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Fire In the Sky!

Photographing Fireworks Displays

It is time once again for my handy guide to help you get great images of fireworks displays this Fourth Of July. Hope you enjoy! (Images by Matt Kozak and Steve Kozak)

Public fireworks displays offer the opportunity for some exciting photography. The results are impressive and the technique is fairly simple. You will need a tripod, a cable release, and a small piece of black mat board. A small flashlight may also come in handy!

Before we get started on the technique, let's talk about lens selection. If you are positioned relatively close to the action, I suggest using a 50mm or a 28mm wide-angle. A small zoom, such as a 28-75 is also a good choice. This is helpful because you will not have time to compose the images and shoot while the fireworks are in progress. These lenses will offer a broad coverage of the sky to include as much of the display as possible.





With the camera on the tripod, position yourself away from any stray light that might spill onto your lens. Avoid street lamps, car lights and any other constant light source. (I will talk about fireworks over city skylines in a bit.)

Point the camera in the direction of the display and watch for the location of the first couple of bursts through the lens. You can compose the image to include only sky, but also look for interesting foregrounds to include in the composition. Water is a great choice if available!



Now we are ready to get an image in the camera. Set the lens to F8 with your camera set to 100 ISO. Set the shutter on the "Bulb" or "B" setting. These settings keep the lens open for as long as you keep your finger on the shutter release. Touching the camera during these "long" exposures may cause vibrations resulting in blurred images, so use a cable release to trip the shutter.

Once the camera is set, cover the lens with the black mat board without bumping the lens. While the lens is covered, trip the shutter with the cable release and lock it so that the shutter remains open. The black mat should keep out any stray light and keep the sensor from recording any visible light

that occurs while the fireworks are on there way up to the point that they explode. When the burst reaches its peak, uncover the lens with the mat board to record a moment of the color and light. Then cover the lens again with the mat board and unlock the lens so that it closes and you can release the shutter for the next burst.

If you don't have a cable release, try using a shutter speed of two seconds and use the same technique with the mat board to cover the lens while the shutter is open and wait for it to close.

You can record several bursts on one frame. Simply expose the first one and then cover the lens with the mat board, but do not advance the film. Leave the shutter open and expose a second burst on the same frame. Then, cover the lens and unlock the release to start over. Try exposing two or three bursts on a single frame. This will help fill your image area without having too much empty space.

Removing the mat early in the burst before the explosion spreads will give you a compact nucleus of light with many accompanying light trails as the burst spreads. Covering and uncovering the lens quickly will record the burst as points of light. Experiment!



If you would like to photograph fireworks against a city skyline, try setting the lens to F5.6 and the shutter to the "Bulb" or "B" setting. Use the same method as above only expose the skyline for about six seconds and then cover the lens. This will not be quite enough time to expose the city lights, but we will add to that exposure time when we record the fireworks burst.

When the fireworks explode, uncover the lens and record the burst. The cumulative time that the lens is



uncovered should give a proper exposure on the city lights.

Once you have captured the images, make sure your photo-finisher prints your images properly. The sky should look black and the fireworks should be colorful. If the sky areas are dingy or green or gray, take the photos back and have them reprinted with the proper density.



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