

Photographing Christmas Lights

Remember the best window of opportunity for photographing outdoor Christmas lights if you wish to include buildings or other no light objects is from sunset until approximately 30 minutes after sunset. The remaining light in the sky will help give your image dimension and more depth.

- Mount your camera on a tripod
- Ideally attach a shutter release cable. If you don't have one, set your camera's self-timer to 10secs or 2secs if available in the drive mode menu.
- Set your camera's metering mode to centre-weighted. This will give you the best result when shooting bright lights against a dark background
- Keep your ISO as low as possible. Ideally ISO 200, but try not to go above 400 or you'll risk noise shooting in this low light.
- Whether you're indoors or outside, shooting artificial light in low ambient light is going to cause problems with colour balance. Your camera's Auto White Balance option will generally do the job. Don't be afraid to experiment with other light balance settings.
- Set your camera to its Aperture Priority mode in the exposure modes menu.
- How much of the frame do you want in focus? You probably want enough depth of field to get all of the lights and house sharp, but you might want the background slightly defocused to help them stand out. In this case, start with an aperture of f/5.6 and see how it looks. Your camera will calculate the shutter speed accordingly.
- Take a test shot and review the image. Make any adjustments to focus or exposure as required.
- It's often a good idea in low-light conditions like this – particularly outdoors with the light is fading or completely dark – to set your camera's exposure bracketing feature to record three frames at different exposure values.

Please note these are suggestions for a starting point. If you choose to use your camera in manual mode keep in mind the thoughts from above then start with an aperture of f5.6 and a shutter speed of 1/4 then adjust down by 2 second to 4 second steps until you reach the desired exposure.

How to photograph Christmas lights with bokeh

Christmas lights can look very attractive in the background of images shot with a wide aperture because the bokeh means they are rendered as soft orbs of light. It's particularly effective with a subject in the foreground and tiny lights in the background.

Throwing the light sufficiently out of focus requires a very wide aperture, close focusing or a telephoto lens or a combination of the three. Find a good subject, go in close and focus carefully, use a wide aperture and look around the background to check that you've got an attractive arrangement of lights.

Using flash when photographing Christmas lights

While you wouldn't want to use flash to photograph Christmas lights as the main subject. But it can be useful when you're shooting a portrait with Christmas lights in the background or to paint in other dark objects.

Which white balance to use when photographing Christmas lights?

Using the daylight white balance setting will bring out the colours of Christmas lights, but it's worth trying the automatic white balance setting if there's a strong colourcast. Whichever option you go for, shoot raw files to give you more data to work with at the processing stage.

What gear you'll need

- A camera that allows you to shoot manually
- Mid range zoom lens for example 28 - 135mm
- A macro lens if you have one
- Tripod
- Shutter release cable

Because you will be shooting at longer exposures, you'll want to use a camera that offers you manual control over the exposure process. This doesn't necessarily mean you must have an interchangeable lens camera. Plenty of compact cameras and smartphones offer full manual control.

A tripod might seem like it goes without saying, but how many times have you tried to grab a shot in front of the tree without one. Set your camera on a tripod for ultimate stability. And if you can, use a shutter release cable to prevent touching the camera and vibrating it during the exposure.

Final thoughts if you have star filter it can add an interesting effect to your image and if you don't have a star filter consider setting your aperture to a the smallest setting as this just may pick up on the starburst effect. Night light photography is all about experimenting with your exposures. And of course have fun.