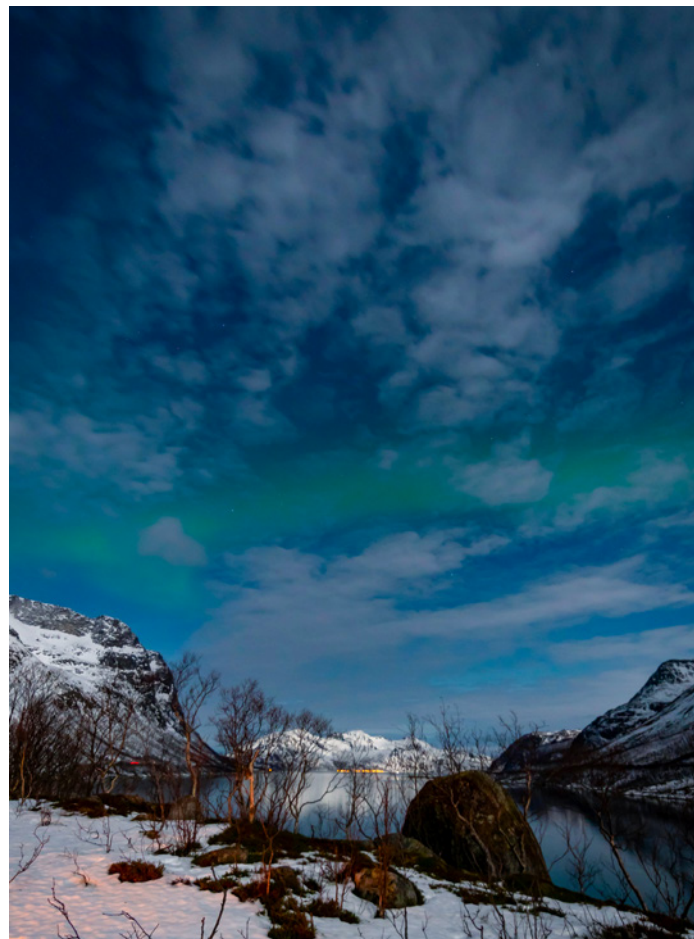




The thrill of THE CHASE

On a shore excursion in Tromsø, Norway, writer **Chrissie McClatchie** heads off In Search of the Northern Lights and discovers just how compelling aurora hunting can be.

The anticipation had been building ever since Viking Star had pulled out of London Tilbury five nights earlier. Leaving the bustle of the Thames in our wake, our route curved up across the North Sea to Norway. Every nautical mile covered meant we were inching closer in search of the northern lights.

In Stavanger, our first stop, I stretched my sea legs with a game of curling, followed by a stroll along the fairytale alleyways of Gamle Stavanger, the city's old town. Bad weather cancelled our stop in Bodø, but the extra day on board was a welcome one: time spent listening to astronomy lectures and picking up photography tips in the ship's theatre.

With our arrival in Tromsø came the first real chance to glimpse the fabled aurora borealis. Of course, there's no guarantee they'll make an appearance but, in February, dusk falls mid-afternoon above the Arctic Circle and it's prime aurora viewing season. By mid-evening, the anticipation was building as I waited with my fellow passengers to be called to board the buses queued up outside.

I'd chosen the minibus tour from the list of shore excursions, reasoning that as a small group of 12 we would be nimble and able to change direction at a moment's notice. Our guide for the evening, Jenka, explained to us that the previous night's chase had taken them into Finland. But this evening, she said, the odds felt better close to home.

The lights of Tromsø started to fade behind us as we followed the coastal road to Grøtford, a fjord 35 kilometers away. As we focused on the sky, Jenka reminded us that it was mother nature who would decide the course of the evening.

THE UNPREDICTABLE NATURE OF THE LIGHTS, OF COURSE, ONLY ADDS TO THEIR MYSTIQUE.

It was the right time of the year, but other factors, such as light activity and clear skies need to align, she said.

On the shoreline, deep in snow, we lit a fire and held our mugs out for a serve of Jenka's lucky charm, reindeer soup. The moon glowed, revealing a cover of clouds. Some of the group huddled around their cameras while others remained faithful to the power of the naked eye.

Then we saw them. Instead of the great swirls of fluorescent green that fill the inky skies, these lights were more muted — single brushstrokes of emerald green that were best seen through the lens. Nonetheless, spirits remained high as we returned to the vessel in the early hours of the morning, captivated by the aurora's ethereal glow. And, with another week of cruising left on the itinerary, it felt like the chase had only begun.

Opposite: Highlights of Chrissie's journey to outside of Tromsø awaiting the northern lights; image credit to Pukka Travels



Go online: Watch a video of the *In Search of the Northern Lights* itinerary at voc.com/videos