Many spectacular photo opportunities appear in cities the world over, but especially at night. Here we've captured the colour and life of a busy city, using manual exposure with a shutter speed of one second and aperture f4. With a tripod, a digicam and a little patience, your travel shots will be transformed.

The city **at night**

Wherever you travel, there are great city shots to be had, and one of the best times for taking them is at night

City streets that look drab and grey in the daytime are transformed at night by the bright lighting of street lamps, floodlights and neon signs.

The lighting is so colourful and intense that exciting new photo opportunities appear. Get out into foreign cities at night to discover excitement, bustle and vivid colours you'll never see during the day.

Don't be put off by the extra technicalities of night-time photography, because digicams make it easy. Yes, you will need a tripod – it's one thing you really can't do without. But because digital cameras have LCD screens on the back, easily viewable in the dark, you get a very clear view of what you've shot.

In fact, any half-decent digital camera will make an astonishingly good job of most night-time shots without any manual exposure correction on your part. You'll need a model that can shoot at shutter speeds of a second or longer, and digicams with manual exposure control will help you achieve special effects, like the rivers of light created by traffic headlamps. Beyond that, shooting night-time scenes with a digicam is far less troublesome than with a conventional film camera, in which the light meter is often less sophisticated, and the film response less predictable at longer shutter speeds.

Adjust and re-shoot

The big advantage of digicams, of course, is that you can view the shot you've taken straight away. If it's too light or, more likely, too dark, you can use exposure compensation (EV) and try again. Alternatively, tweak the 'curves' settings in image-editing software to brighten images.

You might be wondering how to avoid camera shake when you press the shutter button, invariably jogging the camera slightly in the process. Some digital cameras have remote control units, which is one way round the problem. Another solution is to use your camera's self-timer. Set it off, step back, and any vibration will have settled by the time the shutter opens.

It's a jungle out there

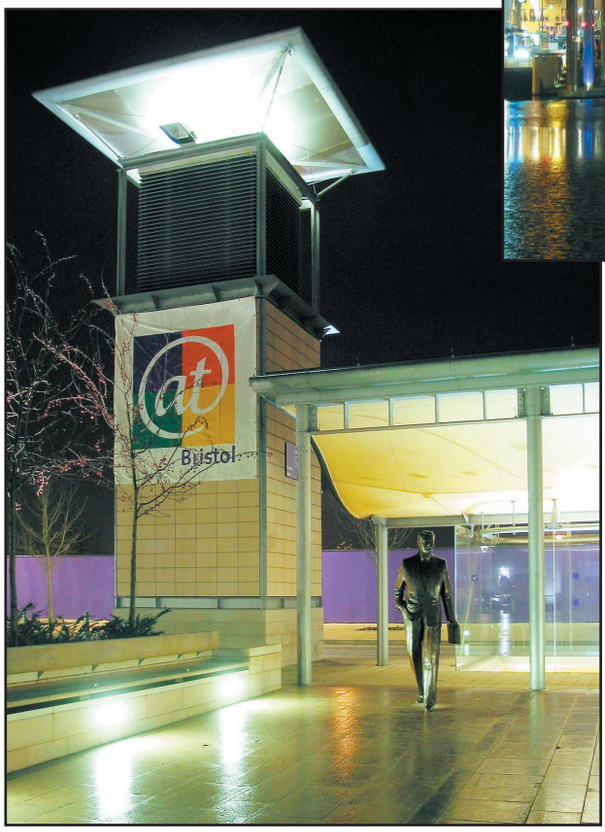
There's one other thing we ought to mention, and that's your own personal safety, especially when shooting in foreign locations. If all your camera gear is on display, you're a tempting target for muggers and pickpockets. Make sure that your gear is stowed away out of sight in camera bags, and that these are securely looped around your neck – don't just hang them off one shoulder.

Better still, why not arrange to have a companion on your expeditions? You'll feel a lot safer, and it's often helpful to have two sets of hands for setting up shots and carrying bags. You'll also have a model on hand for shots that need a human element.

Our shots were taken using a Canon PowerShot G2, although most mid-range digicams are capable of taking night snaps using a mix of auto and manual modes.

