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The Bulb Setting

by Jim Hooper

The great expanse of city skyline as the sun fades below the horizon leaving a darkened rendition in shades of blue... you get your camera and, of course, your sturdy tripod for the long exposure. You don't want to miss a beat, so you close down the aperture to f22 with your Velvia 50. Reaching for a shutter speed to give you a starting point for exposure, you see that you're not getting a reading, even at 30 seconds! What to do?

You've got a couple of options here. The easiest, by far, is to slide the aperture to it's widest setting (f4 or so), and see what reading you get there. Assuming that you get a reading here, you can double your exposure time for each aperture stop you close down. For example, if you are at f4 and get a reading of 3 seconds, then going to f5.6 would mean 6 seconds, f8 at 12 seconds, f11 at 24 seconds, f16 at 48 seconds, and finally at f22 you would be at 96 seconds. Now in reality, reciprocity failure becomes your enemy, and you will probably need to add a "little" more time. At these kinds of exposure times, you need not be perfectly exact. 100 seconds won't be much different from 96 seconds. Try 110 seconds and bracket.

If you set to f4 and still can't get a reading at all, your only other option is to combine this tactic with the other variable in exposure times, film speed. Try setting the ISO to 800. Then just remember to increase your exposure appropriately. In our example, using Velvia 50, and setting the ISO to 800 would be 4 stops different. Add another 4 stops of light to your calculated reading. In the example, that would mean taking 96 seconds and doubling it to 192, again to 384 seconds, again to 768 seconds, and finally again to 1536 seconds (26 minutes)!! Aren't you glad you brought your tripod!