

High Speed Night Photography

By Milton Heiberg

Two students of the Orlando DPA (Digital Photo Academy) Advanced Workshop and the instructor (me) were invited to photograph the STS-128 shuttle launch, scheduled for early morning Tuesday, August 25, 2009. We were invited by a third student, Greg Lohning, who happened to be a career employee of NASA and past member of the closeout crew—the guy who inspects the astronauts as they enter the spacecraft. Two of us, Peter Lapin and I, jumped at the opportunity. We stood by our cameras through the night, watching lightning strikes throughout the Atlantic Ocean behind the well-lighted launch tower (a beautiful sight on its own), until the mission was finally scrubbed because of the bad weather. Well, on the optimistic side of disappointment, it gave us a chance to examine our trial shots on the computer, re-think our settings, and come back for the next scheduled launch date. We determined that to get decent shots of a fast moving subject in what deceptively appears to be a very bright light, made even brighter by the rocket fire, is bright only in comparison to the dark night that surrounds the launch tower. It is still artificial light, and it's filtered by three miles of dense, humid Florida air. This situation called for shooting with ISO 800 at f/4 and 1/2000 sec.

So we sat at the edge of our seats watching the news for the next few days. The lift-off happened at 11:59 PM on Friday, August 28. Here are the results of both days.



1. Before: 08/24/2009 11:55 PM



2. 08/28/2009 11:59:01:22



3. 08/28/2009 11:59:04:32



4. 08/28/2009 11:59:02:31



5. After: 08/28/2009 11:59:07:52

These images were shot at ISO 800 with aperture priority set at f/5.6 (images 2 & 3) and f/4 (images 1, 4, & 5) and shutter speeds that varied between 1/500 sec. and 1/2000 sec.

Overall, the lift-off was spectacular and breathtaking. Peter Lapin and I were taken with the event. It was something we will never forget.

Thanks Greg!