

# How to take Beautiful Photos of Christmas Decorations

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IMAGE BY ANNIE SPRATT - NIKON D4S

Not only do Christmas decorations transform a home, both inside and out, they can make for fantastic photographs.

1) Whatever you're shooting – baubles, tinsel, table decorations, the tree, pine cones, mince pies, piles of presents, Christmas cards, outdoor lights or even the inevitable potted poinsettia – you need to minimise blur, so choose a high enough ISO and a wide enough aperture to let you hand-hold without risk of camera shake, or use a tripod to shoot at slower shutter speeds, firing the shutter either via your camera's self-timer or a remote release. You'll also need to check the white balance as indoor lights can give your shots a warm cast. You might be better selecting tungsten or one of the other white-balance presets; alternatively, if you shoot in NEF (RAW) you can sort out casts on the computer afterwards, although it's always better to strive for the best possible result in-camera.

2) The most obvious source of images is the Christmas tree, but trying to squeeze the whole tree into the frame can lead to a confusing image devoid of any main point of focus. Instead, why not home in on just one or two decorations. If they are shiny baubles, watch out for your reflection in them – you may need to reposition yourself or move the baubles slightly. Fairy lights can be used to create striking background bokeh – a pleasingly soft, out-of-focus effect that will look like little glowing spheres to contrast with your sharply focused foreground decorations. For the best results you'll need a reasonably 'fast' lens ie. one with a large aperture of at least f/2.8, and you'll need to shoot with the lens wide open – f/4 or less will be ideal – so that means switching to either aperture priority or manual to set the aperture you want.

3) You can also get good bokeh shooting with a COOLPIX by increasing the distance between your subject and the background fairy lights. Do this by zooming in to create a more shallow depth of field, and then enhance it further by shooting in macro (close-up) mode. Remember to turn off the flash to encourage your camera to select the widest possible aperture and, if the background is much darker than your subject, you might need to add in some exposure compensation to guard against underexposure.

4) Outdoor lights seem to be getting more popular every year, and they can also make for great images. If a house or building is highly decorated, go for a wideangle lens to include the whole scene; otherwise, focus in tight on one particular area. Shooting in manual is ideal as it will give you the most control over your settings in what are fairly tricky light conditions. Go for the widest aperture your lens offers, such as f/2.8 or f/4. Start off with a shutter speed around 1/60sec and an ISO of at least 400, and if the results are too dark, slow the shutter speed down and/or increase the ISO, and if your shot is looking overexposed, go for a faster shutter speed – it's all about experimenting. If you'd rather not use manual, select aperture priority and again go for the widest possible aperture and an ISO of at least 400.

5) Whatever you choose to shoot, if you're organised and do it early enough you could use your images to make your own personalised Christmas cards, either 'real' ones or e-cards.