WINTER WONDERLAND

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Snow time



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If you're dreaming of a white Christmas, remember that snow can be particularly tricky to do justice to; it reflects so much light that it can fool the metering system into underexposing, leaving you with dull, grey tones rather than the crisp, white reality.

The easiest way to combat this is to switch to Beach/Snow scene mode, which overrides the metering system to ensure bright, correctly exposed snow. If you have the option of exposure compensation control, try adding +1 to +2 stops compensation for brighter, whiter results; take a test shot, check the results on your DSLR's histogram and then adjust if necessary. What you want is the bell curve peaking centrally – if it's way over to the left, it indicates underexposure, while a peak far on the right means it's overexposing.

Altering the white balance can also help you enhance the bluey coldness of a snowy scene or boost the warm glow on the landscape from a weak sun struggling to shine. If you find you're battling too much brightness on a snowy scene in strong bright sunshine, try using a neutral density (ND) graduated filter to cut down on all that reflected light; it's also a great way of boosting contrast between clouds to lift flat, boring and overcast skies.

There's nothing like pure, pristine snow blanketing the landscape and turning familiar, pedestrian scenes into alluring photo opportunities, but shooting it before it's been trampled on by all and sundry does involve an early start. And, of course, take care with your own footprints when you're reccying a scene… Another point to remember is that, with the sun generally low in the sky, it can be difficult to avoid it shining straight into your lens and causing flare. A lens hood can reduce this if you have to shoot with the sun in the frame.

Snow also brings great opportunities for candids – people sledging, snowballing, building snowmen, trudging through it. Choose a long lens setting and you might even be able to capture the action through the window from the comfort and warmth of your own home!



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Christmas lights

Dark evenings are full of opportunities for compelling images, from reflections on wet, glistening pavements to Christmas markets and Christmas lights adding festive interest to street scenes. Nikon cameras have high ISO settings to give you quality results in low-light conditions so you can capture Christmas lights handheld without risking camera shake or overly dark images, or using atmosphere-killing flash. You'll get the best results in manual (M) mode – select a minimum shutter speed of around 1/125sec to freeze motion, set an f/4 aperture and no lower, and shoot in auto ISO so the camera sets the appropriate ISO.

If you want to use long exposures of 10-30 seconds, it's a good idea to steady the camera on a tripod, and use the self-timer or a cable release to fire the shutter. Try shooting at dusk to capture an atmospheric purply, pinkish glow in the sky and to capture details in the lights' surroundings, which can disappear when it's completely dark. Remember to set the white balance to tungsten for cast-free Christmas lights, both indoors and out.

Play misty

Early morning mist adds depth and intrigue to landscapes, creating a real sense of cold, wintry weather. Use your COOLPIX's zoom at its telephoto setting, or a telephoto zoom on your DSLR, such as the 55-200mm f/4.5-5.6, to pick out details like trees, roof tops or church spires peeking up through the mist. You'll need to work fast to capture these ethereal landscapes, because as soon as the sun appears any mist usually starts to burn away.

Safe and sound

While some cameras positively thrive on extreme conditions – the rugged COOLPIX W300 and W100 are freeze-proof, waterproof and shockproof – it's generally a good idea to protect your kit from the elements. Keep your camera safe and dry in a bag or tucked inside your coat (which will also keep the batteries warm so they maintain optimal performance) when it's not in use, or use a waterproof cover to keep moisture at bay.

You need to keep yourself warm, too – it's all too easy to get chilled to the core when you're concentrating on capturing the perfect winter landscape. Layer up, starting with thermals, and protect your extremities with a decent hat and gloves or mittens with a fold-down flap so you can access your camera controls easily and ensure you don't miss your perfect winter moment.

Quick tips

• When you get home, to avoid your camera fogging up, shut it back in its bag while you're still outside, then bring the bag in and leave it with the camera inside for around an hour. This allows your camera to warm up gradually and minimises the risk of condensation forming.

• Shoot in RAW (NEF) if possible – this captures a much broader range of tones than a JPEG can, giving you more leeway for colour-correcting white balance anomalies on your computer.

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