21 Go-to Shooting Settings

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Train Your Photography Instinct

The purpose of this guide is to hand you the settings you need to start taking the control back from your camera. If you can memorise just a few of these settings, or better still, understand the reasoning behind them, then you’ll be well on your way to fully manual photography.

Some of these settings may be obvious - landscapes are often shot at f/16 - and some of them may confuse you - why am I shooting lens flare at 1/500 of a second? - but each of these go-to settings are accompanied by a short paragraph explaining why I’ve chosen the settings I have.

This is a very short ebook, which realistically shouldn’t take you more than 15 minutes to read, but it’s important to revisit it often over the next few weeks, to really keep the memory fresh in your mind.

After a while though, it should become instinctive. For the majority of the settings presented in this ebook, I didn’t have to check the image metadata, I instinctively knew what to put.

And it’s that instinct which I hope to impart to you today.

So without any further adieu, I’d like to invite you to get started. Once you’re finished, please just shoot me an email and let me know what you think:

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Enjoy,

Josh Dunlop
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When shooting architecture, you’re often left with the decision of whether to prioritise depth of field, or a fast enough shutter speed to capture a sharp image. With this go-to setting, it maximises the aperture for a deep depth of field, while being fast enough to not capture any motion blur. The ISO is slightly higher than normal, to make up for the extra exposure required. Definitely a time when you’d want to shoot in manual mode.
Best shot on aperture priority mode, cityscapes require a deep depth of field and maximum sharpness, which comes from a narrower aperture. Once you have the aperture set, somewhere around f/11, you can then set your shutter speed to around 1/200 for a good walking-around speed. You may want to boost your ISO slightly to give you a bit of leeway with the exposure.
Concerts
F/2.8 - 1/160 - ISO 2000

Concert photography often involves a lot of movement by the artist, with fast and unpredictable lighting. For that reason, it’s best to shoot on manual mode, as it will allow you to set an exposure that will freeze motion, and capture the lighting. A wide (but not too wide) aperture will provide your camera with plenty of light, which in turn means that you can turn up the shutter speed and freeze the motion. ISO 2000 is often a must in low-light.
When the sun is just rising, the sky can produce some of the most beautiful light of the day, but it’s as dark as it is soft. As I’m sure you’re well aware, when you’re in low light, you’ll want to shoot on manual mode and crank the exposure to allow as much into the camera as possible. A wide aperture will really accentuate the soft light, and the shutter speed and ISO will be set to the bare minimum to produce exposures without motion blur.
During the golden hour the sun is very low in the sky, which makes for rather dynamic lighting, with lots of soft shadows. You still want a deep depth of field though, so an aperture of around f/8 is a good starting point, while keeping both your ISO low for better image quality, and your shutter speed fast for sharper images. You could easily shoot during the golden hour on aperture priority mode, but as it starts to get darker, it’s best to switch to manual.
This is perhaps my most dreaded lighting situation. You’re fighting low light, with the need for a depth of field deep enough to capture everyone in the frame in sharp focus. In my experience this is best shot on manual, with an aperture of f/4, and a shutter speed just sharp enough to freeze any motion. Any additional exposure required can be made up by a high ISO.
In contrast to indoor group photos, shooting outdoors tends to give you the luxury of an abundance of light. For that reason, I push my aperture to f/8, the shutter speed to 1/200 (to allow for all kinds of movement), while comfortably setting my ISO to only 100. Aperture priority mode is fine for this kind of photo.
Landscapes require a really narrow aperture, as that tends to produce the best possible sharpness, and a very deep depth of field. That’s why I shoot in aperture priority mode, and set the aperture to around f/16, and the shutter speed to 1/100. If you find yourself without enough light, you can always put the camera on a tripod and lower the shutter speed, or push the ISO higher.
Lens flare is a stunning technique when used in moderation, and tastefully processed. Shooting in manual mode, it allows me to take full control over my camera, which will be left confused by the abundance of light entering the lens. f/8 and 1/500 will cut though a lot of the light and leave me with a reasonably accurate exposure, which I can later tweak.
Light painting is great fun, and it’s pretty easy when you know what settings to use. I like to start with 15 second exposures as it’s usually enough time to do all of the light painting I’d like to do, but often I’ll push it to 30 seconds too. With the light that’s being added to the exposure, you can often get by with an ISO of only 1600, and a not-too-wide aperture of f/4, on manual mode.
Shooting The Milky Way requires a little bit of maths, involving the 500 rule, which we don’t need to go into just yet (learn more about it here). But it’s safe to say that if you’re using a wide enough focal length (in this case 14mm), then these settings will do just fine. In fact, I think almost every Milky Way photo I’ve ever shot have been taken on these settings, using manual mode, of course.
Night photography is best shot on manual mode, as it will allow you to have maximum control over the exposure. I tend to capture multiple light sources at night, which gives me the flexibility of a slightly faster (10 second) shutter speed, without having to push the aperture or the ISO too hard.

Night With A Tripod
F/4 - 10 Seconds - ISO 1250
When you don’t have a tripod, you really have to push every aspect of the exposure. This means a super wide aperture, a very slow shutter speed, and a high ISO. Not ideal lighting conditions, but nice to know that you can still capture night photos without a tripod. And of course, this is shot on manual mode.
Panning is a tricky form of photography, as it requires that you capture movement in one part of the photo, while capturing no movement in another... all while moving your camera. You’d be surprised how fast you can push your shutter speed though, especially if you’re in a moving vehicle. Shutter speed priority mode is usually fine, but if that doesn’t work, then it’s best to default to manual.
As with all indoor photography, if you’re not using additional lighting, then you’re not going to lacking the light you need for a comfortable exposure. That’s why the aperture is a little wider than I’d typically like. If you’re in need of more light, I would suggest standing by a window as it acts as a big lightbox, and you can always boost your ISO like I’ve done here. Shot on manual mode.

**Portrait - Indoors**

**F/4 - 1/100 - ISO 400**
When shooting portraits outdoors, you can set your camera to almost any setting you like, so although these are my go to settings, I wouldn’t be afraid to turn up my shutter speed, and widen my aperture to produce soft and dreamy photographs. This is one of the times that you can get away with aperture priority mode without a second thought.
The sea has a tendency to get fairly rough, and unless you love a lot of motion blur, you need to be able to capture that movement. That means shooting in manual mode with a seriously fast shutter speed. As a result, you’ll need to boost the ISO too, and it will not allow you to go too narrow with your aperture.
There’s two options when it comes to star trail photography: you can either take one really long exposure, or you can stack multiple exposures together (like in the photo above). Regardless of which method you choose, you’ll want to shoot on manual mode, and if you’re not going to stack your images, set your shutter to bulb mode and capture exposures which last a few minutes.
Street photography often requires a fast shutter speed as you need to be able to quickly move your camera and take a photo, while moving fast, or capturing a moving object. In the photo above, I was climbing some stairs in Shanghai, and I pulled my camera without even looking through the viewfinder to capture this shot. If it had been much slower, there would have been motion blur. Best shot on shutter speed priority or manual mode.
Sunsets are beautiful, but they mean that you’re losing light, and therefore, need to be conservative with your exposure settings. Make sure your shutter speed isn’t too high that you’re underexposed, while still maintaining a good depth of field with a narrow-ish aperture. Make up for any lack of exposure with the ISO, while shooting on manual mode.
Twilight produces some super soft light, which makes it a great time to shoot, but make sure you’re not underexposing your photos. Shoot on manual, and open your aperture wide, your shutter speed slow, and your ISO high.

Twilight
F/2.8 - 1/60 - ISO 1600