



DESTINATIONS

Best places to see the northern (and southern) lights

Brad Japhe Special to USA TODAY

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Auroras are among nature's most electrifying performances – literally. The brilliant swirls of green, blue and (sometimes) pink occur when charged particles from the sun crash into our magnetosphere. It's a phenomenon commonly observed in narrow bands surrounding the poles – aurora borealis in the north and aurora australis in the south. Since these regions are remote, and their associated weather patterns erratic, chasing down the lights can prove challenging.

If catching them is on your bucket list, some careful planning will increase your odds.

Here's what you need to know.

For American travelers, Alaska remains the surest bet for aurora gazing. In fact, the small city of Fairbanks, in the center of the state, bills itself as the "aurora capital of the world." Spend three nights here in the dead of winter and your chances of spying the nocturnal wonder skyrocket to 90%.

But you needn't brave bone-chilling cold to get your gaze on.

"In the more remote parts of the state, the aurora tends to be most active around the autumn and spring equinoxes," observes Alaska native Ylli Ferati. "That's when I enjoy my best viewings. Plus, the weather's nicer."

The so-called shoulder season also provides ample sun for sightseeing. Book a trip on an Out of the Northwest Passage cruise with Adventure Canada, and you'll sail from the Canadian territory of Nunavut to Greenland over 17 days in September. Spot polar bears and icebergs during the day, and marvel at the lights by night.

"There is a common misconception that you can only see the auroras in the deepest part of the winter – this simply is not the case," confirms Chad Blakley, who runs Lights Over

Lapland, a photo adventure outfitter based in the northern reaches of Sweden. “All you need is a clear, dark sky and you are ready to watch.” Blakley’s clients have a high degree of success in Abisko National Park, where a dry microclimate inhibits cloud formation, resulting in clearer skies than most other locations in the auroral zone.

Similar conditions abound in Svalbard, an archipelago in the Arctic Ocean more than 500 miles north of the Norwegian mainland. The town of Longyearbyen is one of the prime destinations for aurora chasers, particularly during the long polar night, when the sun dips below the horizon from late October until mid-February. The lights can be seen here during lunchtime.

As the days become longer, however, the extreme north trades in prolonged darkness for midnight sun. This all but extinguishes northern lights viewing, of course.

But one region’s summer is another’s winter. In the Southern Hemisphere the aurora australis is just getting lit. Head to the South Island of New Zealand between March and September and you’ll be treated to a special show that few travelers get to see.

Rarer than their northern counterparts, the southern lights are perhaps more dazzling. They offer a range of orange, pink and purple hues that typically appear close to the horizon line, allowing for some otherworldly Instagram photos. Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park is home to the world’s largest Dark Sky Reserve, which means you’ll have unimpeded access to pitch-black night. Weather in this remote, mountainous region can be unpredictable, however.

For more consistency, take an hourlong ferry to Stewart Island. Outside Oban, you’ll encounter clear winter skies in Rakiura National Park.

If you prefer Australia, test your luck with Tasmania. The South Arm Peninsula, 25 miles southeast of the island’s capital city of Hobart, is a dependable destination for aspiring astronomers. It might seem like the end of the earth, but the ever-elusive aurora is known to reward the adventurous.