

Topaz Labs

Topaz Adjust

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Digital photography has created an industry with amazing variety of products, remarkable technology, and creative approaches to adjusting and creating images. A relatively new company for this industry, Topaz Labs offers a suite of plugins that enhance the functionality of Photoshop and bring a very powerful set of tools to photographers. Their products have consistent interface, logically arranged workflow organized in tabs, and their unique algorithms that can create stunning results. Fair warning, the rope they give you is long enough to hang yourself with! It is too tempting and easy to fall into the trap of the trite and cliché. If you use the tools with care and to serve your vision, rather than allowing the tool to dictate a vision on to your work, you will quite likely enjoy using this collection. Here, I will focus on one of their products Topaz Adjust. Topaz Labs products run on Windows or Mac platforms, my review is based on my experiences on a Windows-based computer.

The Product

Topaz Adjust, which has a free trial version available, comes by itself or part of the suite of plugins. Each product is an executable file with the .msi extension. Windows knows enough to start the install process when you double-click on the file you want to install. In this day and age, I find it unnecessary to install each product even if you purchased the suite. Yes, the process is not too complex, but Topaz will do right by the users if they integrate the install process under one roof and allow the user enter the registration number once. The current process requires each product installed separately and registered individually, using the same serial number.

After the installation, all the Topaz products appear under the Photoshop “Filter” menu and can be invoked by choosing the plugin you wish to use. Although Topaz Adjust focuses its attention on exposure adjustments, it brings a suite of tools under the same interface to control exposure, color, sharpness, and noise reduction. The process is rather smooth and speedy.

The Interface

Once invoked from the “Filter” menu of Photoshop, Topaz interface appears as a free floating modal window with all the controls easily visible. On the left is the presets well, the big window presents a preview of the current image with a cumulative adjustment, at the bottom is a series of tabs arranged from left to right in the recommended workflow order. To the right of the adjustment tabs is a small image navigator when the partial image is shown after zooming in. Entire window can be adjusted and maximized to fill the screen; the preview section follows the size of the window.

