Photzy

5 TIPS FOR BETTER LOW LIGHT IMAGES

Quick Guide

Written by David Veldman

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Photo by David Veldman

A photographer's journey is one of many epochs. In many ways, it is like the long process of growing from a child to an adult. We begin our adventure armed with nothing more than a camera and abundant passion, but as we progress we accumulate knowledge and experience, which causes us to mature and improve our images.

I can distinguish two distinct phases in my photography so far.

In the first, I was searching for subjects. I spent a great deal of time considering what I wanted to shoot, searching high and low for interesting buildings and beautiful vistas. I drove for hours in the countryside looking for picturesque abandoned homes, and considered the day a success if I captured one half-decent image. When deprived of an interesting subject, I was at a loss. I would simply not shoot.

As time went on, however, I gained an appreciation for the importance of superior light.

Shortly afterwards, I realized the incredible difference that studying light had on my images, and a new search began.

I began to hunt for light, rising early to catch the golden sunrise, lingering near the sharp edges of buildings to capture the geometric lines of hard shadows. As I studied light and tried to wring the most I could from it, I also became aware of the potential that existed in the absence of light.

Of course, I don't mean the utter absence.

That's why this tutorial is about 'low light' and not 'no light.'

Still, light is a precious commodity for a photographer, and it becomes even more precious still when faint.

We can use this to our advantage, creating distinct and eye-catching images with just the smallest bit of illumination.

Like the human eye, a camera can see in the dark; however, there are caveats to both.

The human eye takes time to see in the dark, much as a camera will require a longer shutter speed.

Our eyesight also degrades in quality in dark conditions; we see less color and details are lost.

Similarly, a camera begins to show digital noise when we raise the ISO (a form of electronic gain), so that the camera can "see" in low light.

Fortunately, there are ways to deal with these challenges, and in this tutorial I am going to give you five ways to improve your low light images.

EXPOSE PROPERLY

Digital cameras are remarkable pieces of technology. In just my lifetime, they have gone from bulky, impractical novelties that many thought would never replace film, to the standard tool for photographers.

One of the most incredible features that they possess is a very wide dynamic range. Simply put, this means that they can capture a great range of tone from light to dark.

If you shoot raw, you will be able manipulate your images in post-processing software and lower the contrast in scenes so that you can see detail in both the shadows and highlights.

However, it is important to know your gear – particularly when shooting in low light, which can sometimes result in very high-contrast scenes.

Certain camera sensors are better at rescuing the highlight data, while others excel at recovering details in the shadows. You may need to experiment with your camera to discover which the case is.

Regardless of the outcome of your experiments, it is imperative that you choose the correct exposure. This means more than just capturing a technically correct image. It means that you need to consider the mood, composition, and the desired final effect of your visualized image.

Do you want the image to appear low-key, forcing the light to appear faint or omni-directional?

Or do you want to blow the highlights out and create a hard shaft of light?

The choices that you make will be instrumental in realizing the image that you have in your head.

While you can generally rely on automatic exposure modes like aperture priority, don't be afraid to choose your settings manually, or at worst, tweak the exposure compensation dial.

