

# Photo collage

If a picture is worth a thousand words, how about a picture made up of a thousand pictures? Adrian Brannan shows you how to create stunning photo collages, without a hint of Photoshop in sight



**Camera:** Nikon D4  
**Lenses:** NIKKOR 70-200mm f/2.8G ED VR  
 & NIKKOR 24-70mm f/2.8G

**ADRIAN BRANNAN:** In the digital age we live in, collages are, more often than not, produced using Photoshop. Whilst this is a valid method, many believe it to be far more authentic and fun sticking to the old school method of cutting and pasting real prints. Considering the scale of some of the photo collages I've created it would be easy to foresee computer meltdown dealing with that many layers too! Plus, there's an old romance associated with printing images that digital files simply can't reproduce.

I've been shooting photo collages since back in the late 90s after discovering the work of David Hockney whilst studying at the Glasgow School of Art. Back then, of course, I was using 35mm film (and still do to this day) but for this tutorial I'll be shooting with a DSLR and printing the images.

When it comes to the shooting technique, collages are an unashamedly inexact science. So even zooming in on areas to exaggerate their presence, and shooting on completely different times and days to capture both different weather and night and day can ultimately all work together. Even moving from the typical single viewpoint to bring in extra aspects into a composition, or exclude the likes of obtrusive street furniture is possible. Variety in exposure and shooting times makes for an altogether more exciting collage, and allows your image to include so much more than what a single image ever would. At the most extreme I have found myself revisiting some long term personal projects over anything as long as ten years, to create a single collage that spans over time!

There's no need to be meticulously measuring out each shot on a tripod, if fact I only really tend to use my tripod when shooting in low light, or capturing light trails as part of a scene. It's not all snap-happy chaos though, you will have to try and shoot with some planning so that the jigsaw pieces you end up with do actually work coherently together.



So why a collage rather than a single image, or seamless panorama? It's true, you can seamlessly stitch images together to capture a similar perspective, but what about those times where you want to create something less clinical? An image that really captures the raw unedited life in a scene? As with any photographic technique, it pays to use it when the final image will benefit from it, rather than looking like a mere gimmick. As seen here, cityscapes lend themselves well to this technique with their busyness and constantly changing features.

In terms of kit, you'll need a zoom lens, ideally with a minimum focal length of 70mm – this will allow you to shoot at a variety of focal lengths without swapping lenses. Bare in mind that the longer focal length used, the more images it will take to make up your collage. I would also recommend shooting in JPEG mode to keep file sizes down, as you'll be working with a lot of images.

Whether your final collage contains five, fifty or five-hundred images the basic technique is the same – it's complexity is entirely down to you. Here's how you do it...

**TOP TIP**  
 Don't be afraid to zoom in on areas of interest in the scene. Collages are abstract by nature, so let your creativity run free!



**1 Find a location** With my location scouted, I find it useful to use an ultra wide-angle lens to take a quick test shot and assess the composition of the scene before committing to the project. This reference shot can also come in handy when you start arranging the collage later on, too. Basic compositional techniques such as lead-in lines and the rule of thirds still apply to collages. I've chosen a busy Edinburgh Street as there's plenty of interest in the scene.



**2 Start shooting** Switch lenses to your telephoto and begin shooting the scene in fragments. Don't be too methodical, but rather focus on events in the scene as they happen, such as interesting people, cars moving, birds in the sky, etc. Pivot around a point and vary focal lengths – don't be afraid to chop between settings and zoom in and out. Make a mental note of what you have and haven't shot – even if you missed areas, don't worry at this stage.



**3 Develop your images** If you have a photo printer at home you can do this yourself, or you can use a high-street lab or online service such as Photobox ([www.photobox.co.uk](http://www.photobox.co.uk)). With your prints done, lay them out on a large board – white foamboard works well here. I find it useful to draw a grid onto the board beforehand, as it prevents the composition from falling out of line. Start putting the photos in place, building your collage up like a giant jigsaw puzzle.



**4 Trim down the images** Use scissors or a guillotine to carefully trim images down to the parts required and use high-quality double-sided tape to stick them in place on the board. You may find that some areas don't join up, due to altering perspectives and converging verticals – cutting photos in half and mating them with other shots can often resolve this, but remember, the beauty of collages is that it doesn't all have to line up perfectly!



**5 Return to the scene** Once the bare bones are complete, it's a good idea to take a photograph of the collage, print it out and make notes on it. Highlight gaps that need filling in or areas that could be improved upon. Return to the scene and focus on these areas. I'll often do this at a different time of day to the original to make the final image more interesting and dynamic. You can also try shooting using a different White Balance to vary the effect.



**6 Shoot the final piece** Add in the missing and improved areas as before, make sure everything is stuck down firmly and you're happy with the final composition. The final step is to create a digital image of your collage by photographing it. Make sure it is evenly lit – I've used two studio lights with umbrellas to light my collage, and shot on a low ISO for optimal image quality. Lighting the collage from the sides will help avoid awkward reflections on the prints.



**Final image**  
 Variety is the key to a successful collage. After all, if it ends up looking like a single image you may as well have done that in the first place!