

A few of the Best Places to View the Northern Lights

By *U.S. News*



The northern lights, known as the aurora borealis, are a spectacular natural light show visible at certain times of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. This phenomenon occurs when electrically charged particles from the sun enter the Earth's atmosphere and collide with gaseous particles, such as oxygen and nitrogen. The experience is surreal, with vibrant hues of blue, green, pink and violet dancing across the night sky. The best places to see the aurora borealis offer little to no light pollution, clear skies and no precipitation. Many top viewing spots have websites with aurora trackers, and staff members at some hotels will wake up visitors when the lights appear (if requested).

While lesser known, polar lights called aurora australis appear in the Southern Hemisphere and are visible in places like Antarctica, Tasmania and New Zealand. This spectacle is more elusive since there's less land mass in this part of the world – and fewer viewing spots to see the show. But if you're lucky enough to travel to see the aurora australis, you'll be rewarded with brilliant displays of color in shades of green, blue, purple, pink, or orange and gold.

What Causes the Aurora? The Sun emits electrically charged particles called ions, which correspondingly move away from the Sun in a stream of plasma (ionized gas) known as the solar wind. As the plasma comes in contact with the Earth's magnetic field, the ions will be agitated into moving around the Earth. Some of the ions become trapped and will consequently interact with the Earth's ionosphere (an average of 60-80 miles above the surface), causing the ions to glow. This is the same principal as how a neon sign lights up. As electrons pass through the neon tubing, they glow, thus producing the light in a neon sign.

The Aurora are constantly changing and moving in streams of light or curtains, because the process of how the Sun's ionized gas interacts with the Earth's magnetic field is very dynamic. Although harmless to life on Earth, the Aurora can cause power disruptions in satellite communications and in radio/TV broadcasts.

Read on to discover the top destinations where you can see the kaleidoscopic off the northern lights.

(Note: Some of the following activities, attractions and locations may be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. New policies may be in place, including capacity restrictions, reservation requirements or mask mandates. Check with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Department of State and local tourism boards before traveling.)

Fairbanks, Alaska



Fairbanks is by far one of the best places in the world to view the northern lights, as it's located directly under the auroral oval. This ring-shaped zone sits over the Earth's geomagnetic North Pole, where aurora activity is concentrated. Visitors can expect to see the lights on an average of four out of five clear nights during aurora season, which lasts from August 21 to April 21. Other activities visitors can enjoy in late summer include a ride on the Riverboat Discovery or panning for gold. For a festive holiday experience in the winter, visit the Santa Claus House in the city of North Pole (around 15 miles southeast of Fairbanks). Travelers can also see ice sculptures in February and March at the impressive World Ice Art Championships or take a dog-sledding or snowmobile tour.

Tromsø, Norway



Located 220 miles above the Arctic Circle, Tromsø is one of several top spots to view the northern lights in Norway. The northern part of the country is dark in the early afternoon until late morning from the end of September to late March. With this extreme darkness, there are more opportunities to see the aurora. Tromsø itself is a modern city, so there's plenty to see and do when you're not looking up at the sky, including a visit to the beautiful Arctic Cathedral. In late January to early February, the city hosts the Northern Lights Festival, a 10-day music and performing arts event featuring a variety of musical genres.

Lapland, Finland



Lapland is located within the Arctic Circle in the northernmost part of Finland. The northern lights are most visible here between the end of August and April – and approximately 200 times a year – so there are many opportunities for aurora spotting. Finnish Lapland is also known as the home of Santa Claus, the Sámi people (the only Indigenous people in the European Union area) and as many as 200,000 reindeer.

Orkney, Scotland



This group of captivating islands, located about 10 miles from Scotland's remote northern coast, is one of the best places to see the northern nights in the country. Fall and winter are the best seasons to witness the aurora, also known in local dialect as the "Mirrie Dancers." This time of year brings cold evenings with clear skies, which makes for ideal viewing conditions. A few places to see the spectacular light show include along the coast at Birsay or on the beach at Dingieshowe.

Yellowknife, Canada



Yellowknife, the capital of Canada's Northwest Territories, is also known as the "Aurora Capital of North America." With its position in the middle of the auroral oval, the city puts on one of the world's most awe-inspiring light shows from mid-November to the beginning of April. There's also a chance to see the aurora from late summer to early fall as the lights are visible up to 240 days a year. Located on the northern shore of Great Slave Lake, Yellowknife boasts winter sports such as ice fishing and cross-country skiing. If you visit in March, plan to attend the month-long Snowkings' Winter Festival, which features events and activities like a snow-carving competition, an ice slide, a snow castle, live music and more.