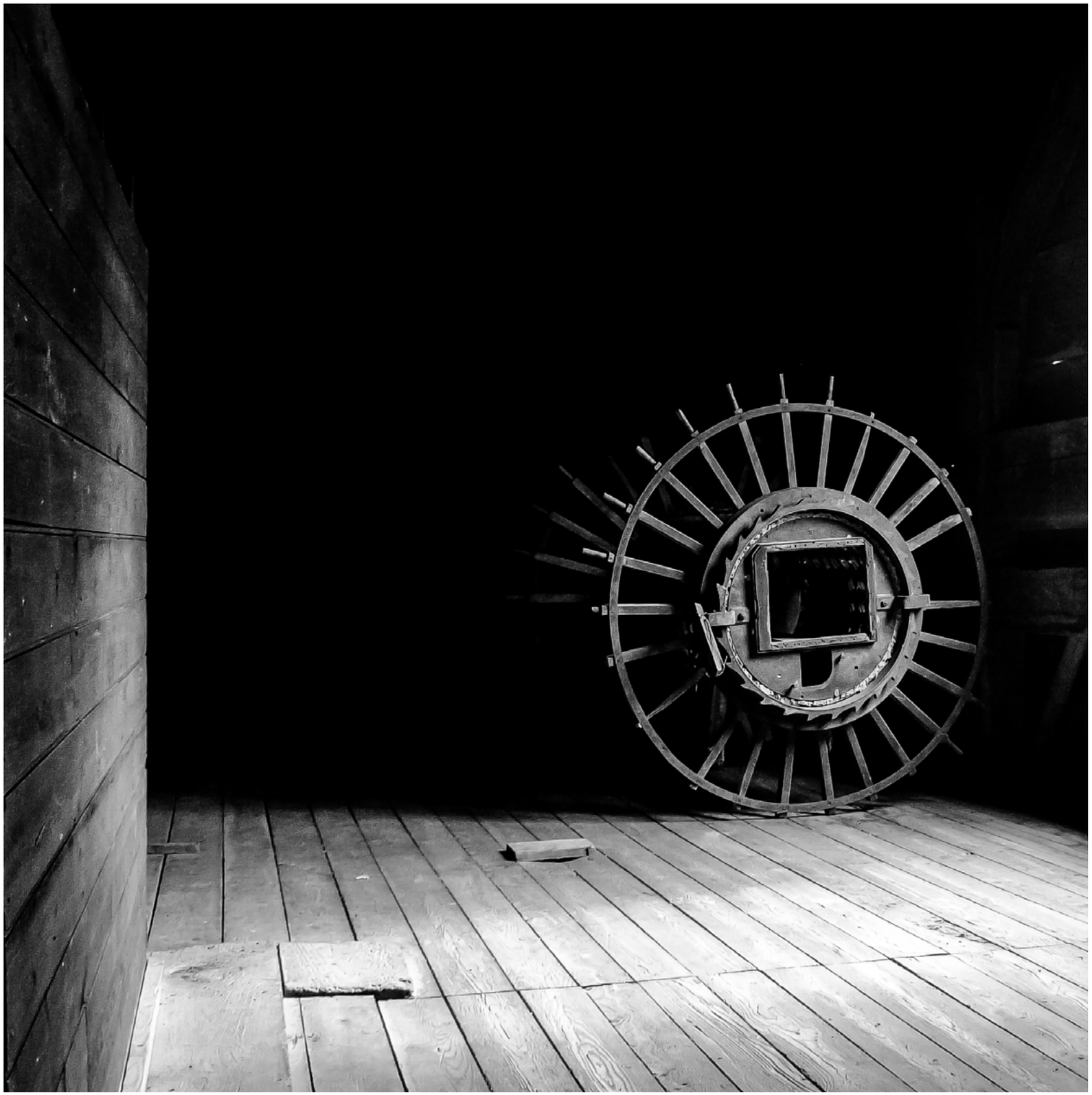

Photo by David Veldman

In this image, I was faced with a singular light source. I had to expose very carefully, and for a few seconds I pondered how to capture detail in the shadows and highlights. In the end, I decided I wanted to create a high-contrast image, which I did. Oddly enough, my fellow photographer, who was with me at the time, had brought a tripod and created a HDR image that allowed him to capture all of the tonality. Neither approach was right or wrong, but it is a perfect example of different ways to capture the same scene.

Recommended Reading:

If you'd like to learn more about light and how you can use it to create better photos, grab a copy of our "Understanding Light Book One" premium guide by Kent DuFault.

SHUTTER SPEED

I am a huge fan of long exposures.

I don't often end up using them in low light situations, though, as I tend to reserve them for the 'blurring' effect that they have upon motion.

With that said, there is no denying that long exposures are one of the best ways to deal with low light situations.

They allow you to keep your aperture small enough to capture a deep depth of field, while simultaneously keeping your ISO low enough to prevent excessive noise.

There are two important limitations, however.

First, long shutter speeds are less useful if you are trying to freeze any kind of motion. This is particularly important when photographing people. Despite their efforts, even the best model still moves slightly. With a slow shutter speed, this can easily translate into unintentional motion blur. In my experience, you cannot always expect to capture people without blur below 1/20th of a second.

The second limitation is also dictated by blur, but not originating from the subject. Below a certain shutter speed (dependent on the camera), the photographer's hand will cause shaking. This is unavoidable, and the solution is, of course, a tripod.

A tripod is arguably the most useful piece of equipment that a photographer might purchase besides their camera and a lens.