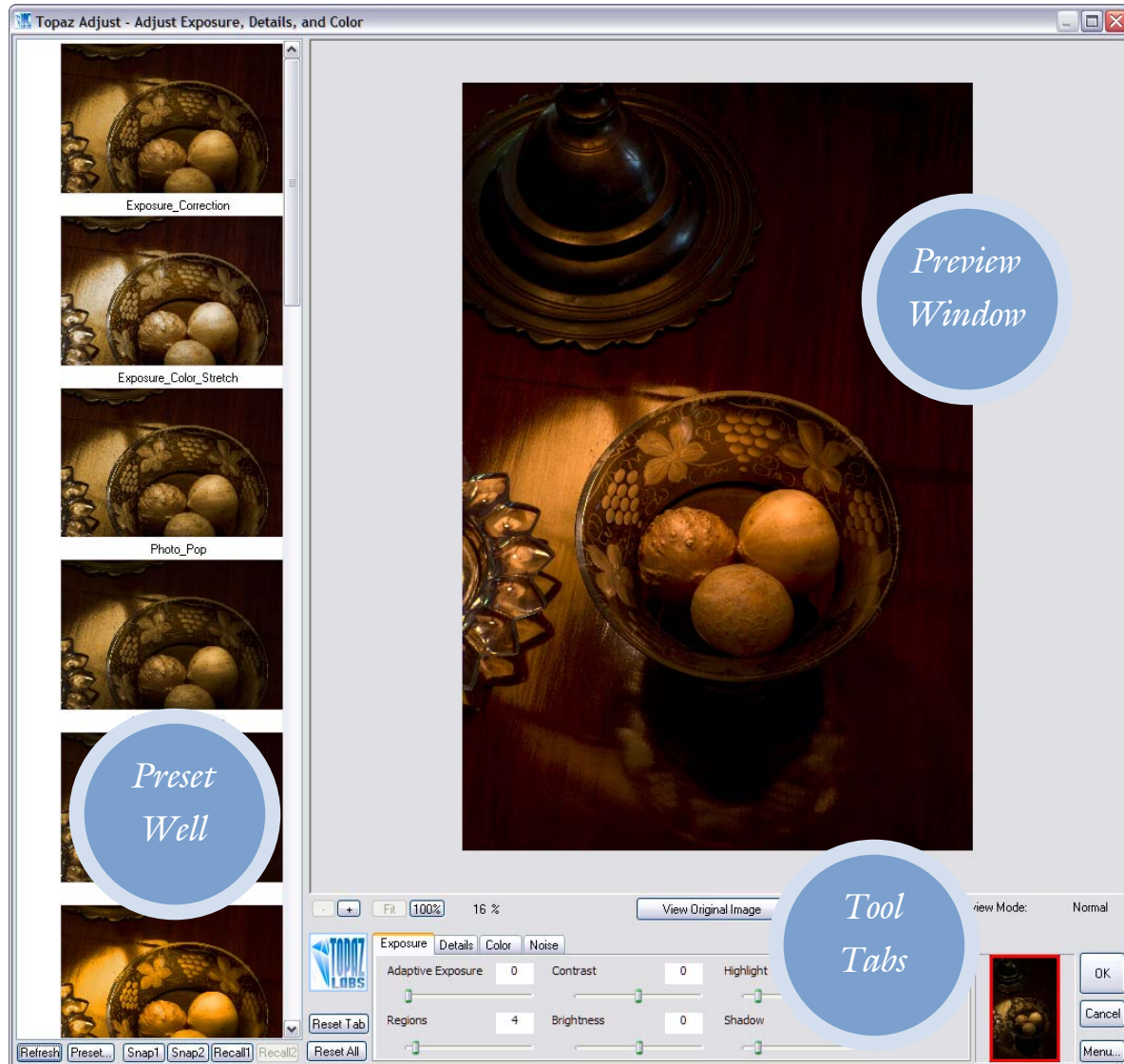


Figure 1 Topaz Adjust Interface

Just like any application window, you can click the maximize button to make it fill the screen, or double-click on the title bar to do the same; nothing unexpected there. There is also a “Menu” button which gives a few options which I consider minor; not a shortcoming but most everything you need is already visible. For instance, there is an option “Pan preview faster” which makes me wonder “why do I not want it all the time?” Although what it does is implied, the reason for selecting or not selecting it is not obvious nor is it in the PDF manual. Other options like “I’m feeling lucky” are playing roulette with your vision. It may be fun, but the danger to be lured to accept a vision that is not your own scares me.

The Presets Well

The preset well is a vertical collection of thumbnails and the area has a fixed width. Although you can turn off the thumbnails in favor of a list view some of the presets have rather nondescript names for this mode to be useful; “specify” is an example. However, for the presets you create the list mode

may be quite useful as the software runs slightly faster as it does not need to refresh the thumbnails. There are a series of presets that come with the product. You can add your own to consistently produce the results that you like. There are also resources that offer preset downloads to integrate into the presets. The small thumbnails show how your image will look with the preset applied. The thumbnails are always in the landscape mode and do not show the entire image even when it fits the viewing area.

While experimenting with different processing parameters, up to two snapshots can be saved so that the results can be easily compared while still in the Topaz Adjust module.

Whether you like the presets or not, or to use available presets from other users are personal preferences, this is where the tool has the potential of pushing its, or someone else's vision over yours if you are not careful. *Don't underestimate the power of the dark side!*

The Preview Window

The bulk of the interface is reserved for the preview area, and for a good reason. It displays your image from fitted to the window size to 400% zoom level. At any zoom setting, you can see before/after views by either clicking on the image or the button designated for this purpose. It is a good way of deciding the amount of adjustments applied to the image. Zooming is done by clicking on the + and – buttons under the preview image. Although Ctrl+ and Ctrl - keys also zoom in and out, you must use the symbols on the top row of the keyboard; the + and - keys in the numeric key pad do not work, a strange behavior which I hope will be fixed in a new release. Also, visit the “Noise” panel and lower the “Suppression” to zero to make the program more responsive. This, the manual tells you almost at the end.

