

How to Photograph Christmas Lights and Other Holiday Events

Learn to Capture Striking Pictures During the Christmas Season

by Kerry Drager

author of [Golden Dream: California from Gold Rush to Statehood](#)

([/reviews/reviewItemDetail.asp?reviewItemID=210&catID=61](#)), [Scenic Photography 101](#)

([/reviews/reviewItemDetail.asp?reviewItemID=213&catID=61](#))

Almost any subject can help record the holiday spirit - from pictures of family and pets to images of bright lights and delicious snacks. BetterPhoto members have recorded the holidays in all sorts of amazing ways. In this article, we explore some of the many subject possibilities, plus offer lots of shooting tips and techniques.

Look for Photos of Christmas Lights, Family, Santa , Decorations, Etc.!

Just consider some of the subjects that BetterPhoto photographers have captured: Shots of kids and cats dressed up like Santa, colorful images of Christmas bows and wrap, and of course, pictures of Santa himself. And not all successful images are in color - some are in glorious black-and-white too!

Also, plan to have lots fun. In fact, BetterPhoto shooters have made soooooo many awesome images that elicit a smile, an out-and-out laugh, or an "ahhhhh, that's cute" reaction. For example, check out these photos, all past contest winners or finalists: "Looks Like Naughty", "One Last Merry Christmas", "Lukas", "...uh, A Little Help Here?", "Holiday Spirits", "My Holiday Helper", "Santa Paw's!", "Happy Holidays from Danielle", "Ho ... Ho ... Ho", and many others.

The key to holiday success? Experiment, with different subjects, perspectives, and compositions. The only hard-and-fast rule for photographing the Christmas festivities seems to be this one: Keep your camera close at hand! See them at BetterPhoto's [Christmas Photographs](#) (<http://www.betterphoto.com/gallery/dynoGall2.asp?catID=287>) gallery.



([/gallery/dynoGallDetail.asp?photoID=655235](#))

Merry Christmas
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<http://www.betterphoto.com/Masterpiece-Membership/>

Creative Ways for Photographing the Holidays

Don't miss BetterPhoto founder/photographer [Jim Miotke's](#) (<http://www.betterphoto.com/gallery/bio.asp?memberID=124>) excellent article - [Top Ten Tips for Better Holiday Photos](#) (<http://www.betterphoto.com/exploring/topten/holiday-photography-tips.asp>) - with techniques to make great pictures of Christmas, Hanukkah, or any other mid-winter holiday. Some highlights from Jim's guide:

Compose Creatively and Move in Close

Whether you are photographing the symbolic subjects of the holidays or your friends and family, look for interesting camera angles and viewpoints. Then place your subject off-center, and move in tighter - i.e., focus on the essentials, leave out the distracting extras.

Shoot First, Ask Questions Later

Especially if your subject is a child opening a gift - or playing with a gift for the first time - the scene can change in a split second. There is often just a few brief moments when that "magic spark" appears. So be ready, and keep shooting!

Use Flash Outdoors

Flash need not be relegated to indoor, night photography. Even in bright sunlight outdoors, forcing your flash to fire often means the difference between a so-so snapshot and an eye-grabbing masterpiece. The reason: bright day flash will fill in the shadows and even out harsh contrasts. Incidentally, bright overcast is great for photographing portraits - due to pleasantly soft-and-even light.



([/gallery/dynoGallDetail.asp?photoID=661026](#))

Under the Mistletoe
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Getting Artistic ... Also, Planning Your Strategy

Look for Reflections

Add an artistic touch to your holiday photos by capturing reflections rather than the object itself. Keep an eye out for interesting splashes of color, reflected from Christmas lights and other holiday decorations. This is one time when rainy days are your friends - puddles in the street can be a perfect source of abstract images.

Blur, Swirl, and Zoom Those Christmas Lights


Tired of the same old Christmas tree photos? Try something new by setting your camera to a slower shutter speed - anywhere from 1/2 second to 2 or 4 full seconds. Then purposefully move the camera while taking the picture. The result: A colorful and abstract blur



of Christmas lights.

Plan Ahead: Charge Batteries, and Clear Cards or Buy Film

The last thing you want to have happen is to get all set up for the family portrait or holiday photo and then realize you forgot to charge the battery! In addition, offload and archive your images so you can free up space on your flash memory card. If you use a film-based camera, have an extra roll or two of film available.



[\(/gallery/dynoGallDetail.asp?photoID=640754\)](#)
Happy
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Exposure Tips for Photographing Christmas Lights

Here's expert advice from a previous BetterPhoto Forum post on how to prevent Christmas lights from overexposing and blowing out:

"Your camera meter sees the dark green tree and these little light bulbs, and in trying to determine the best exposure, ends up blowing out, or overexposing the light bulbs. Often, the only way it works is to use supplemental strobes and light boxes. Or use your on-camera flash as a fill light. Put your camera on the tripod and compose your picture. Take some test shots on M for manual, not P or A. Adjust your shutter speed and/or f-stop until the Christmas lights look great. Most likely, the rest of the tree will be very dark, and now you use your flash to open up those areas. Turn on the flash on your camera and shoot another. If it looks too "flashed", then go into the menu and reduce the flash output starting at -1; then if you need more, try -1.3, -1.6, -2. Hopefully, something in there will work."

