

travel



I love the night light

Anna Harrison sets her sights on Alaska's Aurora Borealis » P16-P17

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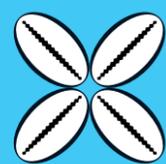
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**#FEEL
RARO**

VISUAL symphony

In ancient times, the Northern Lights were thought to be spirits dancing or a group of walrus kicking around a ball. As Anna Harrison found out, the aurora borealis still inspires awe

It's the one thing that's on everyone's bucket list, right? Seeing the Northern Lights? I never thought I'd get the chance. But the day I step off the plane in Anchorage, I'm told the forecast that night is pretty good. I can't believe my luck!

They say if you want to spot the aurora borealis in Alaska, you should go another 400km north to Fairbanks where the skies are often clear, and stay at least three nights — and even then there are no guarantees. I had been trying not to get my hopes up.

But this winter night it's a relatively high 5Kp index and a forecast of clear skies with maximum 7 per cent cloud cover. All of which means the chances of seeing the aurora are pretty good, even in Anchorage. Jet lag be damned.

I put on two lots of thermals, a fleece layer, and climb into oversized snow pants and jacket. I stick activated charcoal toe warmers to my thick woolen socks and shove my feet in my boots. Glove liners, gloves, hat, scarf, hand warmers. I'm so trussed up I can hardly move.

Jody Overstreet runs Alaska Photo Treks, a small business offering Aurora Quest photo tours. She takes groups out away from the city lights and

then offers tips for capturing the aurora with whatever camera set-up you have. Although I foolishly forgot to pack mine and suspect my phone camera will prove woefully inadequate.

She picks a small group of us up from our hotels at about 10.30pm and we head north to a remote spot called Eklutna, about half an hour out of town.

Jody explains a bit about how to spot the aurora. It will start out as a faint arc across the sky and then, when it is about to get really active, it will glow brighter and suddenly split off into different strands and start flicking around. The displays usually last about 15 minutes.

She explains some of the science behind it. When charged particles from the sun travel towards Earth in the solar wind, most of them are deflected by our planet's magnetic field. But, as the field is weaker around the poles, some particles enter the atmosphere there and collide with gases such as oxygen and nitrogen, producing different colours — and stunning displays when seen from the Earth's surface. That's the bit I care about.

Jody also tells us how different peoples through the ages have had different mythologies around the aurora. Occasionally, when solar storms were particularly violent, the aurora could be seen at

latitudes as low as the Mediterranean Sea. When activity was that strong, it could take on a red tinge and the Romans of ancient times saw that as a bad omen. It must have been terrifying seeing the horizon glow red at night. But the peoples living near the Arctic circle saw the aurora more often and had more benevolent stories. For some Native Alaskans it was the spirits of their ancestors dancing. For others it was a group of walrus kicking around a ball.

The woman in the front seat yells "There it is!". She points and the rest of us crane to see it through the windscreen. But, try as I might, I can't spot it. The side windows are fogged up and the only green lights I can see are reflections from the dashboard. So tantalisingly close. But still it bodes well for our evening viewing.

Soon enough we come to the wooded spot and park before trudging single file through the snow — a sneaky trick to get us moving and warmed up in the -10C temperatures. Jody's headlight casts an eerie glow among the bare trees, illuminating clumps of snow clinging to the branches.

After about 15 minutes of walking we come to a clearing. "Don't go too far down, you don't want to fall into the icy river," Jody warns as she lights



Checklist ALASKA

GETTING THERE

Alaska Air flies direct to Anchorage from many US cities including Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Seattle, Portland and Honolulu. United Airlines flies from New Zealand to Los Angeles, Las Vegas and San Francisco on the west coast of the United States.

DETAILS

For the best times to see the Northern Lights and other regional activities go to anchorage.net.

a small campfire in a hollow in the snow. As everyone sets up their tripods, I wander away to find a good spot and take a few test shots with my phone. They come up black. Humph.

The skies are pretty clear apart from a faint white smudge near the horizon — it could be the start of an aurora! Or it could be cloud or even just mist rising from the river, it's hard to tell. I take my glasses off and try to wipe the lenses — they've fogged up from my breathing into my scarf to try to keep my face warm. In the end, I put them in my pocket next to my phone.

Staring at the sky, I try to pick out constellations from the brightest stars but, apart from Orion's Belt, they're all unfamiliar northern ones. An American woman points out the Big Dipper to me and a shooting star streaks across the sky.

Then that white smudge on the horizon slowly forms into an arc and disappears again. It's almost as if it's teasing us. I can hear the fire crackling as sparks fly into the air, snow creaking beneath our boots, a train in the distance. Jody shares a few more tips for the photographers — set it for a longer exposure so you capture as much light as possible; use the silhouetted trees as a reference point; don't worry about the light from the moon, it will only make the snow show up brighter and the contrast will be more stark. And still that smudge fades in and out.

Until someone points out that it has started to glow. All eyes are glued to it now, waiting to see

Need to know . . .

What: See the Northern Lights.

When: Visit Alaska during aurora season between August 21 and April 21.

Where: Go to Fairbanks or Anchorage and try to get away from the city lights if possible.

In Anchorage: Alaska Photo Treks, Aurora Quest, alaskaphototreks.com

In Fairbanks: Many local operators run aurora tours and hotels offer aurora wake-up calls. Try Chena Hot Springs Resort, Snow Coach Aurora Tour, chenahotspings.com

More info: Check the aurora forecast at gl.alaska.edu. The Geophysical Institute at the University of Alaska Fairbanks gives you the Kp index and where the aurora will be visible. The Kp index rates geomagnetic activity between 0 and 9 so the higher the number, the more activity and the lower the latitudes (in the Northern Hemisphere) it is possible to see it.

The light flashes and disappears again as if giants are dancing around a huge campfire and I'm watching from a distance, the moving bodies casting odd shadows



Clockwise: The aurora borealis; a photographer attempts to capture aurora in full swing; Northern Lights over the Knik River, Alaska; writer Anna Harrison trussed up and finding it difficult to move. Pictures / Getty Images; Jody Overstreet

Then it spreads until the whole sky is pulsing with light.

The others have noticed now too and there's a muted chorus of "oh my" and "wow". We are watching this visual symphony being played out on a grand

stage. It is too vast to take in — I start to get a crick in my neck from stretching back to watch it, but I can't take my eyes off it. Then it begins to split. Vertical shafts of green light shoot up like a bad 80s laser show. Spires, Jody calls them, like a Disney castle. In the background, the river of light ripples across the sky.

It is truly spectacular. And I am moved thinking that this magnificence has been lighting up the northern skies for millennia — long before we were around to appreciate it. I feel rather small in the context of time and space and have to blink back tears. As I squeeze my eyes shut, the ice on my eyelashes melts away.

"It never gets old," Jody says, reverently. "It's different every time and knowing the science behind it doesn't diminish the magic of it." I can imagine that. I've only been watching it for half an hour and I want to stay up all night and every night I'm here, gazing at the sky.

Eventually I start to lose the feeling in my toes and I'm forced to retreat to the van to warm up. As I climb into bed later I can still see it flashing in my mind — frustrating in its capriciousness but in the end utterly enchanting. I wouldn't have missed it for the world.