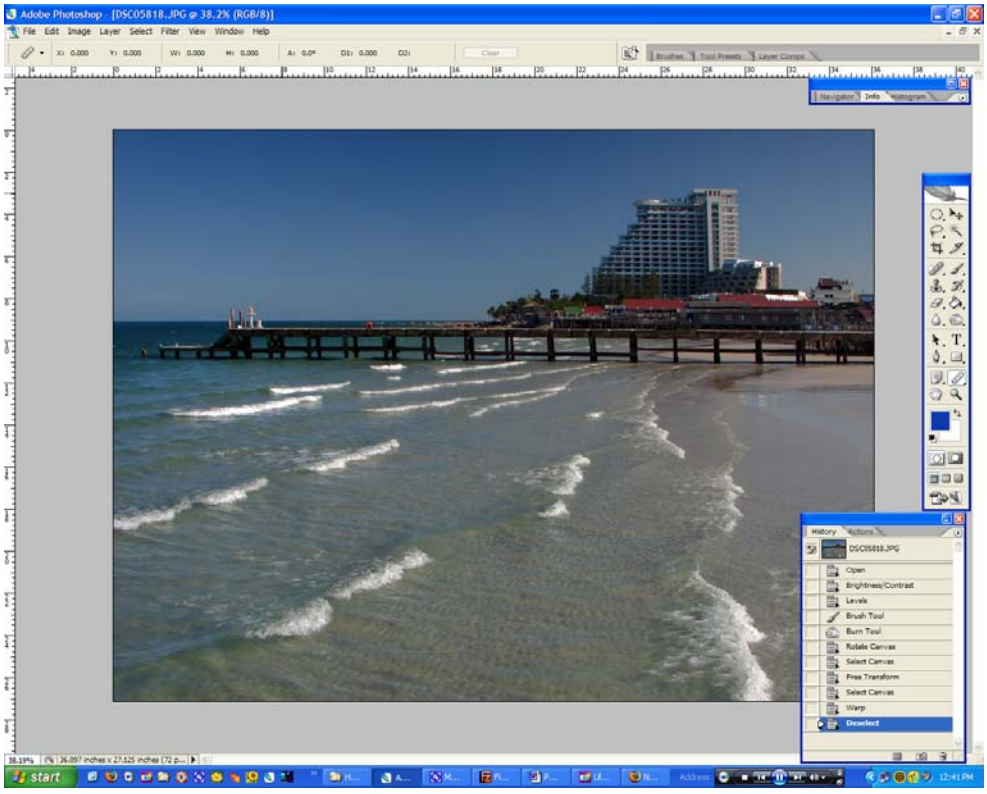
Once selected, the image will appear with a grid pattern over it with little ‘handles’ around it.



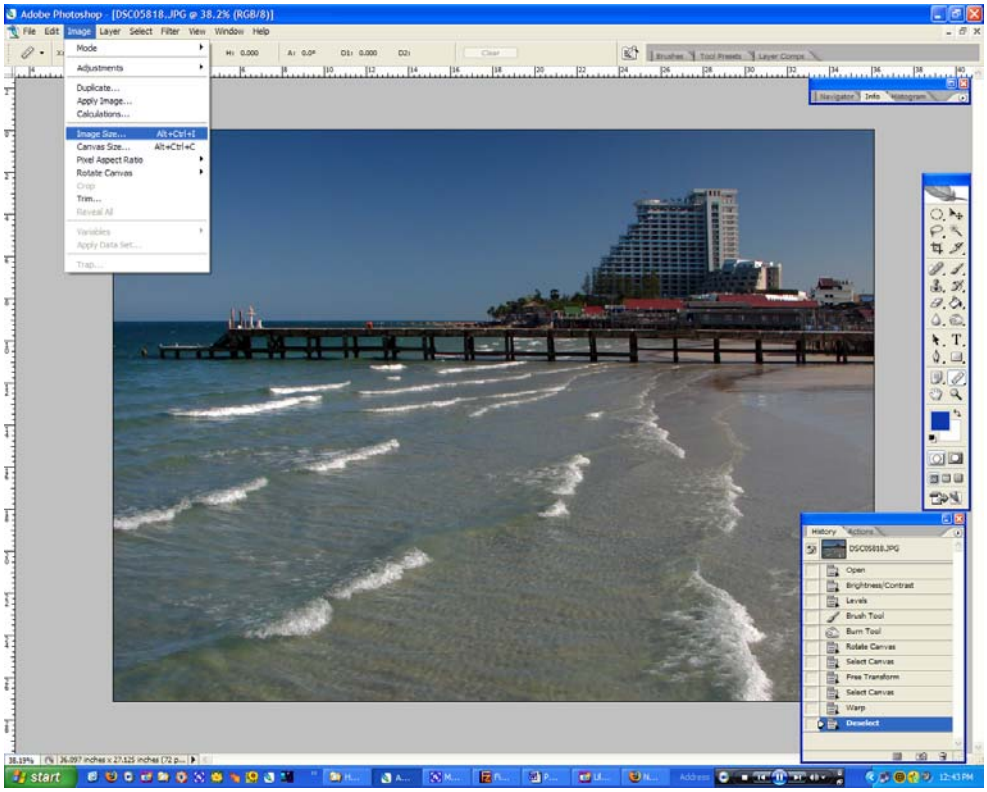
I can then use my mouse to drag the handles and/or the grid intersections to ‘straighten’ out my building.



