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All the Lights We Can (Not) See

*Chasing auroras from North to South, two
Further editors come away with polar-
opposite experiences*

By Hillary Richard & Laura Dannen Redman September 19, 2024 

When you travel thousands of miles to visit, say, the temples of Borobudur, it's pretty likely that — barring some freak miscalculation — you're going to see the temples of Borobudur. They might be overrun with tour groups. Might not even be all you'd expected! But they're there, just as they should be.

Auroras offer no such assurances. Fickle and wily, they're on nobody's schedule but their own. For those who chase them, this will-they-won't-they intrigue is all in the game — essential to the romance of what we might call “ephemeral tourism.” And when the stars and solar storms and airborne particulates align, and the lights miraculously turn on? As one of our two aurora correspondents recently discovered, even a lifetime of prep can't prepare you.

This year's #eclipsemania reminded us how powerful these fleeting phenomena can be, as millions of pilgrims sought out their spot in the celestial shadow.

How many looked up and saw only clouds? If so, was it all for nothing?

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Every day around the planet, hopeful travelers set off in pursuit of a moment that very likely will not come: a meteor shower, a **grizzly sighting**, a breaching whale, the aurora borealis itself. It takes faith and fortitude to set out on such a quest and, for the disappointed, even more to endure the trek home. Yet as our second correspondent learned, sometimes the good stuff lies in unintended outcomes — those scarcely imagined revelations no amount of planning could predict.

NORTH

58.7679° N, 94.1696° W

In a subarctic boreal forest, the only sign of life for miles was a group of photographers and polar bear researchers tucked inside a cozy yurt. Like children back from a snowball fight, we gathered around a stove to warm up with hot chocolate and cookies (and wine) before re-entering the elements. Outside was a different kind of party — one where Aurora was the guest of honor.

I wasn't in my typical party attire. My ski pants swished conspicuously as I planted my tripod in the snow and adjusted my camera, pulling off an oversize insulated mitten that would look more at home next to an oven.

It was day four of a weeklong Northern Lights adventure in Churchill, Manitoba, just a few degrees

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shy of the Arctic Circle, with local tour company [Frontiers North](#). The auroral oval stretches across much of Canada's expansive, undeveloped north, making it an ideal place to see the aurora borealis each year. Churchill's wide-open tundra, infrequent snowfall, and high winds typically equals clear skies — and bitter cold. The high temperature was well below zero degrees each day; with the windchill, the “feels like” temperature dipped to the negative 50s. Life slows down significantly in this kind of cold. Breathing in too quickly outdoors left me feeling like fresh icicles were stabbing at my respiratory system. I wore nearly every layer I had packed at all times, plus a snowsuit, and slid two hand warmers in between my gloves and mittens. Each night, I brought along two external batteries (since the cold drains power) plus a lens cloth for the times I exhaled too closely to my camera and had to rub away the stubborn frost that formed on my display screen.

The naked eye and a camera see the Northern Lights much differently. In person, they're more of an apparition, a ghostly glow of greens and reds that sometimes dance around the sky. On camera, the lightning bolt of neon streaks intensifies thanks to long exposures and heightened light sensitivity.

I wandered deeper into the frozen boreal forest to find a good view. I used my valuable seconds of glovelessness to set my camera's timer, then stepped away from the tripod to watch the show as my hand regained feeling inside my insulated glove.

Aurora had arrived. The party could begin.

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The lights anointed the sky in bloom, like a child with a set of watercolors and a complete disregard for painting within the lines

The entire sky turned from inky black to bright pea green throughout the night. Green- and burgundy-tinged streaks beamed down from the sky as if via UFO, spotlighting the pine trees that were otherwise invisible in the darkness. It had warmed up to the minus 40s with windchill, which felt balmy after the previous night of aurora viewing out by the open shores of Hudson Bay, with its cutting, unrelenting wind.

Each evening, the tour group would hop in a small bus and go chase the auroras around Churchill. On the first night, the lights swirled behind a tepee outside the dogsled yard at [Wapusk Adventures](#); the next day, they ran briefly around Churchill's inukshuk (a traditional Indigenous landmark shaped like a person) before the frigid gusts of wind became too painful, seeming to slice through the celestial activity. In a clearing in a pitch-black forest on the third night, they anointed the sky in a bloom, like a child with a set of watercolors and a complete disregard for painting within the lines. Where earlier there were streaks of green ribbons, now the entire sky glowed a radioactive

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yellowish-green, tailed by a burgundy that showed up subtly in real life but boldly on camera. The auroras saturated the sky, as if reminding us that this was their time and we were the visitors.

The Inuit believe the auroras are souls having fun. Sometimes they're dancing, sometimes they're playing soccer. If you listen closely and the conditions are right, you can hear a faint crackling or swishing — said to be the energy of the spirits, crunching their way across the frozen snow. (More prosaically, it's a static charge.)

The fleeting, impish Aurora I'd seen on previous nights seemed to dare anyone to capture her. But here in the forest, the color-changing auroras beamed lights around the landscape, flanked by stars and planets perfectly dotting the sky. It was almost too perfect, even by Churchill residents' standards. This was a wise old Aurora, a grande dame relishing her time on the celestial stage with open arms, as if to say, "Gather 'round and let me show you something magical."

A snowstorm rolled in the following afternoon, creating a dense cloud cover across the sky. We searched in vain for the lights while talking about the previous night's show. It turned out the boreal forest appearance was perhaps something else entirely: Aurora's final farewell.

—H.R.