The Exposure Panel

One of the major attractions in this plugin is the exposure adjustments panel. The terminology is a bit different, may even sound obtuse to some. The main idea, and the outcome it produces, is to adjust the exposure in an adaptive manner, much like the human eye does. When you are indoors on a sunny day everything indoors looks clear and bright. Then you look outside, lo and behold, despite the huge EV difference you see everything clearly as your eyes quickly “adapt” to the level of light. The adaptive exposure seems to do something akin to that. Just as your eyes separate the indoor from outdoor as two separate regions, Topaz Adjust offers a similar tool to determine the number of luminosity regions. The entire process of adjusting the image is highly visual and reasonably intuitive once you get over the terminology. You can view the results as you move the sliders, the software is very responsive. The sliders also respond to the mouse wheel but in a backward way; scroll up reduces the value and scroll down increases it. This is very counter intuitive and against the norm that I have seen in other software. Also, in order to use the mouse wheel, you have to click on the slider itself, being in the value field does not work. Same backward behavior applies to the arrows cluster as well; up arrow reduces, down arrow increases the value. I sure hope Topaz changes this behavior to bring it more in line with intuition and the common software behavior.

One can go really wild here and produce results some liken to HDR processed images. I beg to differ; they may be very different, very creative but to me that is not HDR. It is different; that's it. You may like it or you may not.

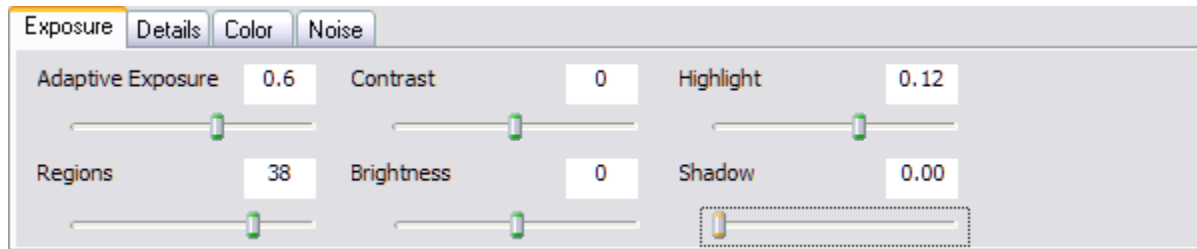


Figure 2 Exposure Panel



Figure 3 Results with above settings

The other two sliders control the highlights and shadows and prevent them from being blown or blocked. The highlight slider works in a way similar to the “Recovery” slider in Lightroom; and the shadow slider is more like a fill light. They both work as expected. The adaptive exposure ranges from 0, no adjustment, to 1, full adjustment. By adjusting the regions the effect is tamed and local contrast is increased while bringing out detail from the shadow areas. At least that is what I tried to do, your mileage may vary. Note that the “Highlight” adjustment is pushed up to prevent the highlights from blowing out. By adjusting the “Shadow” I could have opened up the shadows even more, much more; but that was not what I was after. Take a look at



what the results can be on the right. This is not what I had in mind for this photograph at all. It looks psychedelic and far too artificial to me. So, I will not go there.

The Details Panel

The adjustments in this panel are to add the desired level of punch. Again, the extreme results are possible with the adjustments, easily making the image highly brittle in no time. Your vision and your good judgment will steer you in the right direction, don't get carried away. A little goes a long

way. The terminology is again a little out of the standards I am accustomed to. For instance, “Threshold” does not mean “do not do anything until this threshold is reached” but rather “low threshold-fine detail, high threshold-coarse detail.” This is almost like the radius concept in Photoshop and Lightroom but that term is used for another purpose in Topaz Adjust detail panel.

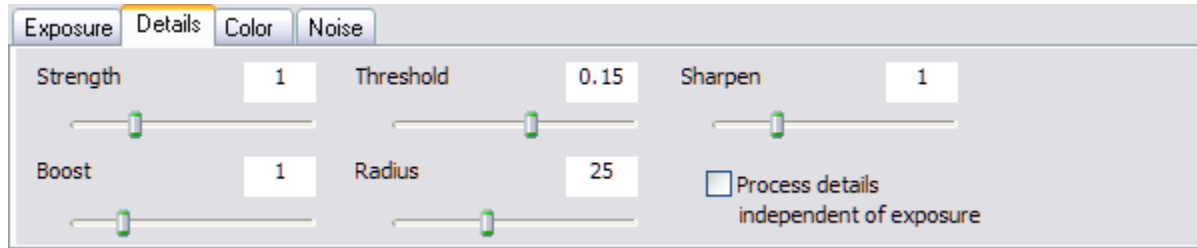
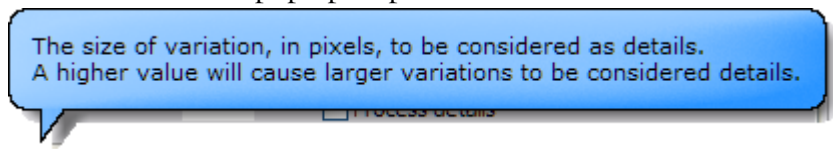