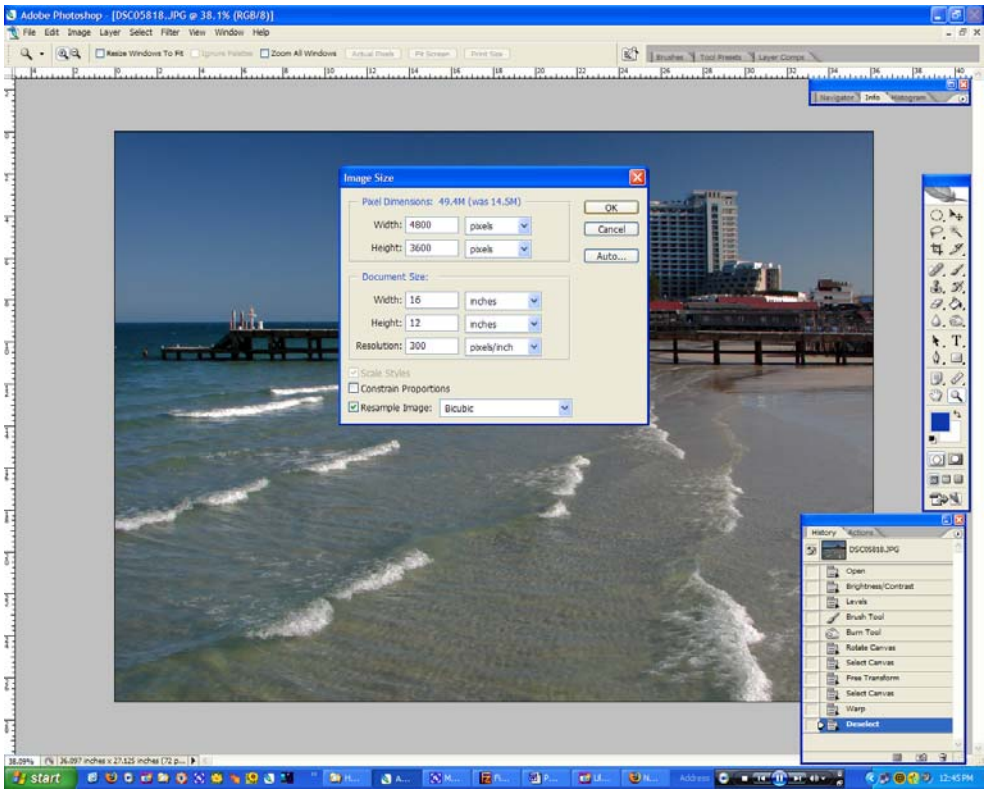
Again, just subtle corrections but now I am quite happy with the result.



