

## Long Exposure Nighttime Photography Tips

By Chuck Palmer

Many effects of nighttime long exposure photography can be stunning, resulting in “remarkable” portfolio-quality photos. Whether you are shooting a moving Ferris Wheel at the local Fair, light trails of city traffic or rocket ships, or a lighted city skyline, here are a few tips to consider when setting up your long exposure nighttime shot.



Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse – 35mm, 0.6 sec, f/8.0, ISO 640 – Three Exposure HDR

Step 1 – Prepare your equipment – You will need a camera with a manual mode, tripod, wide-angle and telephoto lenses, a cable or wireless remote release will come in handy, and a small flashlight will help with camera setup (a cell phone will work).

Step 2 – Set up your camera and initial camera settings.

- Attach your camera securely to your tripod.
- Exposure Mode – Manual. You will need to be in full control of shutter speed, and aperture.
- ISO – Set your ISO setting to the lowest possible. Typically, ISO 100. Experiment with higher ISO settings if you need to shorten your shutter speed, but keep your ISO as low as possible.
- Lens Aperture – There is no absolutely “correct” aperture for long exposure nighttime photography. In general, with longer shutter speeds involved, you will need to stop the lens down to smaller apertures. Your starting f-stop depends on how close you are to the lights and

the action, how much of the frame is filled with bright ambient light, as well as your necessary shutter speed to get the effect you had in mind. Shooting a Ferris Wheel with a wide angle lens can turn out very interesting if you only slightly blur the moving lights at 1/60<sup>th</sup> of second with a very wide open f-stop, while car light trails along a long roadway may require you stop down to f/16 – f/22 for a very long exposure. Experiment and adjust by looking at your histogram and over-exposure blink warnings. Your correct exposure captures as much of the shadows that you can without over exposing the bright highlights of the lights in your frame.

- Shutter Speed – Normally you will use long exposures at slow shutter speeds. But experiment with different shutter speeds from 1/60 to 30 seconds depending on the amount of detail you want in your light trails. Set a specific shutter speed for your first shot. Continuous moving lights like a Ferris Wheel... start at 1/60<sup>th</sup> to 2 Seconds. Long light trails like moving traffic, start at 1/15 to 6 seconds. The great thing about digital photography is that you can see the results. If your lights are too blurred, then your shutter speed is too long. Dial it back. Adjust your f-stop accordingly. Typically - Long shutter speeds = f/11 or higher. Short shutter speeds = f/5.6 or lower. If need be, adjust your ISO.
- Focus Mode – Manual Focus. Try focusing your camera on your subject considering your depth of field, or set your focus to infinity when shooting wide landscapes, but be sure your camera is set to manual focus mode. You don't want your camera auto searching for focus during your exposure. Use your LCD screen zoomed in to optimize your focus.
- White Balance – If you shoot in raw format, you can easily modify White Balance settings in post-processing software. However, you will likely find a Tungsten/Incandescent White Balance setting typically provides more vivid colors.
- Shooting/Drive Mode – Set to Cable Release or Wireless Remote Release mode to prevent camera shake. If you don't have a remote release, you can use your self-timer set to 2 seconds, but timing your shot may be much more challenging for some subjects.
- Lens Image Stabilization – Turn this feature off while photographing from a tripod.



ULA Atlas V – Port Canaveral 18mm, 77sec, f/20, ISO 100

Step 3 – Compose your shot - Remarkable images really starts with a great composition. Some of the more compelling long exposure night images provide a wider angle view or a foreground reflection of the light over water or wet, rainy streets. Try including silhouettes of people in the foreground when shooting images of the whirling rides of your local County Fair. Ask a few people in your frame to hold still as you expose the scene. Consider horizontal and vertically composed images. Use your camera's live view to frame and watch the action to optimize composition before you release the shutter. Fill the frame and change up your point of view. The most important thing is to mix things up as you shoot. Experiment with shutter speeds, vary your lens choice or zoom settings. Getting close with wider angle lenses can make a very interesting image. The more variety you include in your photos the better the chances you come home with some very remarkable images.

What makes Long Exposure Nighttime Photography so special is that each image is unique since light trails move in unique ways. And your shutter speed will make a huge difference in your results. Remarkable images can be your reward for trying Long Exposure Nighttime Photography. Give it a try, and may the remarkable images always be yours.

Chuck