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**GAME-CHANGING
CAMERAS**



URBAN NIGHT

THE CITY COMES ALIVE AT NIGHT

FINDING THE SOUL OF THE CITY WITH URBAN NIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN MATIASH

HAVE AN ABUNDANCE OF COMMON SENSE

I remember taking this photo of Boston's South Street Diner many years ago and being terrified because I wasn't very familiar with that neighborhood, nor was I sure that being there alone was a good idea. That was the last time I went on a night shoot without doing research on the location first.

URBAN NIGHT



For many reasons, I consider myself very fortunate to have been born and raised in New York. For the first 18 years of my life, my entire world was made up of one of the grandest and most diverse cities on the planet. More importantly, growing up in New York City provided the bedrock that makes up my natural affinity for urban photography. Despite photographing New York—and many other cities around the world—during the day, I’ve found that a city’s true soul presents itself to the camera at night. Light, color and tone each take on different characteristics in the absence of sunlight, and I’d like to share some thoughts on how to combine these elements together to capture your city’s soul.

TAKE MENTAL NOTES

It goes without saying that the composition of your photo is what defines nearly everything about it, including how you expose it. When you’re composing during the day, you have the benefit of an amply lit scene, allowing you to easily compose and focus your camera with relative certainty. Photographing

at night is an entirely different story. You’ll now be at the mercy of the available light cast by streetlamps, ambient structure lighting and the occasional headlight of a passing car.

The lack of abundant light will make it that much more important to cover all four walls of your frame, ensuring that you include everything that should be there and omit anything that shouldn’t. It can also make it more challenging to ensure sharp focus on your intended focal point. Fortunately, there are several things you can do to prepare for this. If your camera is particularly good at resolving a photo using a high ISO (ISO 8000+), its live view display can brighten up enough to show you what’s in your frame. Alternatively, you could use a flashlight or even your smartphone’s lamp (if it’s strong enough) to illuminate what’s in front of you as you focus on it. Finally, if time isn’t a concern, you could always drag the shutter to overexpose your photo, allowing you to review it for composition and focus. The last thing you’ll want is to get home only to discover that your composition was off or you just missed your focus.

TAKE GREAT CARE TO KEEP YOUR CAMERA PERFECTLY STILL I had this particular photo of Tokyo’s famous Shibuya Crossing in my head for years, and there would have been absolutely no way to capture the motion of the pedestrians without a tripod.

Taking these steps will go a long way to prevent that from happening.

KEEP YOUR CAMERA PERFECTLY STILL

While there certainly are exceptions to the rule, it’s safe to assume that a majority of your nighttime urban shooting will require a long shutter speed. Even hand-holding my camera still for a solid second can prove to be challenging, especially at night when temps are usually cooler than during the day. Even the slightest inclusion of movement will instantly ruin a night shot. However, a tripod alleviates this concern almost entirely, allowing you to position your camera in a wide variety of ways, which lends itself to finding a strong composition.

Since a tripod provides your camera with an immobile, steady platform to focus and shoot from, you won’t want to introduce motion by pressing the shutter



A CITY HAS A DIFFERENT LOOK AT NIGHT

While I have more than my share of photos of the Tokyo Tower during the day, the elegance and beauty is instantly apparent when viewed from a distance at night.

button. Even an action as simple as pressing your shutter button can be enough to move your camera. That’s why I never leave my home at night without packing a shutter release cable. This allows me to trip an exposure without touching the camera. Fortunately, if you don’t have a cable (or if it’s lost or broken), you can use your camera’s two-second shutter delay (as if you were setting it up to take a group shot with you in it), which yields pretty much the same results as using a remote. The key difference is that a remote will trip the exposure instantly, and the two-second shutter delay will take...two-seconds to begin.

KNOW YOUR CAMERA

Remember how I just told you that you should have a tripod with you whenever you’re out shooting in a city at night? While that may sound like great advice, I know that having a tripod with you isn’t always going to be practical or even allowed (depending on where you are), so

your options are to abandon the photo altogether or do what you can to keep your camera steady while holding it. This is where knowing your camera’s capabilities comes into play.

When I think about night photography and what I need out of my camera, two considerations immediately come to mind: its ability to wrangle the dynamic range of a scene and how it handles at higher ISO levels. By knowing your camera’s capabilities with both of these items, you can get a better idea as to how far you can push your handheld exposure. For example, I often use my Sony a7S II for all night-time photography because it is exceptional in working under low-light conditions. It was built for that. I also know that the sensor captures a great deal of tonal information with each RAW file, telling me that I’ll be able to recover a lot of those underexposed areas during post-processing.

The combination of knowing these two factors allows me to jack up my ISO and decrease my shutter speed enough—without necessarily touching the aperture—so that I can get a sharp photo while holding the camera.