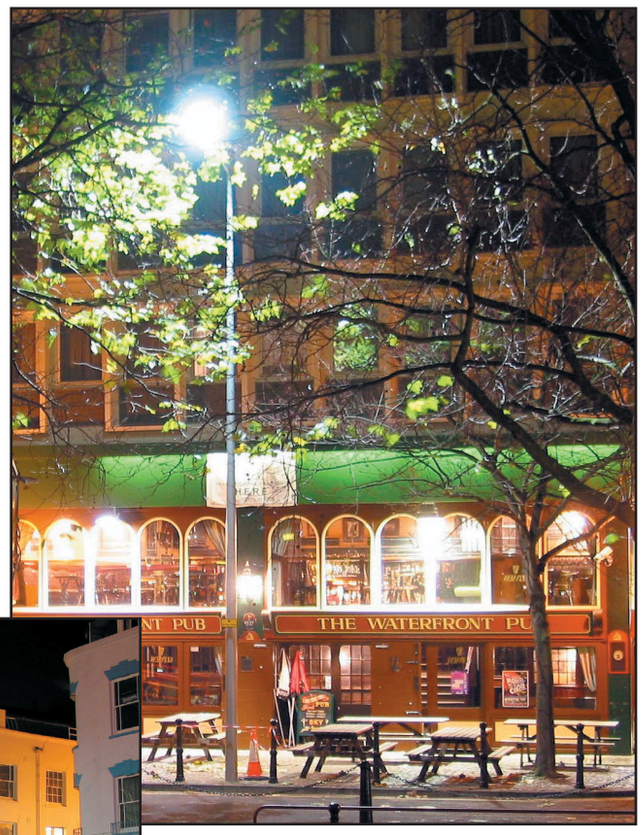
1 From dull to dramatic

Major buildings in city centres are invariably floodlit at night. What may be an unexciting piece of architecture during the daytime can become a dramatic focal point. Look out for water features which you can use to capture the reflections of those city lights. This shot uses the camera's programmed auto exposure, likely to be around a quarter of a second at aperture f2, and maximum zoom.



2 A monumental snap

That's not a person walking across our shot, it's a statue. Look out for opportunities like this, where monuments can assume an eerie presence thanks to dramatic artificial lighting and the absence of any other people. We used programmed auto exposure for this one, likely to be around half a second at f2.



3 Check the exposure

The bright lights in this shot fooled our camera's program exposure mode into underexposing much of the scene, but adding 1.5EV of exposure compensation soon sorted it out. Using program auto exposure, likely to be around half a second at f2, you can take a reading from an area of wall, avoiding naked lights.

4 Illuminated roads

Manual exposure shots can turn busy roads into rivers of light, where the individual vehicles become blurred or even vanish altogether, leaving only the trails left by their headlamps and tail-lights. You'll need a shutter speed of a second or longer – here we found that two seconds did the trick, with an f4 aperture. A camera with manual or shutter-priority control is very useful for this kind of shot.

Jargon Fragger

Noise reduction

Digital speckling effects are sometimes visible in darker areas with longer exposures. Many digital cameras have noise-reduction systems to counteract this.

Unsharp Mask

Sharpening images using photo-editing software produces image-degrading side effects. Unsharp Mask filters enable you to strike a careful balance between increased sharpness and image quality.

EV

Stands for 'exposure value', an EV is equivalent to a 'stop' in old-fashioned photo terminology. Increasing the exposure by 1.5 EV is the same as increasing it by a stop and a half.

Photo fact

Slow flash

You can combine both flash and ambient light at night if your digital camera has a 'slow flash' or 'sync-flash' option. The camera fires the flash, but also continues the exposure according to ambient light levels. It has the effect of freezing foreground subjects, while also recording any movement as a blur. It's a great technique to use because it preserves the bright colours in your night scenes, as you can see from our snap of these joggers at dusk.

Tip!

No flash, please

There are two reasons for not using flash in night-time photography (unless you're experimenting with slow or sync-flash). First, it washes out your image with a harsh, colourless light. Second, it won't work on anything more than a few feet away. Always switch off the flash before you start shooting, otherwise your camera will assume you're shooting indoors at close range and expose only for the flash which, when used at night, will leave the background in total darkness. Most digicams enable you to choose between auto-flash, flash on and flash off.

In a nutshell

A shot in the dark

- A tripod is essential. Without it you'll lose the pin-sharp detail that makes night scenes so satisfying.
- Digital cameras handle night-time city scenes very well, often without any help from you.
- Cameras with manual control over shutter speeds and aperture enable you to capture trails of lights.
- Keep your camera gear well hidden in bags and cases when not in use, and don't just hang bags off your shoulder.
- Take a companion on your night expeditions. It's not just for personal safety – the extra pair of hands will make shooting much easier.
- Don't be afraid to experiment. At night, cities become different places, with different lighting effects, compositions and amazing photo opportunities.

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Paris by night?

By day, this cobbled avenue looks unremarkable, but at night it's transformed into an atmospheric Parisian street scene – even though we're hundreds of miles from Paris (Bristol, actually). Using programmed auto exposure mode (probably around half a second at f2), we waited for the couple in the middle distance to stand in just the right spot for our composition. We've also cloned out an ugly traffic cone in the foreground using an image editor.

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We've got the shakes

We wish we'd used a tripod for this program auto exposure shot, which shows a bit too much blur from camera shake – the poster on the bus stop should have been pin-sharp. Applying the 'Unsharp Mask' in our image editor has helped, giving us more control than a 'Sharpen' filter. The shutter speed was a quarter of a second and the aperture setting f2.

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People pictures

How do you capture people in your night shots? If you want them to be sharp and well-illuminated, you'll need to use 'slow flash'. If you want them to disappear altogether, use a long shutter speed. If you want them visible but blurred, your digicam's program auto exposure mode will automatically set a wide aperture and the fastest possible speed. A quarter-second exposure with an aperture of f2 will give similar results.

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Use the light

It's not just public buildings and street scenes that make for good night-time photos. We took this shot of a picture-seller in a small, city-centre market using only available light. The camera's program auto exposure mode coped well here, using an aperture setting of around f2 and an eighth of a second shutter speed. We didn't have time to set up a tripod, but instead braced the camera against a rigid piece of scaffolding to take the shot.