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SOUTH

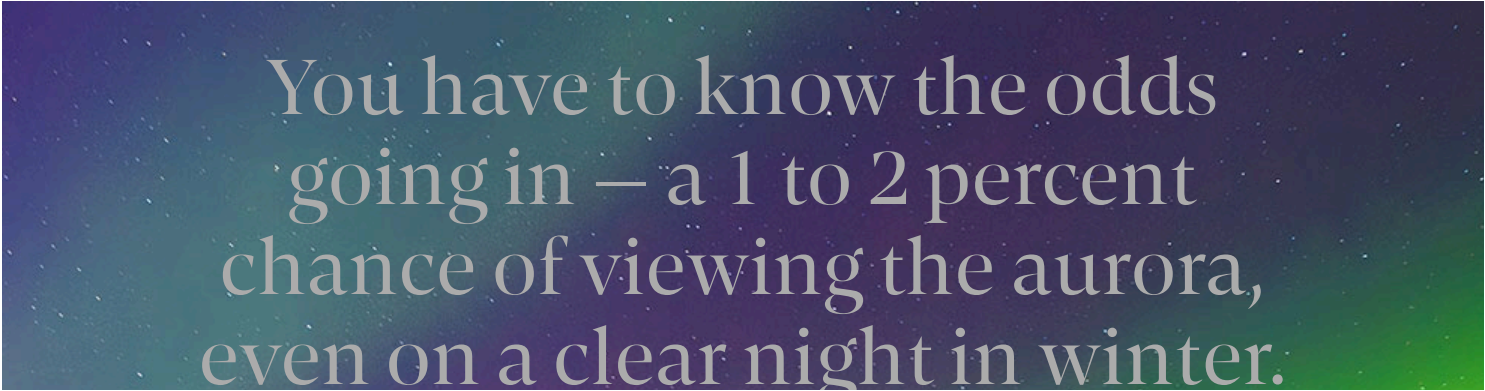
45.0302° S, 168.6615° E

If the aurora borealis is a child with a watercolor set, the aurora australis is more like the mercurial teenager who will *not* come down for dinner tonight, *Mom*. More elusive than their northern cousins, the Southern Lights are made of the same stuff — electrically

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charged solar particles bombarding the magnetic field around the Poles. We just don't hear about them because fewer people get to actually see them. It takes plenty of planning, luck, and protective layers to see the aurora australis way down under — namely, from Antarctica and South Georgia Island (in winter, shudder); Tasmania, the southernmost state in Australia; or the South Island of New Zealand. But the payoff has promise: a light show of vibrating greens and reds, low on the horizon, like a remote portal to another universe for only a select few.

My family and I traveled 9,325 miles to Queenstown, New Zealand, last August, in search of outdoor adventure — the specialty of this adrenaline-loving mountain town on the South Island, where even five-year-olds can go [downhill luging](#) and [jet boating](#). Thanks to the forthcoming solar maximum — the height of solar pinging in an 11-year cycle — we had as good a chance as any of chasing the aurora. “Chase” being the operative word. My husband, Greg, and his parents, Nancy and Tom, piled into a Land Rover that seemed built for tornado hunting and dune bashing. (I drew the short straw and stayed home with the kids; this story has been recapped and dissected so many times by the family, I feel like I was there. It's recounted in detail below.)



You have to know the odds going in — a 1 to 2 percent chance of viewing the aurora, even on a clear night in winter.

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But it's hard not to say, "So you're telling me there's a chance?"

The night was clear and darkened quickly, like someone had abruptly turned out the lights before a surprise birthday, and the air was bracing, begging for multiple pairs of socks, shirts, and scarves. (You can never have too many scarves.) The guide for the evening, Simon of [AuthenticAs](#), a physicist turned tour operator, would supply additional winter coats and hot chocolate to keep the internal fires burning, as well as a steady stream of commentary about the science and spirituality of the stars. Just one thing, though: Greg, Nancy, and Tom would most definitely *not* see the Southern Lights tonight.

Oh.

You have to know the odds aren't good going in — a 1 to 2 percent chance of viewing the aurora, even on a clear night in the winter — but it's hard not to say, "So you're telling me there's a chance?" Is it radical optimism? Delusions of grandeur? Or perhaps a willingness to be temporarily disappointed and pleasantly surprised? Sometimes a ball game gets called due to rain, a space shuttle launch gets canceled, and an aurora doesn't come out to play — but the experience can still be memorable. The sky is still there, and within it, a thousand stories.

In the beginning Ranginui (the sky) and Papatūānuku (the earth) were joined together, and their children

were born between them in darkness.

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Simon had parked the car no more than five minutes from our Airbnb in Queenstown, on a quiet stretch of lakefront, and began to connect the night sky to the culture of the Maori. He opened with a Maori blessing and then recounted the people's creation story, analogous to what he learned in astrophysics about the big bang, he said. He described how Polynesians showed unparalleled skill navigating to small Pacific islands by the stars and sun without astrolabes. How they followed the phases of the moon to know when to fish for eels or to plant taro. To [stargaze in Aotearoa](#), he said, is to see the universe through the eyes of its earliest settlers.

Then out came the telescope and suddenly, a single pinprick of light revealed itself to be a cluster of millions, the Omega Centauri; over there was Saturn with its clearly defined rings, and beyond, the swirling spiral of Antennae galaxies. "The size of the universe is staggering," said Greg. Tom, reflecting later, added: "This is the second time I've purposefully spent time looking at a 'big sky.' It simultaneously made me feel small, lucky to be part of it, and appreciative of Nancy, my family, my work, and humanity."

Nancy's hands were going numb, the reality of the two-and-a-half hours spent outside in 25 degrees Fahrenheit setting in. Yet standing there with her youngest son and husband, hearing the Maori blessings and their appreciation for the sky, water, and environment in their language, kept her warm long

after they came back inside.

—L.D.R.

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