

## Fireworks, Updated 2009

### Monday Morning Tip

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Fireworks are fun to shoot from many perspectives. Most people like the colors and excitement of “bombs bursting in air”. Second, it’s almost always a holiday or celebration spent with friends and family. And, finally, there’s something magical about the fleeting nature of fireworks. One moment, they’re lighting up the sky and the next moment, they’re gone, only to be replaced by different patterns, shapes, colors and sounds. They’re almost like man-made snowflakes.

In order to get good photos of fireworks, the most important consideration is location. Closer is not better. When I first tried to photograph fireworks, I tried to get as close as I could. Not only is this counterproductive, it’s also more difficult because everyone else is also trying to get close. The best fireworks photos have context. Get far enough away from the fireworks that you can include visible cues about the event. I’m sure many of you have seen fireworks photos which include recognizable landmarks such as the Washington Monument or Chicago skyline. In San Diego, the Coronado Bay Bridge, while not world famous, certainly adds drama. To include context, get higher. A helicopter or crane is ideal but if your budget dictates something a bit more modest, climb atop a parking garage or roof. Even the roof of your car or motorhome can offer a better view. Along with better perspective, staying further back and getting higher (not that kind of high!) makes it easier to use a tripod, which, of course is a necessity.

These photos were taken from the top of my RV in downtown Escondido, CA, not exactly a tourist destination. The dome is the entrance to city hall and was taken before the light fell and later added back in PSE because they doused the lights inside the dome before the fireworks display.



Next, think of photographing fireworks as a variation of flash photography. The fireworks act like a flash and the ambient light exposes the foreground/background. Just as you don’t want a flash photo

in which the subject is well exposed but surrounded by a “black hole”, you don’t want the fireworks to be surrounded by nothingness. To correctly expose the bright light of the actual burst, set your camera to ISO 100. The lights are much brighter than you might think. Next, set aperture between f8 and f16, again, the bursts are much brighter than you think and wide open apertures will result in “blooming” where the light will be splotches instead of finely detailed trails.

To capture the foreground/background, start with a shutter speed of 2-4 seconds. This allows the sensor to record the ambient light. At this point, a really handy accessory is a remote shutter release. These things cost as little as \$10 on eBay and are just simple switches that allow you to trip the shutter without touching the camera. If you want to get fancy, there are lots of Chinese companies on fleaBay, advertising remote units for under \$100. I have one and it works fine except the user guide which is written in Ancient Gibberish.

If you don’t want to mess with a remote release, try a piece of black, lightproof cloth. Place the cloth over the lens and trip the shutter. As the fireworks burst, remove the cloth to expose the sensor. This also lets you make multiple exposures. Of course, you’ll need to set your shutter speed to 15-30 seconds so the shutter doesn’t close between bursts. A baseball cap works just as well. Just don’t jiggle the camera as you cover and uncover the lens.

One final point, be aware of street lights and other strong sources of ambient light. They can cause lens flare and other problems. If they’re too close, your images will be “blown out”. Try to set up where the ambient light isn’t too strong or from a single source.