

## THOUGHTS ON NIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY by Philip Smithies

In this article I'll be concentrating on the general principles required to produce a decent result – don't just point-and-shoot. Figs 1, 2 and 3 were taken in London. They weren't particularly difficult to take and are in locations which are easily accessible – just a few minutes' walk from London Bridge station.

### Colour in the sky.

If the sky is a dominant part of the picture it should ideally have some blue in it because totally black skies just don't look as good. To retain some colour in the sky, take the picture in the half hour or so after the sun sets. After that, the sky gets increasingly dark and loses its colour. Software like Photoshop can put some colour into very dark skies but don't rely on it.

Water usually looks very effective in night pictures.



Fig 1 Tower of London



Fig 2 Tower Bridge

### Don't hand hold

Exposures are lengthy and you will get camera shake if you hand-hold your camera. Yes, you can just about get away with hand-holding in certain circumstances by increasing the ISO to a very high value and also using wide apertures but the results won't be very good. There will be a great deal of noise, detail will be lost and you'll have no control over depth of field, shutter speed and length of exposure. Not only that but the images won't be as sharp as they should be. The majority of people can't hand-hold at shutter speeds slower than 1/30<sup>th</sup> of a second – even with image stabilisation. Also, the use of longer lenses increases the risk of camera shake.



Fig 3 GLA Building



Fig 4 Albi Cathedral

### **Use a tripod**

Use a tripod or at the very least firmly support the camera to allow for long exposures – and buy the best you can afford. Cheap ones aren't very stable (they wobble in quite gentle breezes) and they don't last long because of their flimsy construction.



Fig 5 Amsterdam

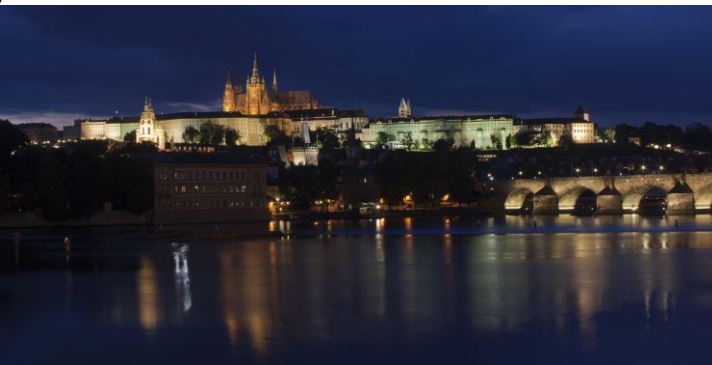


Fig 6 Prague

### **Shoot in RAW**

For the best results, use RAW rather than jpegs. They're of much higher quality and contain much more information. After you've edited them, you can convert them to jpegs.

### **Use the lowest ISO**

Use the lowest possible ISO – say between 100 and 400 for best results. The higher the ISO then the greater the noise – and the effect is particularly noticeable with mobiles and cheap compacts. Despite what you may read, the results are not as good with cheaper cameras. Also, don't be tempted to use the "Night Mode" on most cameras.

### **Image stabilisation**

Turn image stabilisation OFF – unless your camera/lens guide/on-line information tells you specifically that keeping it on whilst using a tripod won't cause problems. The risk is that the lens may "hunt" for movement. If in doubt – turn it off.

### **Use a cable release or self-timer**

It's essential to use a cable-release or self-timer to avoid causing slight shutter-shake when you press the shutter button.

### **Use "Live-View"**

Think about using "Live-View" as it can be more comfortable than using a viewfinder, especially if it tilts and shifts. You don't have to stoop or squint to see through the viewfinder and you will see clearly what is going to be captured. Also, you can arrange it so that the histogram is visible which will indicate whether the image is over or under exposed and if areas are burned out. Live View is easy to use at night although difficult to use in daylight. Remember that it uses a great deal of battery power.