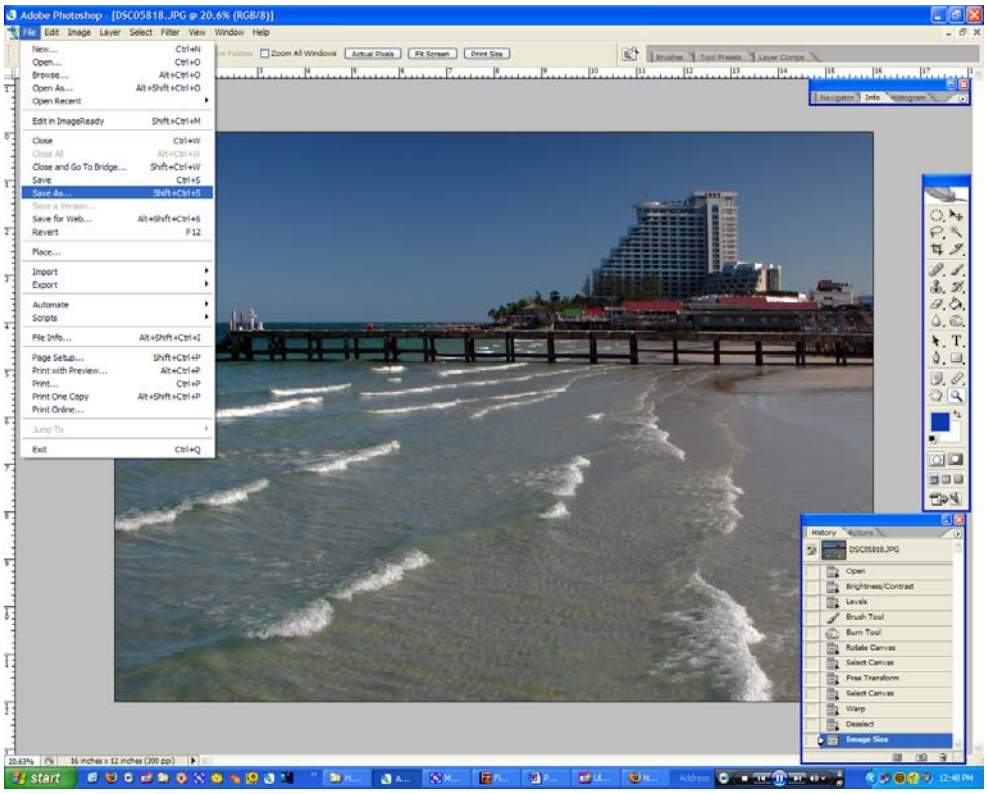
Now, I wish to resize the image for printing. To do this I select Image, Image Size.



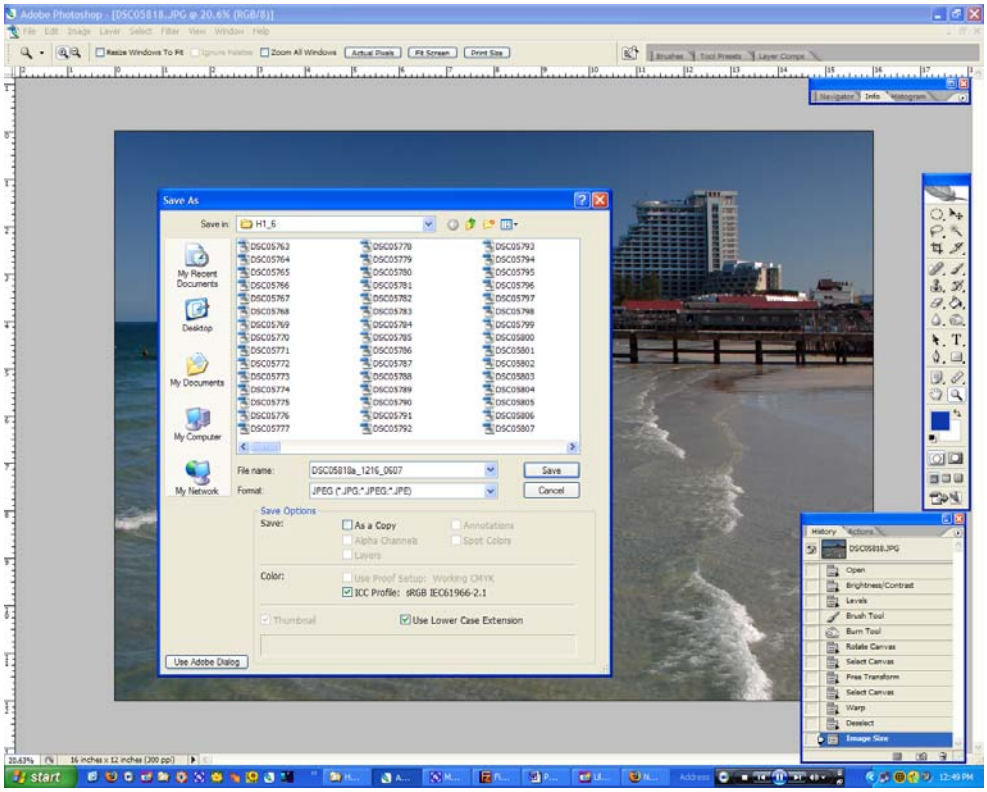
In this instance, I will print to 12 x 16”. All I need to do is enter the values and hit OK. (Please Note : I have changed the original resolution from 72 to 300 pixels/inch. 300 is the accepted ‘norm’ for image printing)



