

Night Photography

Get the best shots that you and your camera are capable of.

Some digital photography tips for better photos in the dark. From night photography settings for your DSLR to ideas for creative low light pictures.

The quick answer? ISO100, f/11, 30 seconds.

1 Get high quality night shots

If you want the best night shots you need to shoot in the best image quality, and that means RAW. By shooting in RAW your images will retain the most 'information', which gives you greater scope for enhancing your shots in Adobe Camera Raw and other raw-processing software. RAW is especially beneficial when taking night shots as it gives more flexibility when you want to change things such as colour temperature (or White Balance) or accurately increase (brighten) or decrease (darken) your exposures. If you're not shooting in Raw (and why not?) you'll have to make do with the less adjustable Jpeg.

2 Use a tripod for sharp pictures

Shooting at night obviously means there will be less light and therefore slow shutter speeds, anywhere from 1-30 seconds - that's way too slow to shoot hand-held. So you'll need to attach your digital camera securely to a tripod if you want sharp results. Make sure your tripod is set up correctly and rock solid - it's easy to end up with soft images because you haven't double-checked. A tiny vibration in 30 seconds will spoil the picture. Hang your camera bag off the hook on the bottom of the centre column if you can. If there's no hook, there's usually an alternative. And don't hold onto your tripod as you're shooting with slow shutter speeds because any slight movement can mean blurred photos. Best to shoot with a short delay (most cameras have a short one and a long one), then the mirror will get out of the way before the shutter opens, reducing vibration even more.

3 Pick your night photography locations in advance

Before you venture out into the night, it will pay dividends and save you valuable time later if you plan ahead. Pick good locations beforehand by scouting out the best spots in your local town to find the most interesting lights and architecture, or if you're looking to shoot traffic light trails, check which roads are busiest, when is the best time for traffic, and which is the best (and safest) position to take photos from. Check out the web (Flickr etc) for inspiration, to see how other photographers have tackled the local city lights at night.

4 Use the lens sweet spot

Use the 'sweet spot' range of apertures for your lenses - this is usually between f/8 and f/16, but take test shots to find out. Even pro-level lenses don't produce the best results when used at their maximum and minimum apertures. By using apertures in the middle of the available range you'll increase your chances of capturing the sharpest shots with your lens.

5 Night photography settings

To take control of your exposures it's best to shoot in Manual mode so you can choose the best narrow aperture and slow shutter speed for night photography. Begin by composing and focusing your shot, set a narrow aperture around f/16, then dial in the right shutter speed until the Exposure Level Mark is in the middle of the Exposure Level Indicator. Take some shots and review them on your LCD. Remember this is what your camera thinks is the best exposure, but if your shots are looking too bright, underexpose by 1-2 stops so that they actually look dark!

6 How to get a 'starburst' effect on street lights

Using a narrow aperture (around f/16) will not only ensure a deeper depth of field, so your shots are sharp from foreground to background, but will also make street lights 'sparkle' in your scenes to give your pictures an added magical effect.

7 Composition at night

Carefully study the scene before you start taking photos. Are parts of the scene in darkness? Do areas of the shot become more interesting, brightly lit or colourful as it gets darker? If so, don't be afraid to zoom in on the most photogenic areas. Zoom in with your wide-angle zoom lens or 'zoom with your feet' - just move closer to your subject...

8 Use Mirror Lock-up

The slightest movement can create unwanted camera shake, and this even includes the mirror moving up and down inside your digital SLR. You can quickly enable Mirror Lock-up (look for it in your camera menu's Custom Functions menu) to get around this potential pitfall.

9 Don't touch your camera!

When taking long exposures at night, even touching your camera to press the shutter button can create enough movement to leave you with blurred results. Use your digital camera's built-in self-timer to trigger the shutter after you've pressed the button to avoid any problems. For shots that rely on accurate timing, use a remote release instead

10 Creative ideas for people shots

Invariably we photographers go out of our way to avoid capturing people in our scenic shots. However, when it comes to night photography, including crowds of people in your frame can add contrast and interest to your pictures. If people are stationary, try using them as a creative silhouette to enhance photos. Or, if people are walking through, try using a shutter speed of around 1/4-1/2 sec so they're 'creatively' blurred.

11 Which ISO setting is best for night photography?

The ISO setting you need depends on the type of night photos you're taking. If you're shooting city scenes with long exposures, you'll be using a tripod, so you can keep the ISO at 100 or 200. This will also keep noise levels down - ideal for retaining maximum detail in scenic night shots. If you're shooting an outdoor performance at night and working hand-held, you'll need to bump up the ISO to ensure a fast enough shutter speed for capturing sharp shots, but you'll have to accept the deterioration involved with fast ISO.

12 Motion blur shots

Capturing motion blur on camera can transform drab scenes into dramatic works of art. The good news is, like most night photography, you simply need to use your digital camera on a tripod and select a slow shutter speed (try between 2-5 secs, depending on the speed of the vehicles that you're shooting) to take creative motion shots at night. Camera Shake is NOT Movement blur!

13 Auto or manual focus?

For night shots it's best to use both autofocus (AF) and manual focus (MF). Use AF to focus on to part of the scene, then switch to MF to keep the focus locked. That way your camera won't be 'hunting' to achieve autofocus if the light or scene changes or a good surge of traffic drives past. When shooting in the dark you'll need to find part of your scene that is bright and contrasty enough for your camera to be able to achieve AF, otherwise you'll only be limited to MF.

