The best photo editing software in 2019 from Digital Camera World

By Rod Lawton

Photoshop is not the only choice, as the market is now flooded with exciting and capable alternatives

Photoshop isn't just the world's best-known photo-editing application, it's entered the language as a verb (to 'Photoshop') and an adjective (oh, that's obviously been 'Photoshopped'). But there are lots of other programs that are just as good or better at enhancing your pictures.

The first problem is that these days you can only get Photoshop with one of Adobe's subscription plans. Adobe's Photography Plans are very good value, but lots of people want to pay outright for a licence, just like the old days, instead of paying a monthly fee. If that includes you, then take a look at some of the other programs on our list.

Second, Photoshop is just a photo editor. That's all it does. If you need to open a raw file it has to go through Adobe Camera Raw first (which is included). If you need to organise your photos you need a separate program like Lightroom (included in the same Photography Plans). If you need fancy black and white effects, retro/analog effects, HDR or one of dozen other specialised 'looks', you'll probably be better off using a custom-made plug-in rather than wrestling for hours with Photoshop.

Third, it doesn't do quick and simple non-destructive editing with one-click preset effects. This is increasingly how modern photo-editing applications tend to work, but Photoshop stays with its roots as an old-school in-depth one-process-at-a-time image editor.

Fourth, remember that Photoshop is also for artists, designers, videographers and illustrators. There's a lot in this program you won't need, and only a finite amount of space for photography-dedicated tools.

So Photoshop is great at what it does, but what it does is starting to look pretty limited. Which is why the other programs on our list all deserve a long, hard look. Many are cheaper, many are simpler, many are smarter.

Lightroom is so powerful you may not need Photoshop at all, **Affinity Photo** does everything that Photoshop does at a fraction of the price, **Capture One Pro** is like Lightroom for pros and **DxO PhotoLab** can make ordinary cameras and lenses look better than you could ever have imagined.

If you're looking for cheaper all-in-one photo editors, get **Adobe Photoshop Elements** if you must, but first take a look at **ON1 Photo RAW 2019**, **Alien Skin Exposure X4** and **Luminar 3 with Libraries**. Adobe might still be the big name in photo editing, but don't decide anything until you see what its rivals can do!

1. Adobe Photoshop CC

Photoshop's scope is limited, but it's powerful, slick and fast

PC: Intel Core 2 or AMD Athlon 64 processor 2 GHz, 2GB RAM (8GB recommended), Windows 7 to 10 | **Mac:** Multicore Intel 64-bit, 2GB RAM (8GB recommended), OS X 10.11 or later | **Hard drive:** 4GB | **Minimum screen resolution:** 1024x768 pixels

+ Immensely powerful
+ Clean, intuitive interface
- Subscription-based
- Needs Lightroom or Bridge

Lightroom CC plan **£9.98**/mth
Creative Cloud Photography plan (1 TB) **£19.97**/mth

VISIT SITE at Adobe

Adobe's decision to make Photoshop a subscription-only product remains controversial. Nevertheless, Photoshop is slick, powerful and constantly improving. Its support for selections, masks and layers is unmatched, making it the tool of choice for complex composite images. Despite its reputation for complexity, Photoshop actually offers a very clean, slick interface. There are no 'novice' modes, but the tools panel does offer fly-out animations that show you how the tools work and what they do. There are no image browsing or cataloguing tools in Photoshop itself, but since Lightroom is included in the same Photography Plans as Photoshop, that's not an issue. On its own, Photoshop is powerful but limited; with Adobe Lightroom it's half of an unbeatable double-act of image editing.

2. Adobe Photoshop Lightroom Classic/CC

Lightroom is great, but its split personality (Classic and CC) is not

PC: Intel Core 2 or AMD Athlon 64 2 GHz or faster, 2GB RAM (8GB recommended), Windows 7 SP1 to 10 | **Mac:** Intel 64-bit, 2GB RAM (8GB recommended), OS X 10.12 or later | **Hard drive:** 2GB (10GB for CC) | **Minimum screen resolution:** 1024x768 pixels

+ Seamless raw editing
+ Easy Photoshop 'round-tripping
+ Mobile synchronisation
- Lightroom CC is limited

Lightroom CC plan **£9.98** /mth
Creative Cloud Photography plan (1 TB) **£19.97**/mth

Lightroom is an all-in-one image cataloguing, Raw-processing and editing program that makes the perfect partner for Photoshop. Lightroom can take care of all your everyday organizing and image-enhancement needs while Photoshop tackles the complex pixel-based processes that Lightroom can't. If your main work is photo enhancement rather than manipulation, though, you might not need Photoshop at all. But Adobe has made things more confusing by splitting off the 'old' Lightroom, now called Lightroom Classic for regular desktop storage, and introducing a new, slimmed-down Lightroom CC which stores all your photos online. You get both in the main Adobe Photography Plan, but for us the Classic version is by far the best.

