

PHOTO COURTESY VISIT FINLAND



Chasing Aurora

NOORAINI MYDIN braves the bitter cold to bask in the brief aura of the Northern Lights.

I can't feel my nose," I tell my guide, Antti, as I get off the snowmobile. I am wearing a beanie, four base layers, two fleeces, a jacket, thermal tights and salopettes (ski pants). I also have a thin pair of socks underneath thermal ones and sturdy walking boots. The temperature is below -30°C.

We are on a hill, on the hunt for the Aurora Borealis in Finnish Lapland. I have come to the village of Luosto, 90 minutes from the Arctic Circle. On arrival, I learn that the lights have not appeared for two weeks. My first five nights are a washout of snow and cloud. Tonight, the sky is clear.

The celestial display occurs when charged particles from the sun enter the earth's atmosphere at the poles and collide with gas particles:

common green and reds are created by oxygen, blue from nitrogen, and purple from helium. Long winter nights in December and January are ideal for sightings, although the lights are visible from autumn to spring.

Antti points to the starlit sky and tries to show me the North Star. But I'm not in the mood; my glasses have frosted over and I can't feel my fingers.

At the campsite, Antti swipes 8cm of snow off the log seats surrounding the fireplace before getting the fire roaring. He warms up my mittens and gives me an extra pair of thermal overalls. Trussed up like a Michelin man in the frozen white wilderness, I sip hot fruit juice and exchange life stories with Antti for the next three hours. But the Aurora Borealis does not appear.

My dreams of photographing the grand dame of the heavens evaporate. All I want to do is get back to my room at Santa's Hotel Aurora (hotelauroora.fi) and thaw. Like a stowaway, I curl up into a ball in the snow buggy while Antti covers me with reindeer hide. Back at the hotel, the manager commiserates with me.

The next evening, I go to bed fully clothed, praying for the Aurora sighting alarm to come through my in-room mobile phone. It comes at 9.17pm. "Northern Lights are on the sky now. If the local sky is clear, you can see them. Check the sky!"

I leap to my feet and take off, this time joining others at a nearby frozen lake. Someone shouts, "Look!" And there she is – a little shy, green shimmering light dancing across the sky in bursts of one or two minutes.

For the people of Luosto, the Northern Lights are as commonplace as the fog is to me back in London. But it is a dream come true. Although Dame Aurora's visit is brief, a 15-minute audience with her feels like eternity. ■

ADVENTURES WITH AURORA

PHOTO JOURNEY

Expert tutoring on photographing the Aurora Borealis is provided on this tour of Abisko National Park in Swedish Lapland. When the Arctic winds get too much, take cover in the Sami tent by a wood fire. lightsoverlapland.com

CRUISE

Set sail through the spectacular Norwegian fjords and enjoy the Northern Lights from the comfort of Hurtigruten, a traditional steamer ship. hurtigruten.co.uk

WELLNESS HOLIDAY

Indulge in a massage and Finnish sauna by day, and admire the Aurora from an outdoor Jacuzzi by night – all at the Northern Lights Resort & Spa in Canada. northernlightssyukon.com