Despite being incredibly 'low tech,' a tripod can open the door to many new photographic opportunities: astrophotography, HDR, and self-portraits (that reach beyond the realm of a 'selfie'), to name a few.

If you don't own a tripod, I urge you to purchase one.

Photo by David Veldman

In the still life image on the left, I was using very dim natural light. I chose to use a tripod to maintain depth of field and preserve image quality.

Despite their usefulness, sometimes tripods can be limiting. They can cause the photographer to plant themselves in one location and thus prevent them from moving about in search of a better perspective.

For this reason alone, I frequently forgo carrying one. Fortunately, necessity is the mother of invention, and you can always find a quick alternative. Monopods are smaller and more portable, and in the past I've even resorted to resting my camera on a bench or counter for stabilization.

ISO

In the digital world, ISO refers to the sensitivity of the electronic sensor that lies in the heart of your camera.

In the film days, ISO used to refer to the chemical sensitivity of the film. A higher number meant that the film reacted more strongly to light, but this came at the cost of more grain.

Today, we face the same challenge, although digital cameras have far surpassed film in their ability to accurately record a scene at a higher ISO rating.

ISO 3200 film would be considered very fast, but today we can achieve useful images from far higher sensitivities.

Still, the higher the ISO setting, invariably it will result in more digital noise.

Because of this, I often see terrible advice slung around the Internet.

You will frequently see a camera review declare that the image is ‘unusable’ over certain sensitivity settings.

While digital noise can certainly be a problem, a noisy image is better than no image.

Boost the ISO if needed, and worry about the noise later.

To a certain degree, you can mitigate electronic noise in post processing, and a shaky image or one with too narrow a depth of field is just as bad.

Photo by David Veldman

In the image on the left, I shot with the aperture set wide open and with the slowest shutter speed that I could manage to handhold the camera. The low light level still required an ISO of 6400.

Is the image as clean as the still life photo on page 8? Of course not, but I did get the image I envisioned, and I did not have a tripod with me at the time. Don't fear noise. Raise the ISO and capture your shot.

KNOW YOUR GEAR

As I've mentioned a few times now, modern cameras are almost miraculous. However, to take advantage of the very best of yours, you must know it. This is particularly true when confronting low light scenes.

You must consider all the variables that will affect your image.

How does your camera handle higher ISO settings? Certain cameras offer incredible high ISO performance (meaning that you are free to use a faster shutter speed or a smaller aperture).

Other cameras have unbelievable in-body camera stabilization, which can offer the photographer the ability to handhold the camera down to a one-second shutter speed without incurring motion blur.

Know the strengths and weaknesses of your gear to make the most of it.

In the image on the next page, I utilized the image stabilization feature to handhold the shot at a shutter speed of 1/18th of a second.

I also raised my ISO to 6400 while keeping my aperture small enough to preserve as much depth of field as possible.

I did all of this because I knew that my gear could easily handle the higher ISO setting without creating too much objectionable noise.

Recommended Reading: See my quick guide titled "10 Camera Controls Every Photographer Should Know" for a list of essential camera controls.

Photo by David Veldman

CHEAT

One of the best ways to shoot in low light situations is to cheat.

In other words, when you are faced with low light, create your own light.

There are many ways to do this, including speedlights, reflectors, continuous lighting, or even light painting.

Even if you are trying to create a moody, low-key look, it is still possible to add some extra light. In portraiture, this is especially valuable.

Don't be afraid to position a speedlight out of frame and bounce it for a soft fill in to the existing low light. Or you can fill in the dark shadowed areas with a reflector.

The important thing is to create the image that you see in your mind. Play with your available low light options: camera settings, point of view, tripod, post processing, and adding light.

> **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to learn more about light and how you can use it to create better photos, grab a copy of our "Understanding Light Book One" premium guide by Kent DuFault.

CONCLUSION

Shooting in low light is challenging. However, like most photographic endeavors, labor is repaid with interest. Don’t put away your camera because light is fading. Remember these five tips, and in time you will develop your own mechanisms for dealing with meagre lighting.

Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful *(and FREE!)* photography resources:

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About the Author

David Veldman wants to be a better photographer, and he hopes you will join him on the journey of learning. Best of all, he's doing it on a budget! When not taking pictures, David and his wife are hiking, snowshoeing, or discovering new culinary delights.

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