3. Affinity Photo 1.6

If you like Photoshop's approach but not its price, Affinity Photo is perfect

PC: Processor not quoted, 2GB RAM (4GB recommended), Windows 7 SP1 to 10 | **Mac:** 64-bit Core Duo 2 or better, 2GB RAM, OS X 10.9 or later | **Hard drive:** 670MB | **Minimum screen resolution:** 1280x768 pixels

+ Powerful tools
+ Cheap to buy
- No cataloguing tools
- Quite technical

CHECK AMAZON

We complain that there's too much Photoshop doesn't do, but the fact is for many photographers this kind of old-school image-editor is exactly what they need. And Affinity Photo gives you exactly the same thing subscription-free, via a single extra-low payment. Affinity Photo is sold at a budget price point, but it has the tools and the features and the power to compete with Photoshop head-on. Serif has focused particularly heavily on the retouching market, with cloning, healing and retouching tools, an Inpainting tool for automatic object removal and a dedicated Liquify persona (workspace) for localized image distortion effects. Affinity Photo is an extremely powerful photo editor with more tools and features than there's space to list here, from focus stacking to high-end frequency separation. It does not, however, have any browsing or cataloguing tools, so keep that in mind.

4. PhaseOne Capture One Pro 12

This high-end Lightroom rival is built for professionals

PC: 2-core CPU or better, 8GB RAM, Windows 7 SP1 to 10 | **Mac:** 2-core CPU or better, 8GB RAM, OS X 10.12.6 or later | **Hard drive:** 10GB | **Minimum screen resolution:** 1200x800 pixels

+ Excellent raw processing
+ Layers based adjustments
+ Great tethering tools
- Expensive (£247)

Capture One works both as tethered capture and editing tool for studio photographers with a 'sessions' based workflow and as a Lightroom-style image cataloguing, searching and non-destructive editing tool. Capture One Pro works in a single window rather than in Lightroom-style 'modules' and has a highly customizable set of 'tool tabs'. One of the key differences is its layers-based local adjustment system which makes it much easier to see and edit your changes to your work, and this now includes 'parametric' linear and radial gradient masks which you can edit later. Capture One's conversions look smoother and sharper than Lightroom's, and Phase One's new co-operative arrangement with Fujifilm means it can produce arguably the best Fujifilm processing you'll see and also recreate Fujifilm's Film Simulation modes. Capture One doesn't offer Lightroom's cloud-based 'mobile' synchronisation, but it does have excellent tone, colour and image adjustment options.

5. DxO PhotoLab 2.1

The ultimate in raw processing and lens correction, but specialised

PC: Intel Core 2 or AMD Athlon 64 X2, 4GB RAM (8GB recommended), Windows 7 SP1 to 10 | **Mac:** Intel Core i5 or higher, 4GB RAM (6GB recommended), OS X 10.12 or later | **Hard drive:** 4GB | **Minimum screen resolution:** Not quoted

+ Superb raw processing
+ Excellent lens corrections
- Doesn't support Fujifilm cameras
- PhotoLibrary disappointing

DxO PhotoLab is the replacement for DxO Optics Pro, adding local adjustment tools to make it a more powerful all-round photo-editing solution. You use the new PhotoLibrary window to browse your image folders, create Projects and carry out basic filtering and housekeeping tasks. It now has a search tool, but to be honest it feels somewhat unfinished and detracts from PhotoLab's real qualities – its superb raw processing, amazingly effective PRIME denoise tool, excellent local image adjustments and highly effective (and automatic) lens corrections. The image quality produced by PhotoLab is second to none. On the downside, you'll need the more expensive Elite edition to get the PRIME denoise and DxO's ClearView Plus feature, and if you want to apply perspective corrections (once built into Optics Pro) you'll need the DxO ViewPoint plug-in. DxO's FilmPack analog effects plug-in is also extra, so the cost of the full suite is significantly higher.

6. ON1 Photo RAW 2019

An affordable alternative that can do practically everything!

