

# Night vision

**Steve Sharp** explains some of the techniques he uses to take his wonderful low-light images. He reveals some of his tricks of the trade to **Oliver Atwell**

**WORKING** in low-light conditions doesn't have to be intimidating. Like any other method, low-light photography simply requires practice and learning a few tricks of the trade. Leeds-based photographer Steve Sharp is never happier than when he's peering down the lens on his camera into the dark with his flashgun and torch at the ready to illuminate the scene.

'Low light seems to offer more control, particularly if you're adding your own artificial light,' says Steve. 'Shooting in low light means working with longer exposures, so consequently you are working at a slower pace. That gives you more time to think about what you're doing, and you can decide how light or dark you want things. Dark conditions give you a blank canvas to play with, as you can decide which bits to illuminate and which bits to keep in the shadows. With daylight, you're relatively restricted.'

Shooting in these conditions means that Steve has two options: he can either go

into a scene to experiment or he can previsualise the shot.

Steve usually gets to his location early so he can find the best place to set up. He also decides which elements to bring out of the scene and where to place the light. 'In a lot of ways, I treat the scene as one large studio,' he says. 'However, on other occasions I've seen an area beforehand and had a long time to wait for the right conditions to unfold. It's different each time.'

One problem many photographers encounter is that producing images in low light, particularly ones featuring sky, can mean the presence of noise.

'Image noise will generally show up a lot in the sky,' says Steve. 'I don't worry too much about noise in terms of the subjects I'm shooting, as they will be lit appropriately or moving into dark shadows. I also shoot in raw and work in Adobe Camera Raw as this allows me to reduce noise simply by moving around a few sliders. It's a simple process and one that works wonders.'



## Guide

'This photograph was taken using a technique that is a firm favourite of low-light photographers – light painting,' says Steve. 'I used a handheld Canon 550EX Speedlight flashgun to illuminate the guide. I flashed it twice, once from the left and then from the right. I stayed behind the camera and distanced myself slightly away so there would be no extreme glare on either side of the image. The boards on the pier were lit using an LED head torch. The torch has a spot beam mode and using that I was able to get low to the floor and skim the surface of the planks, moving from under the tripod up to the guides. There was also a subtle level of illumination that came from the arcades 500 yards behind me. That added quite a bit of warm light, which can be seen on the red life preserver to the left. The final exposure was 360secs. That's why the image looks almost as if it were taken at twilight and has such a dramatic background.'



## Trolley park

◆ 'This shot was taken very close to where I live,' says Steve. 'One evening I looked out of my window and saw that fog had settled over the town. I already had an idea of the location that I knew would work, which was the car park of a supermarket. I ran down the road with my camera and immediately spotted this trolley. It was in the trolley park and I repositioned it in the way you see here. Then it was a question of setting up my camera and firing away. The colour has come from the sodium street lamps. You'll also see there's a subtle magenta light on the trolley park, which is coming from the supermarket behind me. It has massive magenta neon letters. What I particularly like is that the fog is acting as a giant softbox and diffusing the light. It has given the image a lovely atmosphere.'



## Power station

◆ 'There are two elements to this shot, taken in a power station in the West Midlands,' says Steve. 'First, I took a few exposures using the available light. It looked very smooth, but then I realised I needed something extra to give the scene some punch. The exposure was 1/13sec, which was enough to blur the water, so I fired the flash during the exposure, which illuminated a lot of water drops. That gave it an interesting effect of water streaking through the scene. 'Second, I used a tilt-and-shift lens that allowed me to achieve the perspective I needed to get to maintain straight verticals. This lens will enable you to transcend the normal restrictions of depth of field and perspective, which is why they're used mainly in landscape and architectural photography. I set the camera up level to the background and then adjusted my lens settings. To get the bottom of the supports in the shot using a standard wideangle lens would have meant angling the lens down in such a way that it would have caused the verticals to converge. Using a tilt-and-shift lens, I was able to adjust the knobs to tilt the lens downwards to get the bottom of the supports, but shift it so that the shot remained parallel and straight on.'



**Pillbox**

◆ 'On the evening that this shot was taken the moon was around three-quarters full and was illuminating the scene beautifully,' says Steve. 'In the image the moon is in the ten o'clock position. The exposure was 194secs, which I worked up to through a series of test exposures. When I tripped the shutter I was standing on the dune to the right-hand side of the pillbox. I used the Canon 550EX Speedlight to light the front of the building. That was flashed four times. I then ran inside the structure and placed a red gel on the front of the flash. I lay on the floor and flashed up towards the ceiling, ensuring that all corners of the room were covered. I then ran up to the top floor and did the same. By the end I was exhausted. Three minutes isn't much time to run around in the dark.'



**Coach garage**

◆ 'This is another image taken in moonlight, and on this night it was particularly bright,' says Steve. 'This shot comprises two images, both of which are the same file. I took one shot and then processed the raw file twice. The sky was quite bright in the first shot, so I underexposed the first raw file to get a nice deep sky, which then left the shed underexposed. Then, on the second raw conversion, I brought the shed to a nice level where I could see the details. I then blended the two images together. The brickwork on the shed is very vivid. I also like the fact that you can see traffic trails in the background, and that's actually where some of the light in the image has come from.'



**Street**

◆ 'I don't often work with high dynamic range (HDR) images, but on this occasion I felt it was necessary,' says Steve. 'HDR has developed a bit of a bad reputation, but it has a genuinely practical purpose when used correctly. HDR allows you to capture the tones that the camera can't capture in one image. It could be that the dynamic range exceeds the capability of your camera, so you need a way of finding a greater dynamic range between the light and dark areas of your photograph. First, bracket two images by taking one exposure for the highlights and then one for the lowlights. You can then blend the files together in post-processing to get your final shot. You'll often see HDR used in quite an exaggerated way for artistic effect, although I prefer a more subtle and practical

application. In this image it was a matter of bracketing by just 1 stop. It allowed me to retain some level of detail where the light is shining on the side of the building so it didn't blow out. Conversely, I was also able to include some details in the shadows. I could have produced a relatively good image without HDR, but using the process allowed me to take the image up a notch. 'It is important to shoot raw files when you're working in areas that have man-made ambient light because the colour cast can look very unusual. By shooting raw files, I can adjust the settings in post-production and see what works best. Raw files are very flexible and are often a godsend when working with HDR because you need to ensure that the white balance in each of your bracketed shots is exactly the same.'

To see more of Steve's images, visit [www.stevesharpphotography.com](http://www.stevesharpphotography.com)