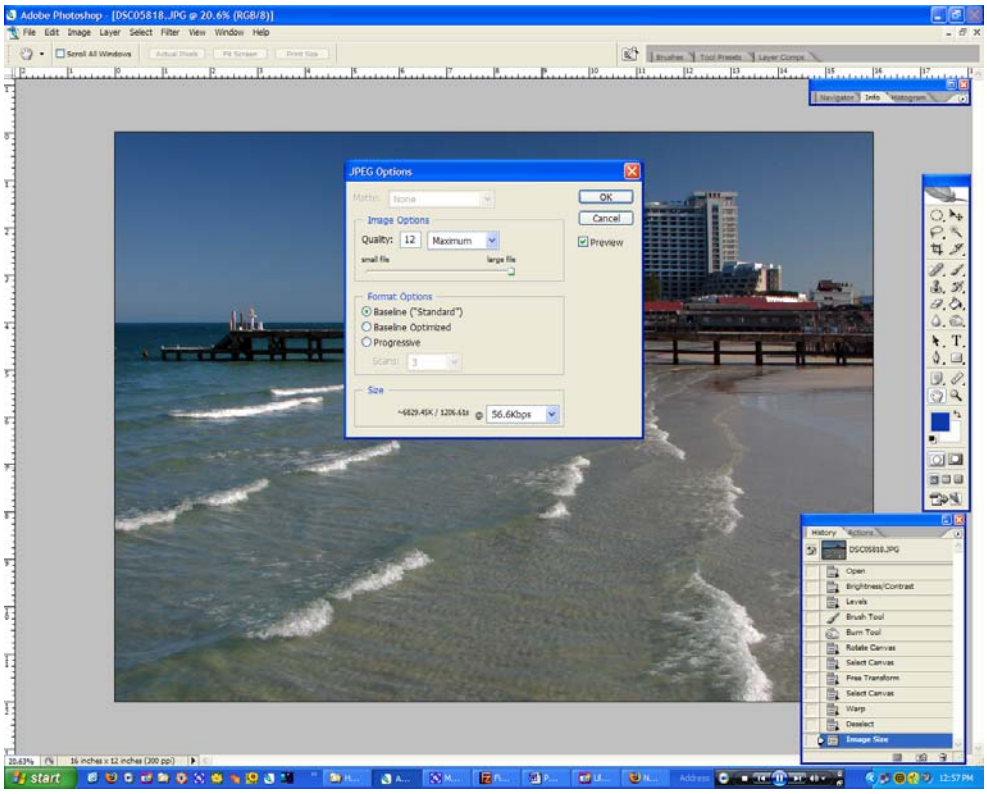
The most important, and final, part is to save the image. I never save over my original images so, I will use File, Save As.



Once I have selected this I see a dialogue box, which gives me options for location and image name. I have added …a_1216_0607 after the original file name so I know it has been adjusted (a) the new size (1216) and when it was edited (0607).



After clicking ‘Save’ a new box appears, I always set Quality to 12 and use Baseline (“Standard”).



Well, that’s about it. I hope this was helpful for you. Remember, the best way to learn this is to try it yourself. Happy processing.

(Just a quick word on sharpening. I used to religiously sharpen images using Unsharp Mask (USM) or Smart Sharpen. One day while trying to clean up some troublesome sharpening ‘halo’s’ in an image, I thought why do this ? Since then, I rarely sharpen an image)

Regards, Dave Lloyd

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