PC: Intel Core 2 Duo, Xeon, or better, 4GB RAM (16GB recommended), Windows 7 to 10 | **Mac:** Intel Core 2 Duo, 4GB RAM (16GB recommended), OS X 10.12 or later | **Hard drive:** 1.5GB | **Minimum screen resolution:** 1280x720 pixels

+ Great range of effects

+ Support for layers
+ Non-destructive editing
- There's a lot to take in $99.99

ON1 Photo RAW 2019 is perhaps the single most complete solution of all the programs here. It has a built-in hybrid browsing and cataloguing module that gives you fuss-free exploring of your image folders but more powerful search tools if you need them. It has an Edit module with Develop, Effects, Portrait and Local (adjustment) panels, and the Effects module alone has a vast array of filters that can be adjusted, masked and combined in an infinite array of permutations. The 2019 version pulls off a particularly amazing trick, incorporating layers, masking and compositing tools into its fully non-destructive workflow. ON1 Photo RAW 2019 might not be as well-known as some rivals, but it's worth any keen photographer taking a look, especially as the 2019 version has had an interface update to make it look fresh, crisp and modern.

7. Alien Skin Exposure X4

A powerful all-in-one program, especially for analog photography fans

PC: Intel Core 2 or compatible, Windows 7 64-bit or later | **Mac:** Intel Core 2 or compatible, OS X 10.10 or later | **Hard drive:** Not quoted | **Minimum screen resolution:** 1280x768 pixels

+ Powerful all-in-one editing tool
+ Easy non-destructive editing
+ Wide range of presets
- Scanning large folders can be slow $149

Like ON1 Photo RAW 2019, Alien Skin Exposure X4 is a relatively little-known program that deserves a lot more recognition than it gets. It's a subtle, powerful and efficient all-in-one photo editing and browsing tool that specializes in analogue film effects and comes with a huge library of simple one-click preset effects. It doesn't have the layer compositing support you get in ON1 Photo RAW 2019, but it hits back with a neater, simpler interface, some beautiful effects and straightforward and effective tools. Like ON1 Photo RAW 2019, it also offers non-destructive adjustments and 'virtual copies' to try out lots of different looks for a single image without having to save additional files. Version 4 adds Smart Collections, a Lightroom migration tool and handy Transform (perspective correction) tools.

8. Luminar 3 with libraries

A pocket-money priced photo editor that's really going places

PC: Intel Core i5 or better, Windows 7 64-bit or later | **Mac:** Early 2010 Mac or better, OS X 10.11 or later | **Hard drive:** 10GB | **Minimum screen resolution:** Not quoted

+ Wide range of filters and tools
+ Customisable workspaces
+ Non-destructive workflow
- No virtual copies yet   Offer $59

Skylum Luminar is a relative newcomer to the photo-editing scene but it's made a big splash already. If you like the idea of an all-in-one photo-editor that can both organise your images and edit them with a fully non-destructive workflow, then you're in the right place! It even supports image layers, masks and montages. The update to version 3 is relatively new and introduces Luminar Libraries – previously, Luminar 2018 was simple a standalone photo-editor/effects tool. The Libraries feature offers fast, painless photo import, 'live' folder monitoring and – later in 2019 – it will offer virtual copies and search tools like those in ON1 Photo RAW and Alien Skin Exposure X. So it's not quite up to speed with the best of its rivals yet, but its price is amazing and this is definitely a program to watch.

9. Adobe Photoshop Elements 2019

Elements is cheap, but it's cheesier than an out of date brie

PC: 64-bit 1.6GHz or faster, 4GB RAM, Win 7 SP1 to 10 | **Mac:** Multicore Intel 64-bit, 4GB RAM, OS X 10.11 or later | **Hard drive:** 5GB | **Minimum screen resolution:** 1280x800 pixels

+   Friendly interface
+   Guided edits
-    Raw processing limited
-    Many effects are crude

Photoshop Elements is very much the 'amateur' version of Photoshop, with a simplified, family-orientated interface and a heavy emphasis on beginners and novices. Photoshop Elements 2018 is actually two programs, not one. It consists of the Elements Organizer and the Elements Editor, which do work together but can also work as standalone programs. The Organizer can browse your photos folder by folder, but it also offers albums for bringing your photos together 'virtually' and Smart Tags which identify common subjects automatically, saving on time. From the Organizer, you can open images directly in the Editor, which has an eLive mode for inspiration and tutorials, a Quick mode for fast and simple effects, a Guided mode with an ever-expanding list of effects walkthroughs, and an Expert mode with the full range of tools. The Guided mode is a good idea, but many effects look crude and dated, while the Expert mode has hardly moved on at all. It feels like Elements is just treading water these days, as it's overtaken by fresher, faster and trendier rivals.