

WANDERLUST

# Aurora hunters

on the flight of a lifetime

Could it be that the most memorable plane ride you ever take is a flight to nowhere?

BY JENNIFER BAIN

Greeks and Romans named the lights after Aurora, the goddess of dawn, and Boreas, the god of wind.





**Earth isn't the only planet to have auroras  
– Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune have them as well.**

**I**T'S WHEELS UP AT 11:45 P.M. AT ERIK Nielsen Whitehorse International Airport. We have a three-hour flight that will take us over a large swath of the Yukon and into the Northwest Territories. Instead of a destination, though, we have a mission aboard this Boeing 737. We will spend an evening in the sky, making a ceremonial crossing of the Arctic Circle while searching for nature's most dazzling light show.

We are aurora hunters on the flight of a lifetime.

Not content to just stand on Earth and gaze skyward, we are here to chase the northern lights in a jet. The sky is clear and no storms are brewing. There is a favourable "KP factor," a numerical scale that measures geomagnetic activity and helps predict how vivid the aurora might be. All signs point to a sky full of those gorgeous, alien green streaks.

There are 58 passengers aboard the 122-seat Air North flight, plus airline and event staff, which means window seats for most of us. But once this charter full of Canadians and a few Americans reaches cruising altitude and the captain switches off the wing lights, we have permission to unbuckle, roam freely and enjoy the vantage point from various windows.

Neil Zeller, the Calgary photographer documenting the trip, advises the aurora borealis "is better as a shared experience."

The airline's legendary warm cookies are guaranteed, as are gin cocktails with spruce tip bitters and glow-

in-the-dark green ice cubes, but the northern lights are a natural phenomenon that can't be controlled. If the aurora appears on the left, people on that side of the plane get to watch until captain Laurent Avril does a wide U-turn to give those of us seated on the right side a view of the magic.

**EVERYBODY WANTS TO GO AURORA HUNTING** these days. Travel to countries like Iceland, Norway, Finland and Sweden if you must, but here at home, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories boast some of the best light shows in the world.

There's more than one way to chase the aurora. DIYers can scope out local hot spots, usually on the periphery of town and as far from light pollution as possible.

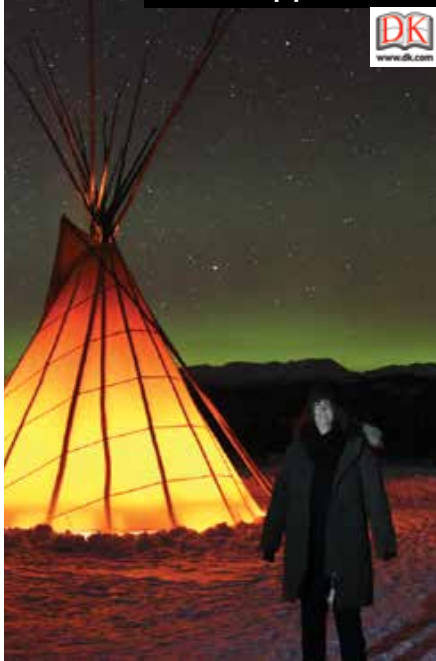
Rachel Bertsch, a Whitehorse photographer, tells me about the Aurora Alert Yukon Facebook group where locals post the time and location of aurora displays. She often goes to Schwatka Lake, looking north to Grey Mountain, between August and December to photograph the northern lights that reflect on the water. She also loves aurora watching from the Grey Mountain Cemetery – "the quietest place and also one of the darkest."

Tour operators pick hopefuls up at hotels for nights that usually run from 10 p.m. to 3 a.m. and might include yurts, photography lessons, snowshoeing, hiking, dogsleds or snowmobiles. Wilderness lodges, some with "aurora wake-up calls" or viewing windows in cabins, offer the cushiest experience. ▶

Inspired by an aurora australis (southern lights) flight in New Zealand, the Aurora 360 initiative in Whitehorse ups the ante by flying through a sky engulfed by the northern lights. What started as a test flight in November 2017 evolved into a cultural package in February 2019 presented by Anthony Gucciardo and his company Consulta Meta. Over four nights, there are two chances for an aurora flight (depending on the weather), while days are filled with tours and lectures dedicated to science, nature and culture, and an Indigenous-led gala.

