Tips for Capturing Silhouettes

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Silhouettes are all about photographing a subject in front of a light source and persuading your camera to expose for the brightest part of the image – the background – so your subject is sufficiently underexposed that it appears blacked out.



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Silhouettes work beautifully with the vibrant colours of sunset, or against dramatic starry or moonlit skies, and they also bring depth and foreground interest to the Christmas and New

Year fireworks displays which are now becoming increasingly popular.

Whatever the background, you need to meter and correctly expose for that background in order to place your subject in shadow. Check on the LCD how the image looks, and adjust your exposure accordingly. You can also use exposure bracketing to shoot a series of shots with varied exposures, and then pick the best one.



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The ideal spot on which to focus is the subject. However, since the subject of a silhouette is so dark, the camera may have difficulty locking on the focus. Here's what you can do to deal with this:

• Manually focus the camera on your subject.

• Focus on the subject's edge, where there will be more of a contrast difference between the darkened subject and the brighter background.

• Focus on the brightest section of the image, half depress the shutter and keep it there, move the camera to frame your subject, and now take the shot.

If your camera has Active D-Lighting, make sure it's turned off, otherwise it will try to force the camera to correctly expose for the subject that you want to be in shadow. Some COOLPIX and DSLRs have a Silhouette Scene/Effects mode which automatically turns off D-Lighting and selects the exposure for the scene's brightest area.

The stronger the silhouetted subject's shape, the more successful the image. While a silhouetted subject can show some detail, the less there is visible, the more punchy the end result. Full-length silhouettes of people work best when your subject wears fitted rather than loose clothing. Whether you go for a full-length shot or a close-up shot of their face, shoot them in profile – this gives a more recognisable and interesting result than if you capture them face-on.

More to discover: try our tips for photographing fireworks here.

Quick tips

• Create silhouettes indoors by making sure there is more light on the background than on the subject.

• Another way to shoot silhouettes is in the studio; set up lights to backlight a subject against a white background – for a fun look, add coloured gels to the lights.

• Ensure your subject is sharp by using as small an aperture as possible. In post-production, add more contrast to make the silhouette even more dramatic.

- PS It’s basic, we know, but do remember to turn off the flash!

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