"THE LIGHTS OF AURORA BOREALIS DANCED IN MY HEAD, AND I DREAMED OF CATCHING THE ELUSIVE PREY."

ANNE KAZEL-WILCOX, WRITER

No man-made light show can compete. We ooh and aah at colorful fireworks displays, accompanied by window-rattling booms and whistles, sometimes by patriotic orchestral music. We can plan our fireworks viewing on holidays and at ballparks, inconvenienced only by parking and traffic.

The northern and southern lights, however, spring solely from nature's powers, unrestrained by schedules and seemingly averse to predictability – perhaps part of their appeal. The vibrant colors shimmer and dance, usually in hues of greens with occasional shades of red and blue. The patterns dance in the night sky, like rays reaching skyward or wind-blown curtains, building to a crescendo, fading, undulating, always silent – soothing and soft, yet powerful.

The aurora borealis (northern lights) and aurora australis (southern lights) are caused by electrons colliding in the upper reaches of the atmosphere. The most spectacular shows arise from powerful sunspots and solar storms. Earth's magnetic fields guide electrons toward the polar regions, making the lights more common and spectacular between latitudes of 60 and 75 degrees, including northern Canada, Alaska and Scandinavia.

To see the lights, then, one must travel to cold climates during the wintertime, avoiding the midnight sun that would spoil the viewing and hoping for both clear skies and solar activity.

Despite the uncertainty, many travelers make their way toward the poles each winter in hopes of catching the phenomenal natural sky show. These stories come from a few who have made their bucket-list trip and captured the lights.

WHY ARE THE COLORS DIFFERENT?

The color of the northern lights depends on the type of atom involved in the collision. Our atmosphere consists mostly of oxygen and nitrogen atoms. Because the composition of our atmosphere varies, different-colored auroras occur at different heights.

RED LIGHTS OCCUR AT ALTITUDES OF **150 MILES AND ABOVE.**

GREEN LIGHTS OCCUR AT ALTITUDES OF **UP TO 100 MILES.**

PURPLE LIGHTS OCCUR AT ALTITUDES OF **60 MILES AND ABOVE.**

BLUE LIGHTS OCCUR AT ALTITUDES OF **UP TO 60 MILES.**

INFORMATION FROM EXPEDIA NORWAY

HUNTING THE LIGHTS IN THE WHITE DESERT

Snowmobiling with Hurtigruten Cruises, Norway – February

by Gigi Ragland

The ship crossed the 71st parallel of the Arctic Circle on the fifth day. It was the farthest north I had ever been and the best chance to see the aurora borealis. We were cruising toward the North Cape of Norway, the northernmost point of the mainland European continent. Every winter, Hurtigruten Cruise Lines heads north into the Arctic Circle with itineraries packed with northern lights programs and excursions.

As in an African safari, where the animals don't show up on command, neither does the aurora borealis. That's why a winter Hurtigruten cruise was so special. Not only did I have the chance to see the lights while on the ship deck, but a guided snowmobiling excursion proved to be most rewarding.

On a stark landscape of frosty snow, described by locals as "the white desert," my small group zipped off into the dark, clear night single file, following our guide. The only sound came from the roar of the snowmobiles as we cast into the black night with headlights aimed at the whiteness ahead of us.

Suddenly, the guide braked and with his hand up ushered us to stop beside him. Adjusting our eyes to the inky blackness, we saw that we were on a plateau overlooking a small coastal town along the Arctic Ocean, lights twinkling in the distance. Way above it illuminated an arch of hazy neon greenish blue light, the luminescence brightening, then eerily fading in and out. Spellbound, we stood in silence staring. It was the "wow" moment I hoped for and will never forget.

OTHER NEARBY ACTIVITIES: Kirkenes Snow Hotel; skiing, tobogganing and sledding; dog-sledding; snow hikes; cultural city walks; midnight concert in the Arctic Cathedral.

Gigi Ragland is a freelance travel and food writer who enjoys otherworldly experiences all across the globe.

Snowmobilers stop to take in the lights on the Arctic coast of Norway.
Photograph by Ørjan Bertelsen, courtesy of Hurtigruten

LINKS FOR CHASING THE LIGHTS

NORWAY:
VisitNorway.com

ICELAND:
VisitIceland.com

FINLAND:
VisitFinland.com

MANITOBA, CANADA:
TravelManitoba.com

CRUISES:
Hurtigruten.us

ARCTIC RESORT, FINLAND:
Kakslauttanen.fi/en/

FAIRBANKS, ALASKA, RESORT:
ChenaHotSprings.com

NATURAL HABITAT ADVENTURES, INCLUDING CANADA:
NatHab.com

POLAR BEAR TOURS, MANITOBA, CANADA:
ChurchillWild.com