EARLIER IN THE AFTERNOON, ALL predictions pointed to a good aurora show on our first night, so we gathered at the Yukon Beringia Interpretive Centre, a museum of natural history, for cocktails, canapés and a talk by an astronomy ambassador, U.S. space weather prediction

**Whitehorse takes its name from the local rapids on the Yukon River that reminded gold rush miners of “the flowing manes of albino Appaloosas.**



expert and a postdoctoral fellow who studies orbital dynamics.

The Canadian Space Agency defines auroras as natural displays of light that can be seen with the naked eye when “charged particles (electrons and protons) collide with gases in the Earth’s upper atmosphere, producing tiny flashes that fill the sky with colourful light. As billions of these tiny flashes occur in sequence, the lights appear to move or ‘dance.’” Green is the most common colour, but lights can be pink, purple, blue or crimson depending on the composition of gases in the Earth’s atmosphere and other variables.

“Let’s go see the lights,” said enthused project lead and host Kalin Pallett when it came time to pile into a bus and drive to the tarmac to catch our flight. After a safety briefing, he instructed us to “sit back, relax and enjoy the incredible view.”

I hunker down in my window seat and wonder why the northern lights are so captivating. All those Instagram photos of spectacular skies look the same after awhile, but at the same time, every moment of every aurora is different. You can’t control the aurora or ask it to wait. You must bend to its will, be able to stay up late and show patience.

The northern lights appear all year long, but here in northern Canada, aurora season runs loosely from August to March when the night skies are dark. This likely explains why winter tourism is on a major upswing in the region.

It takes just 14 minutes for the aurora to appear but it seems to last forever. We fly in circles below the green glow, but it feels like we are drenched in it. I watch the brilliant squiggles pulsate until the intensity overwhelms me and I start drifting in and out of sleep as our three-hour journey goes half an hour longer than expected.

Yukoners have a special relationship with light, whether enjoying 24 hours of summer sunshine, 24 hours of winter darkness or sporadic auroras. Indigenous communities, we are told, believe the northern lights offer a way to communicate with ancestors. Chasing the northern lights makes me realize that I don’t look to the heavens enough, literally or figuratively. I look ahead, behind and down, but rarely pause to look up with gratitude for a sky that might be pitch black, twinkling with stars or pulsating with aurora magic. **41**



## When You Go

**WHAT TO DO:** For details on the next **Aurora 360** experience, watch [aurora-360.ca](http://aurora-360.ca). In 2019, flights cost \$1,045 and four-night packages are \$2,939. **Arctic Range Adventure** in Whitehorse has summer, fall and winter aurora tours. **Southern Lakes Resort**, 90 minutes south of Whitehorse, has lakefront cabins. **Who What Where Tours** leads a colourful Whitehorse city tour - ask them to point out downtown’s two famous “log skyscrapers.” The **Yukon Beringia Interpretive Centre** has dioramas of extinct ice age animals and woolly mammoth statues out front.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Downtown Whitehorse is walkable and the **Best Western Gold Rush Inn** is steps from everything with a free airport shuttle, saloon and photogenic Mountie statue and mounted moose head in its lobby. Five minutes from downtown in the woods, get your log cabin fix in one of the two self-catering cabins at the **Yukon Pines**.

**WHERE TO DINE:** **Wayfarer Oyster House** for Yukon, B.C. and Alaskan seafood, house-made pasta, local meats, smoked fish and killer cocktails, like the Jiggs Casey with rye, birch syrup, grapefruit and local bitters. **Burnt Toast Café** and **Bullet Hole Bagels** for daytime eats. **Woodcutter’s Blanket** for craft beer, cocktails and bar snacks.