

Photography in the Snow.

It's that time of year again.... how to - without being in the Alps or the Rockies - capture some interesting pictures in the snow.

One of the major challenges when shooting outdoors in the winter is the snow. The snow presents some interesting challenges that make it one of the toughest scenes to shoot. Typically, when you shoot in the winter with snow on the ground, pictures tend to come out very dull and underexposed if you shoot in automatic or semi automatic modes. But why?

Simply put, even the most expensive cameras will get confused when presented with a scene where white is very predominant. The reason is that a camera doesn't see colour; it only sees grey tones and bases its measurements of the light on the grey tones, not white or black. Since you are photographing snow which is white, your camera will try to make the snow a light grey and in doing so it will underexpose your photo.



The great thing is that every camera, whether it is a compact or a digital SLR, has all of the overrides you will need to remedy this situation. Your camera will have a button on the exterior or in the menu of your camera called exposure compensation. This mode allows the photographer to override what the camera thinks is the right exposure by forcing the camera to overexpose or underexpose relative to what it thinks is the correct exposure.



If you are taking pictures in the snow, have a look at the image on your screen and if it appears to be a little dull or dark, try adjusting your exposure compensation. When you start adjusting the exposure compensation on your camera, you will see a scale that goes from -2 to +2 (though it could be more).

The general rule of thumb for a winter scene with snow is to set your exposure compensation to +1.5. This effectively tells your camera to brighten the scene and this prevents your snow from coming out grey and your scene will have much better colour.



Note that sometimes your camera has to be in a certain mode to allow you access to exposure compensation.

Your Camera:

When it gets cold your camera can start behaving in ways that may drive you crazy. Firstly, all batteries, whether they are alkaline, lithium ion (Li-ion) or Nickel metal Hydride (NiMH), don't last as long in the cold. Why? Batteries are not designed to operate at peak performance once it gets below freezing. There is a really easy solution to this that is used by photographers the world over. Take a spare battery and keep it in a pocket that will stay warm with heat from your body, so when your camera says the first battery is running low, you'll have another to swap out. When you do swap the batteries, put the discharged battery into your pocket to heat up and once the other battery dies, put the old one back in and repeat. Since the first battery will have been warmed back up, the camera will say it has a lot more charge than when you took it out. Please note that if you use this trick make sure that you don't have change or keys in your pocket with the battery because you'll end up discharging your battery by accident!

Another problem commonly encountered with winter shooting is that your camera and your lens does not respond well to extreme temperature changes. When you subject glass to rapid temperature changes condensation will form on it, which makes for very foggy pictures. If you are driving to your shooting location, try and keep your camera as close to the outside temperature as possible. Or, at very least when you get out of the car, let some air circulate in your camera bag to let your gear acclimatize, so when you see an awesome shot you don't have to stand around for 5 minutes waiting for your lens and viewfinder to un-fog.

Other Outdoor Tips:

It's a great idea to invest in two kinds of gloves for shooting in the cold. First, get a pair of thin gloves that have some grip on them so you don't drop your camera but still allow you to press all of the buttons on your camera. Then have a second pair of very warm gloves to put on over top of the thin gloves. Toasty hands makes for much better pictures.

Almost every camera these days has a mode that allows you to press your shutter and keep taking pictures in rapid succession. You can use this to your advantage to help you ensure you get a sharp picture if you don't have a tripod with you. The trick is to take 3 to 6 shots of the same scene very quickly. Generally speaking, if you do this the first picture will be a bit blurry and so will the last one, but one of the pictures in between should be nice a sharp.

Brace Yourselves!

Most serious photographers, over the years, learned to keep their elbows tight and 'brace' themselves, lock the viewfinder to the eye and support the camera under the lens - some quite long exposures can be used and many experienced photographers became capable of holding a camera without shake, down to around 1/30th of a second. Nowadays, many compact, or 'point and shoot' cameras do not have a viewfinder. Even the camera shop salesmen tell users to hold their camera at arms length to take a shot by using the screen on the back. Frankly, there's not much alternative if you've only got the LCD screen (which most 'senior' people would struggle to see properly, with or without reading glasses). The bottom line is.... the further your camera is from your body, the more you will shake. So, for me at least, a camera without a viewfinder is about as much use as a chocolate teapot! So if you want the kids or grandkids to get involved in photography, start them off properly and get them a *proper* camera!