Fig 7 Tonbridge Castle

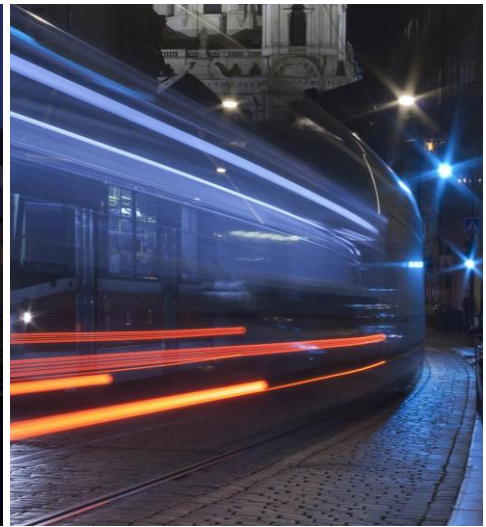


Fig 8 Tram Trails

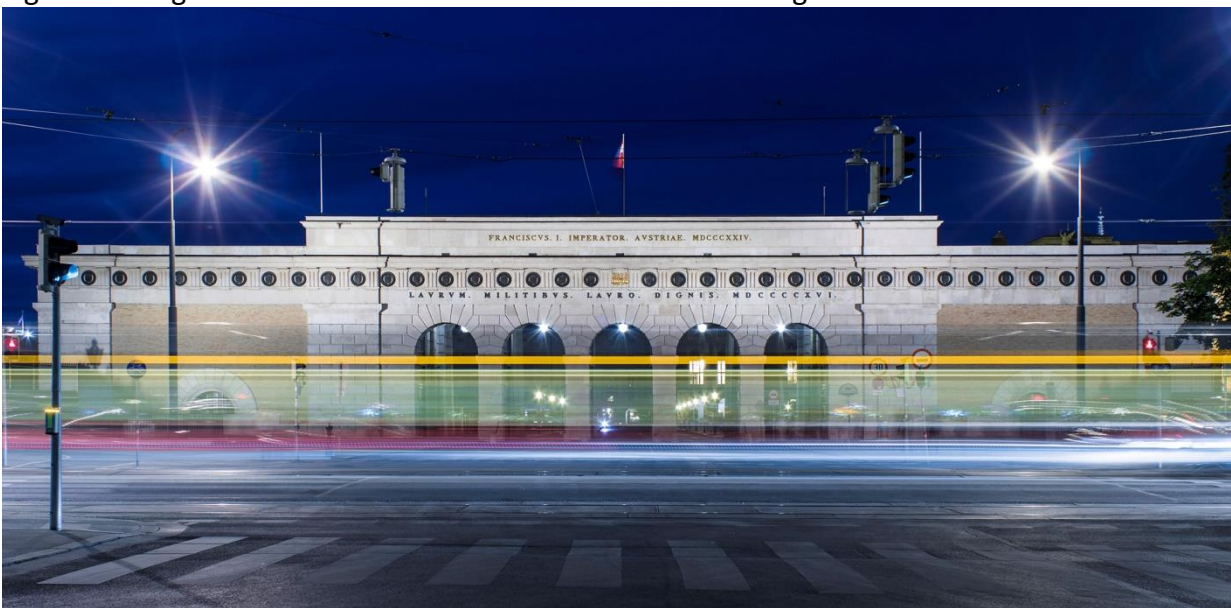


Fig 9 Tram Trails

### **Bracket your exposures**

Bracket your exposures so that if necessary you can later combine the best bits of different images. Fig 7 is a combination of two separate images – one for the main scene combined with parts of another one which was exposed correctly for the rooms. In the main shot, the rooms had burned out.

### **Don't use "Auto"**

You need to take full control of shutter speed and aperture. A slow shutter speed will enable traffic trails like those in Figs 8 and 9 to be created because of the long exposure (e.g. of ten seconds) enables vehicles to move across the scene with the vehicle itself being almost or totally invisible. To ensure the right amount of light reaches the camera, you will need a small aperture (high f-number) which increases the depth-of-field. However, a high f-number also increases the likelihood of "star-burst" as happened here. Better constructed lenses are less likely to give star-burst effects.



These pictures in Figs 10 and 11 of the Big Wheel in Vienna (the one used in “The Third Man” film) show what a difference that a long exposure (Fig 11) can make to an image.



Fig 10



Fig 11



Fig 11

### Fireworks

There is a great deal of trial and error involved with firework shots: you can't be sure where they'll go off, you can't be sure how many will go off and you can't be sure how much of the scene they'll occupy. Try using aperture of about f8 combined with the “BULB” setting for shutter speed: this means you can have the shutter open for as long as you like so you can include plenty of bursts.