Figure 4 Details Panel

Topaz Adjust offers two kinds of details enhancement, for enhancing minute and weak detail use “Boost”, for enhancing stronger detail choose “Strength.” This can be convenient at times. Both boost and strength offer smoothing options by dragging the sliders to below 1. Both of these sliders are affected by the threshold slider. Radius slider behaves as the radius slider in the Photoshop USM and here is how the pop up help describes it:



I wish the terminology was clearer or better defined in the manual. Experiment in controlled moves to get the hang of it. Also, the “Sharpen” slider is a crude sharpening; even the manual suggests using another Topaz module to do higher quality sharpening. Leave that alone.

The Color Panel

Next in the workflow is the “Color” panel. Don’t expect to white balance your photograph here; it is more for color enhancement. The fundamental logic of “Adaptive Saturation” and “Regions” are similar constructs to their counterparts in the exposure panel. However, be prepared to see the saturation of the image to go down as you slide the adaptive saturation slider to the right; it seems to reduce the saturation from highly saturated areas in an effort to balance it. There seems to be some interaction with the luminosity levels as the brighter areas are more affected by this adjustment. If you pull it to the extreme, some parts of the image will become like gray dust, that’s the best way I can describe it. I think, simply speculating here, the gray dust works as an indicator that you have gone too far. You can pull the slider back to the left until the gray dust disappears. Helping with the adaptive saturation slider is the regions adjustment. It “mentally” divides the image into regions where localized “Adaptive Saturation” is applied.

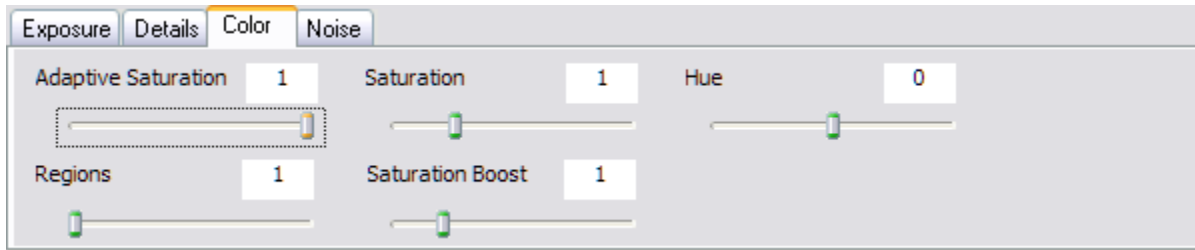


Figure 5 Color Panel



Figure 6 Full-strength Adaptive Saturation

As I indicated earlier, the “Adaptive Saturation” slider can seriously lower the saturation, essentially working as a desaturation slider. Take a look at what happens when it is applied full strength. As you see in the image on the left the saturation has been diminished significantly by applying the “Adaptive Saturation” adjustment full strength. Yes, it does even out the saturation in various areas; but it does so by lowering the saturation of highly saturated areas rather than increasing the saturation of the low saturated parts. You can also get a sense of the “gray dust” I mentioned earlier on the gourds in the bowl.

After finding an optimum point on the adaptive saturation slider, the image may be smoothed out better by using the “Regions” slider. It essentially takes the global adjustment of adaptive saturation and applies it to various regions according to its internal, and unknown to the user, regionalization.

The “Saturation” and “Saturation Boost” sliders are supposed to work as overall saturation increase and saturation of less saturated areas respectively. In my

experience they both seem to affect the same areas, but the “Saturation Boost” slider seems to be a kinder, gentler version of the saturation adjustment. All the sliders seem to change the luminosity of the image considerably. You may want to revisit the exposure panel to tweak the image luminosity to your liking.

