



Visitors can see the northern lights glowing across Alaska, including on a photo tour, shown here, at the Eklutna Tailrace fishery near Anchorage.

HERE & NOW »

UP IN LIGHTS

Aurora borealis is a showstopper in Alaska

By Eric Lucas

» Usually, when a curtain unfurls across a great stage, it marks the end of the show. Here on Chena Lake near Fairbanks, the show is just beginning: Aurora borealis has appeared, a banner of shimmering viridian that spans the limitless sky. In times past, a chorus of “Awesome!” would have been the primary sound coming from the two dozen viewers on our guided trip, but this is 2018, and instead cellphones and long-range camera lenses are aimed upward, clicking continuously, as the amateur shutterbugs hold their breath.

Still, there are a few remarks. “Can you hear the static? Listen.”

“Right there, a touch of red. See it?”

And: “Catch any fish?” That’s what my fiancée, Nicole, asks me.

Yes, I have, in fact. Four landlocked salmon through the ice in local guide Reinhard Neuhauser’s frozen-lake shack that serves as both a fishing venue and a warming hut—the latter a welcome amenity on a frosty mid-March night.

Nicole and I are on an outing with Alaska Fishing and Raft Adventures, and we dash in and out between angling and aurora. In the hut, our guide is frying the fish for a mid-evening supper once we return inside from the cold.

“Cold” is only 10 degrees. Chilly by my Puget Sound standards, but balmy for winter in Fairbanks. The mild night



also reveals the secrets of aurora viewing in Alaska. The northern lights, which occur when solar particles smash into atoms and molecules in the Earth's atmosphere, can be seen almost any clear night, mid-August to mid-April.

My favorite time of year to see the lights is in March, because it's not usually subzero; the skies are clear most of the time; and with the spring equinox nigh, there's plenty of daylight for outdoor activities, such as dogsledding, fat-bike riding, Nordic skiing and more.

Though the aurora can be seen anywhere from Juneau up to the Arctic coast, the Alaska Interior around Fairbanks enjoys two advantages: The North Pacific weather that clouds up coastal locations is blocked by Denali and the Alaska Range, and Fairbanks is under what geophysicists call the "auroral oval," a circumpolar ring that fluctuates but is usually about 180 miles wide and is where the aurora is most active most often. It's no coincidence that one of the leading scientific facilities devoted to the aurora is the Geophysical Institute at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, which produces a daily aurora forecast.

There are seemingly infinite ways to see the northern lights in Alaska. In Fairbanks, these include departing your motel room at 1 A.M. to scan the sky; signing up for one of Neuhauser's "fish, cook and view" evening tours; and traveling to Chena Hot Springs, where you can see the lights while relaxing in a thermal pool.

In Anchorage, longtime Alaska photographer Jody Overstreet leads evening photo tours during which she helps visitors understand the intricacies of this delicate art, with everyone dashing outside from her heated van when the lights appear.

It's all easier than most would-be aurora visitors think. I've deliberately set out to see the northern lights four times—and been successful all four.

But there is one popular aurora impression that's absolutely true: The sheer sensation of standing beneath an indigo sky on a midwinter night with your breath turning to ice fog. This is one of Earth's peerless experiences.

The French poet Arthur Rimbaud likened the aurora to a "kiss rising to the eyes of the sea." I am sure he meant the great sea of the entire universe, and we are grateful spectators to this electric romance. ✨

NORTHERN LIGHTS VIEWING SITES

From the streets of Anchorage to the sparse Arctic terrain, the aurora can often be seen dancing across Alaska's night sky during the fall and winter. Experts at the Alaska Travel Industry Association shared the following ideas for viewing the northern lights.

■ **Southcentral Alaska:** At the Glen Alps Trailhead, located in the southeastern part of Anchorage, visitors can watch the northern lights flash across the city's skyline. Another option in town is at the end of Northern Lights Boulevard, which is a beautiful spot to view the aurora shimmering above Cook Inlet. Visitors can also see the lights from the Eagle River Nature Center, less than 30 miles east of Anchorage, or in the Knik River Public Use Area, less than 45 miles northeast of Anchorage.

■ **Interior Alaska:** Less than 30 miles northwest of Fairbanks, Murphy Dome, the site of a former Air Force

station, offers clear views of the night sky.

North Pole, Cleary Summit and the Chena River State Recreation Area are also popular spots for aurora viewing in the Fairbanks area.

■ **Arctic Alaska:** See the lights in Coldfoot, which is one of the few communities above the Arctic Circle that's accessible by road. Tour operators such as Northern Alaska Tour Company can safely get travelers to the town, located more than 250 miles north of Fairbanks on the Dalton Highway. Another place for remote aurora watching near the Gates of the Arctic National Park & Preserve is in Bettles. It's the smallest incorporated city in Alaska—the population is 12.

Visit travelalaska.com/things-to-do/winter-activities.aspx for more ideas on where to see the northern lights. —Charlie White