14 Timings for night photography

The time of night can make all the difference when it comes to capturing traffic light trails. There will be more traffic in your local city centre between 5-6pm - for once you'll be wishing for rush-hour traffic! Set up in a safe place on a busy road and experiment with 10-30 sec exposures to see which captures the densest light trails. Try and fire the shutter as buses drive past as their interior and rear lights will produce thick streaks high and low in your frame. Note that early in the evening, there will still be a little light in the sky.

15 Try to reduce the amount of darkness in the shot

A lot of darkness will be handled by your camera's meter in the usual way - it will try to give an exposure that makes them grey. It's easy to over-expose the lights unless controlled by some exposure compensation (which can be a bit hit and miss and a tedious task when you have to wait 30 seconds, plus the longer in-camera (development) time. To reduce the darkness, it's best to just zoom (with your lens or your feet) to fill the frame with lighting.

16 White Balance settings at night

If you're using Auto White Balance, it's easy for your DSLR to get confused with what it thinks is the best White Balance (WB) setting when shooting under street lights at night. To ensure consistent results, give thought to manually setting WB; try the Cloudy (6000K) setting to warm up your scenes (making them more orange) or Tungsten (3200K) to cool down the temperature (making them look more blue). However, these settings can be a little too influential and so, if you've worked out how to put a manual White Balance setting on your camera, go for it. If shooting Raw, though, you can correct later - another advantage of Raw.

17 Switch IS or VR off

Image Stabilisation, Vibration Reduction or Shake Reduction - different terms for the same thing- on lenses or in cameras are very useful for reducing camera shake when you're shooting hand-held, but it can have the opposite effect when you're using a tripod, have no vibration to worry about and you're taking long exposures. The gyroscopic sensors inside most IS/VR/SR lenses and cameras will actually be creating unwanted movement. Switch IS/VR/SR off and you won't have to worry! Doing so will also increase battery life - which will be very helpful in cold conditions.

18 How to photograph star trails

While traffic light trails exposures are 30 seconds long, star trails can take over 30 minutes! There are two methods to shoot star trails, in one long exposure, or in a series of shorter exposures joined together. With the single exposure method it's best to use your camera's Long Exposure Noise Reduction function. The problem with one long exposure is the sky can become quite light by the end. Or you can take a series of exposures and mix them together using a piece of software called Startrails (www.startrails.de). Use an aperture of f/4 and an ISO of 400 to let plenty of light in. Take a series of 30-second exposures on Bulb (in Manual mode) and in continuous shooting mode (with Long Exposure Noise Reduction turned off). Sequences need to last an hour or more for a good visual effect.

19 Reflections at night

To give your night shots a boost, look out for water in front of buildings, rivers or lakes, for reflections that double the amount of lights and colour in your images. Even wonderful wet, wintry weather can help to turn drab pavements and courtyards into interesting reflective surfaces, which in turn creates some foreground interest.

20 Special effects

Try the zoom burst technique to capture artistic effects of night lights. For this you'll need a zoom lens, your 18-55mm or 17-85mm kit lens will do nicely, and a slow shutter speed - depending on available light, around 1/15-1/4 sec is a good start. Start with your lens at its wide-angle end, then zoom in as you press the shutter button. Alternatively, start zoomed in, then press the shutter button and zoom out. Experiment and you'll soon be capturing zoom-tastic results!

21 Painting with light technique

On a night with no moon, any rocks, trees and statues in your landscape shots can become silhouettes against the sky, so try lighting them up using a powerful flashlight - not the kind that connects to your camera but the one you can get at a decent hardware store. With a tungsten bulb, the 'painted' feature takes on a golden colour. By covering the torch with a blue CTB (Colour Temperature Blue) gel, you can create a more natural, moonlight effect. There are Halogen lamps too, which need a different treatment.

For the best torchlit pictures:

- Arrive before it gets dark to find the best composition.
- Switch to Manual exposure mode and start with an exposure of around 120 seconds at f/8. Work the aperture up or down from there or change the shutter speed to adjust the exposure. The timing isn't an exact science - just count in your head!
- Keep the torch beam in motion, otherwise you'll have patches and blotchy light over the subject

22 Keep your camera working in cold weather

Battery power is drastically reduced when shooting in cold conditions - and when taking long exposures. To avoid being caught out and missing the perfect shot, keep a spare battery or two in your jacket pocket so you're ready to quickly switch when a battery inevitably dies. We often find that by warming up the original, cold battery in our pocket, it will come back to life so you can use it for another brief burst of shots if you get desperate. We know we don't need to say it, but don't forget to keep yourself warm too - and if you're in a busy area or shooting near roads, wear a hi-visibility vest for extra safety.

23 Digital darkroom tips

When processing your RAW night photos in Adobe Camera Raw, don't be afraid to pump up the Temperature slider to increase the intensity of the lights and colours. Nudging up the Vibrance and Saturation sliders a bit will boost colours too - just don't overdo it. Use the Recovery slider after these tweaks to combat clipped (over-exposed) highlights, which can often appear after you've carried out colour and tone enhancements.

Above all, be safe out there! Don't venture into areas that you feel are unsafe and be very careful of traffic on the roads - and those idiots who ride bikes without lights!