Freedom of the Night

Becoming comfortable with photographing the night has many advantages. When darkness is familiar, you can photograph at the "golden hour" and beyond in remote locations without worries about getting back safely. Most people never see the world of darkness, and this world is revealed to you as a night photographer. You get the chance to explore a world that appears dark but is actually full of color—in places that seem familiar and in more exotic locations.

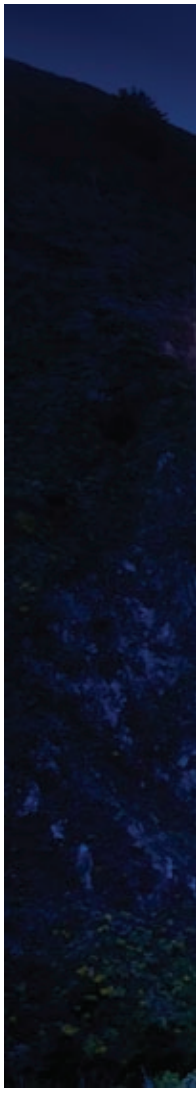
Night photography reduces exposure considerations to the basics. You'll want full manual control, often using the Bulb setting (see pages 40–51). Once you get night exposures right, you are far less likely to have problems in any daytime situation—however extreme.

All these benefits of night photography sum up to a creative form of "freedom of the night." And with freedom comes responsibility.

Responsibility in the context of night photography has two major implications. You need to take common sense precautions to stay safe (see page 22 for some suggestions). And to come back with compelling photos of the night landscape, you need to plan your shots.

Planning a night photography shoot means pre-visualizing the image you want to achieve. Your plan should consider how you will arrive at the right location, at the right time. You should also plan to bring the right gear to take your photo, and to keep you safe and warm.

Becoming comfortable in darkness and experiencing the freedom of the night is great. Add to this a bit of pre-visualization and planning, and you have the recipe to make great images of the empty spaces of the night.



▲ Pages 142–143: Against the backdrop of pounding surf and a light mist on the ocean, I photographed star trails between Point Reyes Lighthouse. I think of this image as a portrait of "the edge of night."

The star trails are shorter and less curved than you might expect for an exposure of this duration because I was facing south (rather than north). You can see the separation in the star trails between the ten-minute exposure and the stacked composite (the longer segments of each star trail). This kind of "gap" in the path of the individual stars is not approved of by star trail "purists," but I like the effect in this image.

There's an explanation of stacking, one of the techniques I used to make this image, starting on page 194.

10.5mm digital fisheye, composite of foreground (10 minutes at f/2.8 and ISO 100) and sky (13 stacked exposures, each exposure at 4 minutes, f/4, and ISO 100), tripod mounted, total exposure time 62 minutes

▲ My idea with this photo was to present a different view of this iconic bridge along US 1 in Big Sur, California. I spent several days in the area, photographing mostly under heavy coastal cloud cover as I planned this shot. I established a base for night photography along the Big Sur coast, and then drove 25 miles in the gathering dusk toward the bridge, which I had previously scouted. I waited for more than an hour for the light to dim enough for a thirty-second exposure and for the right combination of cars to cross the bridge.

16mm, 30 seconds at f/7.1 and ISO 100, tripod mounted