

Aurora Survival Guide

Everything you need to know when planning a trip to see the Aurora Borealis

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Cameras

Is this your bucket-list travel trip? Always wanted to see the aurora? Well then, you'll want to have a good camera to capture it.

Your eye will see the aurora differently from that of your camera, so don't be surprised if the floating green blur isn't what you've seen in magazines. To get that sort of image, you'll need a good DSLR with a remote shutter release cable, tripod and spare batteries.

In the extreme cold your batteries will last less than half their normal duration. Take spares and keep them warm by placing them inside your jacket or store them (and your camera) in an esky to regulate the temperature and stave off transpiration. A hand held cable-release will enable you to take several images with stability and without losing warmth in your hands.

Make sure you really understand how to use your camera. Go outside and start taking images in a night-time setting. Finding the right buttons and overriding your flash is much harder in the dark. (Please don't blind your fellow travellers!)

Composition is everything. Earthbound objects give your skyward images credibility and perspective. People, trees, buildings are perfect. Unless you have a super intense Aurora overhead, your sky-only images may just look like a desktop wallpaper.

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See a dentist before you go away

The cold finds teeth irresistible. Cracks, holes and gums will feel every bit of the Arctic cold as it blasts your way.

Stuffy Nose

Antihistamines are not just for allergies. Moving in and out of extreme cold and warm creates infinite opportunities for your nose to run like crazy. Your snoz doesn't know whether to protect you from the cold or the heat, and you're subjecting it to both conditions several times a day. Taking a non-drowsy antihistamine is an easy solution to a simple, slightly irritating problem.

Walking

If you're new to snowy conditions, you are possibly also new to walking on slippery surfaces. Inevitably, you'll have a fall somewhere during your journey, simply walking down the street. This happens mostly at the beginning of spring when the sun hits footpaths, melts the snow, and then refreezes overnight, creating a slippery base for the next day.

Slow down, lift your feet and pay attention where you're walking. Scandinavians will flit past you able to negotiate the terrain in all sorts of shoes, but whilst you get used to the technique, take as much time as you need. Invest in a cheap pair of slip-on crampons if you're worried.

Aurora watching

Look south. Often the aurora builds from a blurry blob at the bottom of the horizon, and develops in light strings, like contrails behind a plane. It's worth hanging around or popping outside every 5 or so minutes to see how it develops. Sometimes you'll be lucky, sometimes you won't, but a little bit of persistence goes a long way.



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To enhance your chance of seeing the aurora:



Plan your trip around a new moon. Fainter auroral displays can be completely overridden by the light of the moon.



Look for opportunities to travel near the autumn and spring solstices. It's not understood why, but there seems to be a higher correlation of sightings of the aurora around the changes of the seasons.



Get out of town. Little villages in northern Norway and Finland are just perfect to view your bucket-list item. Not only are they charming places to visit, you'll support local communities and get away from light pollution which will hamper your view.



Explore local travel options. Local cloud patterns may mean that you are not able to see a display, that is going off down the road. There are several tour companies that offer evening Aurora Chases. One we took part in, we drove 120km on snowy roads, across the border into Finland and then back, with an adventure and a set of fabulous images under our belt.

Be prepared that you may not see an aurora. There are many factors in seeing an aurora, and most of them are in Mother Nature's hands. Plan a holiday or expedition that will be a treat even if you don't experience it.



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Washing

Travelling economy class to Norway and only have a 23kg weight limit with your inbound airline? Don't worry, Scandinavian hotel central-heating will be your best friend. Wash your smalls overnight, hang them over your towel rack and they'll be dry by the morning. Have more than just smalls? Try taking one of our guest's tips, washing your larger items and putting them on the sparkling clean and ever so warm bathroom floor. Yes, they too will be dry by the morning.

Clothing

Very few people have truly experienced the real cold that the arctic can bring. Arctic conditions fall into two areas. You are either very pleasantly warm (indoors) or braving the elements. The key is having the right clothing for the right environment which may change frequently throughout the day, or terrain you find yourself in. It's important that you don't sweat. Creating a damp layer near your body, is a sure-fire way of getting a cold

As Icelanders say, "There is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing!"

Be prepared for all weather conditions, by layering your clothing.

Invest in merino or possum wool and eiderdown, and aim for brands like Icebreaker, Marmot or NorthFace if you can afford it.

If you're not a ski-bunny and not inclined to go back to the cold, seek out second-hand clothing from your nearest op-shop or ask your friends who are. Check out your local ski shops, many have rentals and will happily rent you good boots, jackets and pants to get you through a few weeks away in the Arctic. One last tip, don't wear jeans. They draw in the cold and keep it close to your skin. Brr!!



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Tips to layer your clothing:



Body Layer: A thin layer close to your body. Thermals, top and bottom may not be sexy but they are critical to keeping you warm. When you're spotting aurora, try wearing TWO pairs of socks - one thin, one thicker to avoid the cold breaking into your shoes. Cold tootsies are miserable.



Middle layer: Travel back to the seventies and bring out your skivvies. You've never been so hip. This light layer with a high neck is perfect for wintry conditions.



Outer layer: Ideally this is a cardigan-type layer. Something that gives you control over heating and cooling.



Shell or Jacket: An Irishman once told me the lower you go below your bottom the warmer you'll be. Ski jackets are good if you're doing a lot of exercise and need to move freely, but for aurora watching a full-length jacket is better. Puffer-filled, down jackets are ideal. Windproof pants are great over the top of your woollen pants.



Boots: Look for the thickest rubber-soled boots you can find. The more distance you can give yourself from snow and frozen ground, the better.



Accessories: Gloves, beanies, scarves and sunglasses. If you're dog-sledding or hiking long distances a balaclava may also be good.