And, from the same Q&A thread, these exposure thoughts from BetterPhoto member Doug Elliot: I have been working on a project for our local CofC. I am shooting outside lights. I use a tripod and shutter release, and meter for the lights. I shoot in manual mode, tungsten mode for white balance, and Raw. I also bracket my shots.

Great Resources for Photographing the Holiday Season

BetterPhoto articles:

- [Top Ten Tips for Better Holiday Photos \(http://www.betterphoto.com/exploring/topTen/holiday-photography-tips.asp\)](http://www.betterphoto.com/exploring/topTen/holiday-photography-tips.asp)
- [Holiday Idea: BetterPhoto Gift Cards! \(http://www.betterphoto.com/gifts.asp\)](http://www.betterphoto.com/gifts.asp)
- [Snow Photography: Big Bear Lake Skiing, Aspen Snowboarding, Etc. \(http://www.betterphoto.com/article.asp?id=106\)](http://www.betterphoto.com/article.asp?id=106)

BetterPhoto Galleries:

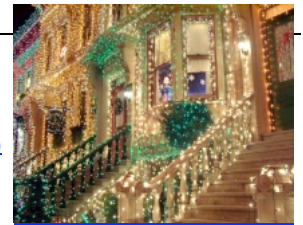
- [Christmas Photographs \(http://www.betterphoto.com/gallery/dynoGall2.asp?catID=287\)](http://www.betterphoto.com/gallery/dynoGall2.asp?catID=287)
- [Winter Scene Pictures and Snow Photos \(http://www.betterphoto.com/gallery/dynoGall2.asp?catID=450\)](http://www.betterphoto.com/gallery/dynoGall2.asp?catID=450)

BetterPhoto Forum Threads:

- [Photographing Christmas Lights \(http://www.betterphoto.com/forms/QnAdetail.asp?threadID=30966\)](http://www.betterphoto.com/forms/QnAdetail.asp?threadID=30966)
- [How to Shoot Christmas Lights \(http://www.betterphoto.com/forms/QnAdetail.asp?threadID=21013\)](http://www.betterphoto.com/forms/QnAdetail.asp?threadID=21013)
- [Indoor Christmas Photos \(http://www.betterphoto.com/forms/QnAdetail.asp?threadID=26673\)](http://www.betterphoto.com/forms/QnAdetail.asp?threadID=26673)

Excellent Instructor Insights blog by Richard Lynch:

- [Making Your Own Holiday Card \(http://insights.betterphoto.com/archives/weblogs_by_richard_lynch/index.html\)](http://insights.betterphoto.com/archives/weblogs_by_richard_lynch/index.html)



[\(/gallery/dynoGallDetail.asp?photoID=640711\)](#)
Holiday lighting
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About Author / Instructor / Photographer, Kerry Drager

[\(/gallery/bio.asp?memberID=20858\)](#)

The content manager and an instructor for BetterPhoto.com, Kerry Drager is also the author of *Scenic Photography 101*. In addition, he teaches two online photography courses at BetterPhoto: [Creative Light & Composition \(http://www.betterphoto.com/courseOverview.asp?cspID=74\)](#) and [Creative Close-ups \(http://www.betterphoto.com/courseOverview.asp?cspID=65\)](#).

Kerry's Pro BetterPhoto Web site offers an assortment of galleries and illustrated how-to articles on photography. In addition, [kerrydrager.com \(http://www.kerrydrager.com/-/kerrydrager/\)](http://www.kerrydrager.com) was featured in Shutterbug magazine.

His work has appeared in Outdoor Photographer and other major magazines; Hallmark cards and Sierra Club Calendars; and in advertising campaigns for American Express and Sinar Bron Imaging. He is also the photographer of the photo-essay books *The Golden Dream: California from Gold Rush to Statehood* and *California Desert*, and is a contributing photographer for the books *Daybreak 2000* and *Portrait of California*.

He lives with his wife, Mary, in the country near Sacramento, California, with their six Newfoundland dogs, a Himalayan cat, a Bengal cat, a Siamese cat, three mixed-breed cats, two horses, and a mixed terrier.

- [See Kerry Drager's Basic BetterPhoto™ photo gallery \(http://www.betterphoto.com/gallery/gallery.asp?mem=20858\)](http://www.betterphoto.com/gallery/gallery.asp?mem=20858)
- [Enroll in an online photography course with Kerry Drager \(http://www.betterphoto.com/online-photography-courses.asp\)](http://www.betterphoto.com/online-photography-courses.asp)
- [Contact Kerry Drager \(/gallery/contact.asp?memberID=20858\)](#)



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