The Noise Panel

The last adjustment panel provides controls to deal with noise. Terminology idiosyncrasy continues here as well. The main slider adjustments are “Suppression,” “Amount,” and to a lesser extent, “De-JPEG artifacts.” A passing note in the manual indicates that this panel is there for convenience and for minor noise handling. For better noise suppression they recommend their dedicated module To-

paz DeNoise. The clearly marked check box gives a strong hint to that effect as well. So, easy do it when it comes to dealing with noise in this panel. Again, a fair warning is due: If you try to reduce noise aggressively here you can easily turn your photograph into a veil with no detail left in it. I am not kidding.

The first slider “Suppression” is essentially a threshold setting that helps define what may be considered as noise. The larger the number more detail is considered as noise. The actual noise suppression is controlled by the “Amount” slider. If you think of these sliders as “defining noise” and “reducing noise” you may better relate to them as I did.

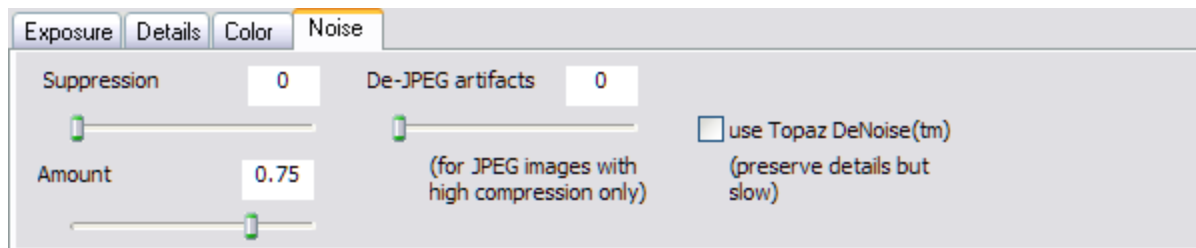


Figure 7 Noise Panel

Documentation

There is but a skimpy PDF manual which explains things through circular references, sometimes in a confusing and ambiguous manner. It certainly can stand a rewrite. The information is cursory; it seems to be written by programmers rather than from a user’s perspective. There is a small glossary which includes definitions for “Algorithm” but not of “Adaptive.” A three-page workflow section provides a quick tour to get the user started. The Topaz Labs Web site has several informative video tutorials and a knowledge base that provides answers to some questions. This is not one of the strong areas of the software.

Conclusion

I wish the concepts were better explained to help the user understand the underlying logic of the adjustments. “Regions” is defined as “The number of regions to divide the image into for purposes of Adaptive Saturation (or Adaptive Exposure).” No kidding! But we have no idea about the basis for this regionalization; is it luminosity, saturation, detail, a combination? Some of the concepts and adjustment behavior are very counter intuitive. For instance, “Threshold” in the “Detail” tab refers to the fineness of detail rather than blocking the application of detail enhancement until a threshold is reached. And let us not forget the inverted behavior of the arrow keys or the mouse scroll key, both of which seems intentional as the manual describes them as such. Speaking of the manual, it needs a rewrite with more informative explanations of the adjustments rather than repeating what they do.

There is a free add on, or an intermediary software that allows Topaz Labs plugins to work with Aperture, Lightroom, and iPhoto on the Mac platform. Since I work in Windows I could not try

that product. However, I am a bit concerned after reading one of the knowledge base questions. Apparently Topaz products require that the original passing of the image file from Aperture or Lightroom be done in sRGB color space. My concern lies in the modules ability to create extensive, perhaps even excessive color adjustments in a small color space. This is an area that the users need to be aware of and we hope that Topaz Labs brings some improvements by allowing adjustments in larger color spaces. This seems to be an issue only when the Fusion Express intermediates the connection between Lightroom, Aperture and Topaz modules. I used Topaz Adjust in Photoshop with images in ProPhoto and 16-bit color depth with no ill effects (other than those I could impart at will!)

All said Topaz Adjust is a somewhat quirky but very potent piece of software; so much so that I feel compelled to warn you not to be seduced by the extreme adjustments it is capable of generating. Unless, of course, that is what you want. Some issues I have mentioned aside, all the modules are worthy of serious consideration.

February 15, 2010
Warwick, RI