HAVE FUN WITH SPECULAR HIGHLIGHTS

When you create urban photos at night, one of the elements that you’ll almost always have to consider are specular highlights. Specular highlights are those bright spots that appear when light is reflected off of a surface, and they’re especially noticeable in two ways. The first way is as soft glowing orbs that you’ll typically see in the bokeh of a photo. Think about that portrait taken in front of a Christmas tree with a wide-open aperture. Remember how those little Christmas lights look like a bunch of tiny bubbles? Those are your specular highlights. The other way is as a starburst, which often occurs when you use a very small aperture. What you’re seeing here is the actual shape of your lens aperture as light passes through it. The appearance of a starburst is largely dependent on the focal length of your lens, the number of blades that make up its aperture and what aperture setting you have chosen. In both cases, by creatively incorporating specular highlights into your frame, you can evoke a whimsical, dreamy feeling for your viewers.

URBAN NIGHT



TELL YOUR CITY'S NIGHTTIME STORY

In my years of photographing urban areas at night, one thing that has been made undeniably clear to me is that each city has a story to tell that's available to see once the sun goes down. And it's your job as the photographer to tease out that story by sensing how the presence of artificial lights and the absence of pedestrians affect your surroundings. For example, one of my absolute favorite places to photograph when it's very late at night are New York's subway stations. They are, for the most part, almost entirely devoid of commuters, and the sheer quiet adds so much to the atmosphere and experience of shooting there. Oftentimes, I'll take a subway and get off at a completely random station stop just to see what it's like in the dead of the night.

Another aspect of nighttime in the city is all the lit signage. My favorite lights to seek out are those made of neon. They provide a particular quality to a photo that's unrivaled by any other artificial light source, which is why I particularly enjoy so many areas in Tokyo.

HAVE COMMON SENSE (DON'T GET DEAD)

It goes without saying that you should always have your wits about you whenever you're roaming around a city at night. It's rare that I listen to any music when I'm out shooting because I want to keep audible tabs on my surroundings, especially at night. Also, I do enough research to identify whether particular areas are safe enough to go

by myself. If not, I'll try to hook up with a friend.

General awareness of your surroundings is critical for two reasons. First, it's not always easy to see a potential obstacle, like a pothole or uneven pavement, when it's dark, so paying attention to your immediate surroundings goes a long way. Second, by being aware of your surroundings, you can be even more attuned to whether others are also aware of you. It's not farfetched to imagine getting lost in a composition and inadvertently taking a few too many steps into traffic. That's why you should invest in some highly reflective outerwear. You really don't want a car or bicycle coming anywhere near you because you came out of nowhere or they simply couldn't see you.

EXPERIMENT WITH MOTION

One of the most common ways I see motion conveyed in urban night photography is with light streaks from the headlights and taillights of passing vehicles. It is, for the most part, a given that you'll give this a whirl at least once—and you really should experiment with it. It's a great way to understand how exposure relates to motion at night. If you have too fast of a shutter, you're going to freeze the object and its lights in place, and if you drag it for too long, you may lose any sense of definition. So, it boils down to experimentation.

Another technique that I really enjoy experimenting with, especially at night, is panning, and I find Times Square to be one of the best places to familiarize

EXPERIMENT WITH MOTION I can't begin to count how many panning photos of cabs in Times Square I have. Despite that, I always make it a point to get more whenever I find myself visiting my family in New York.

yourself with it. Panning is when you swivel your camera horizontally, along the X axis, so that it follows an object that's in motion. I've found that a shutter speed ranging between 1/20" and 1/2" yields the best results, but test it out for yourself. I'll usually perch myself on the corner of one of the streets and wait for one of New York's famous yellow cabs to come streaking by. The combination of it and the dizzying array of lights creates quite a psychedelic effect.

CORRECT WHITE BALANCE

So now that you've wrapped up your night of shooting, it's time to import those photos and take a crack at some of your favorites, because now is no time for sleep. When you're talking about night photography, especially urban night photography, the single most important setting you'll want to adjust is your White Balance (WB). Of course, getting a custom WB works if you're shooting in RAW, so hopefully you had your camera set accordingly. If not, please do so. Aside from the added, uncompressed tonal information available to you with RAW files, you can also faithfully set a custom WB per your camera's settings.

Getting a correct WB is so important here because of the dizzying array of artificial light sources that you'll be constantly contending with, each illuminating with different temperatures and qualities of light. The safest way to get a correct WB would be to bring a grey card that you can sample from, but I've had decent success when metering off of a grey or white area in my frame. It's not ideal, but it has worked in a pinch. Still, don't start editing your photos until you've corrected your WB. It can make that much of a difference. Trust me. DP

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