

This Canadian northern lights show is for women only <https://www.thenationalnews.com/travel/2023/11/16/this-canadian-nort...>

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See the aurora borealis in all its glory during Churchill's deep winter



Natural Habitat Adventures offers women-only Northern Lights and Arctic Exploration in Churchill, Manitoba, Canada. All photos: Lindblad Expeditions

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In the far reaches of Manitoba, [Canada](#), along the shores of Hudson Bay, is

where you will find the town of Churchill, famous for its large polar bear population. Tourists gather in the autumn hoping to get a glimpse of the giant white creature from the safety of expedition tundra vehicles.

The bears hang out near the town, waiting for the chill of winter to transform the Hudson Bay into sheets of ice. By December, the predators migrate on to their icy hunting grounds within the bay to feast on seals for the season, leaving the town empty of their presence, opening it up for another type of tourism.

Although it's a compelling enough reason to visit and see these magnificent animals, I travel to Churchill in winter for another reason: To see the grand night-time show – the Aurora Borealis.

There are a number of places in the world to see this grand spectacle, but this is one of the best. It's perfectly placed under the auroral oval of the polar north, allowing scientists to predict where northern lights will appear with more accuracy. Plus, there's a greater chance of clear skies for prime viewing conditions due to the town's location in the Far North next to frozen Hudson Bay.

Knowing my chances of seeing the famous spectacle was fairly reliable, I decide to check this “once-in-a-lifetime” trip off my bucket list. As a female travelling solo (since my husband isn't keen on wildlife holidays), I was thrilled to learn that Natural Habitat Adventures, an esteemed conservation leader in the tourism industry, offers women-only departures on their seven-day Northern Lights and Arctic Explorations tour.

The company's inaugural women-only adventure tour set off in 2020 with Churchill Northern Lights as their first offering. Because the location in the coldest part of winter can seem formidable, they wanted to make it more approachable for those not used to frigid conditions.

Presented in a supportive atmosphere, the small group trip experiences are designed to allow women to step out of their comfort zone and offer the chance to go snowshoeing and dogsledding.



“We felt like there might be women who were keen to experience these adventures in a context that felt safe, comfortable and affirming,” says Wendy Redal, editorial director for Natural Habitat Adventures. “The women who have gone on these departures absolutely love the experience.” Now the company has added nine more destinations to their women-only adventure trip roster.

Travelling with like-minded, adventure-loving women is a great way to satisfy my wanderlust. Most women on my trip are between 50 and 70 years of age, which proves you are never too old to allow yourself new adventures in life. And like me, the entire group of 12 women signed up foremost to have the “experience of a lifetime”.

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Catching sight of the phenomenon on the first night sets the tone for the rest of the trip. As evening approaches, our guide Judy corrals the group into a big comfy warm van where we set out towards the shoreline of frozen Hudson Bay. “I like to take everybody out by the inukshuk sculpture near the edge of town for their first glimpse of the lights,” says Judy, who has been guiding the tours since 2020.

We learn that an inukshuk is a human-shaped figure made out of stones or boulders built by the Inuit as a marker placed throughout the Arctic. They were used for navigational purposes, designating special places or historical sites.

Judy explains indigenous peoples thrived in the icy climate of the Canadian North for thousands of years, and still do. She says we will find out more about the culture of the Inuit, Metis and Dene peoples that call the area home, throughout the week. While we admire the giant stone figure, a band of neon green emerges in the sky. We quickly flock to the sculpture to take pictures with the glowing green stripe in the background. I choose to think of the special sculpture site as a talisman of good things to come.

Complete darkness engulfs us as we drive away from the blur of town lights towards our special viewing site for the evening. It is a jet-black night with clear skies. The group chats excitedly about the optimal conditions and what that might bring. We don’t have to wait long.

Wapusk Adventures, a property owned and operated by an indigenous family, provides a magical atmosphere for our group of skywatchers. The expansive area includes a large tepee to lounge in while enjoying the celestial event and a cosy log cabin that provides warmth and snacks to retreat to when the night-time cold becomes too much to bear.

Thankfully, Natural Habitat Adventures provides all the cold-weather clothing needed for the duration of the tour, so we don’t have to bring any gear for

outings. This includes heavy parkas, snow pants, insulated snow boots, fleece jacket, hat and neck gaiter, mittens, plus toe and hand warmers. We look



Catching sight of the phenomenon on the first night sets the tone for the rest of the trip. We look like big blue yetis, but the gear keeps us warm in the sub-zero Arctic weather.

As the first swirl of green light stretches across the dark canvas of the sky, childlike squeals begin to erupt within our group. Blasts of “oos” and “aahs” sound out throughout the night as the northern lights dance across the sky. Cameras click non-stop and arms become tired from pointing lenses towards the heavens.

Changing colours of green, yellow, bits of pink and pulsing shapes elicit more murmurs of wonder. There is such a parade of lights that I can only leave the awesome spectacle for the warmth of the cabin when my nose feels numb and my fingers tingle from non-stop picture-taking in the freezing cold. A night I will never forget.

Each night of the trip we are treated to different viewing locations. This includes Natural Habitat Adventures' custom-designed Aurora Pod, showcasing 360-degree views of the night sky through a glass ceiling and half-walls in a remote tundra location, as well as the circular Aurora Domes with Plexiglas roofs where I climb a ladder to the upper section for optimal viewing. We also head to another cabin location set deep in a boreal forest accessible by snow coach expedition across a frozen creek where we see the glow of the northern lights above the spruce trees.

Even when the lights are a no-show one night, we make the most of the experience.

Judy and her team of all-female assistants create a playlist of each guest's favourite songs for dance parties under the stars. While we chase the lights, we also boogie and sing, play board and card games, sip drinks by the fire and relax. There is no need to style our hair, wear make-up or dress up. It is great to "live it up and let loose", to be "lifted up" in the company of adventurous women in a safe and comfortable atmosphere.



During the day, our curiosity for life in the remote village is quenched with science and cultural talks featuring female speakers, in addition to active pursuits such as snowshoeing, dog-sledding and even testing our skills at outdoor ice games like curling and hockey.



Guests get to go dogsledding. Photo: Lindblad Expeditions

One 71-year-old lady, a grandmother with multiple sclerosis, even tries her hand at snowshoeing for the first time. We also learn how to saw blocks of snow to create an inukshuck and build an igloo.

First-time adventurers' nerves are calmed by the camaraderie of our supportive and encouraging group as they test their abilities. While we are all here to tick off “aurora borealis” on our bucket lists, we get so much more, including the chance to bond as a sisterhood of women chasing the lights.

Natural Habitat Adventures offers four women-only departures for the 2024 Northern Lights and Arctic Exploration trips, from \$7,395. The winter seasonal tours run from January-March; www.nathab.com