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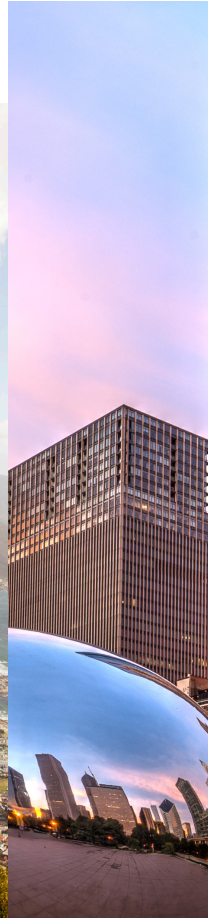
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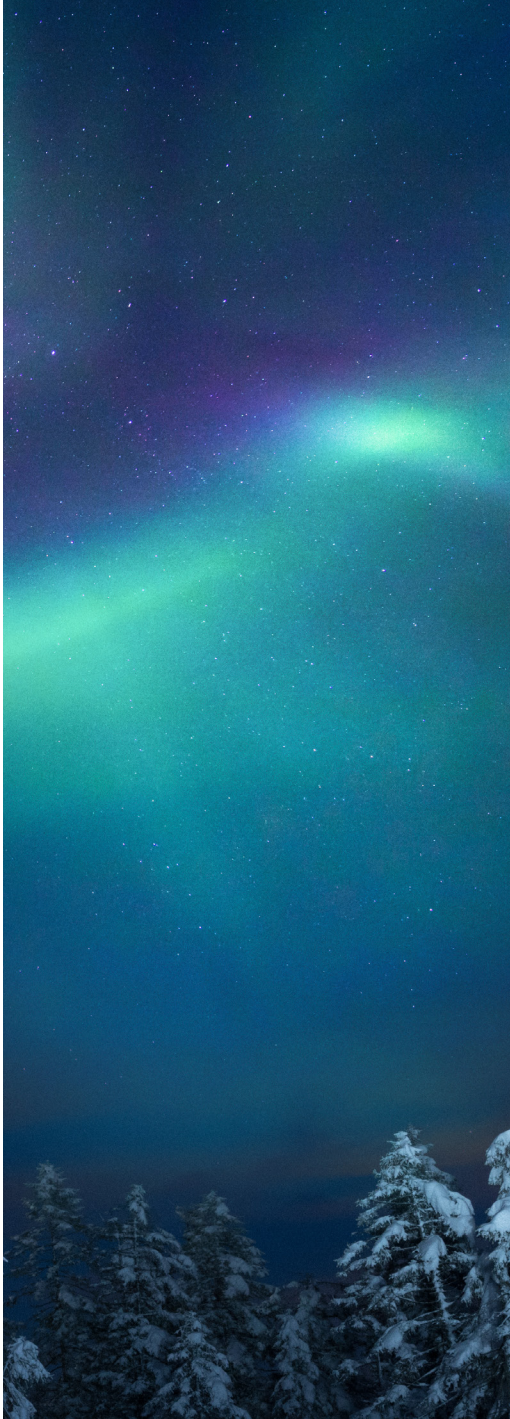
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## Chasing The Northern Lights

Chase the Northern Lights, also known as Aurora Borealis, in James Lasdun adventure in Finland. While traveling he found the best tips and other fun adventures to do.

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Glow





# Chasing the Aurora Borealis.

*Photographs by Namjoon Kim*





*Many tourist decide to stay in glass igloos to have majestic view of the Northern Lights.*

On January 31, 1913, King Haakon VII of Norway went to the University of Oslo to hear a lecture by the physicist Kristian Birkeland, who believed that he had unlocked the secrets of the Aurora Borealis, also known as the northern lights. Birkeland planned to demonstrate his theory with the aid of a specially constructed device: a brass-plated magnetic sphere, called a terrella, suspended inside a vacuum chamber with glass sides and an electrode on one end. When the electrode was heated, it would shoot cathode rays across the chamber toward the sphere. If all went well, the rays would interact with the sphere's magnetic field, producing eerie flashes of light that replicated, in miniature, the Aurora Borealis.

As Birkeland's biographer Lucy Jago tells it, the lecture was a triumph. The contraption didn't electrocute anybody or implode in splinters of flying glass, as earlier models had tended to do, and obligingly produced a diminutive version of the aurora's luminous flux, dazzling the King. Word spread, and a Nobel Prize

was widely predicted, yet England's Royal Society—at the time the arbiter of scientific fact—was unimpressed, and treated Birkeland as an amateur with a hopelessly inadequate grasp of theoretical physics. He died in 1917, and it wasn't until the nineteen-sixties that satellite data proved his hypothesis to be correct. The lights are caused by high-velocity solar particles—the “solar wind,” as it came to be called—interacting with the Earth's magnetic field and atmosphere.

Birkeland remains under appreciated, but his imprint can be felt in the mixture of engineering wizardry and primal enchantment that is fueling a touristic boom in countries where the northern lights appear. As I discovered on a trip to the Arctic in February, the glow of an aurora is sometimes difficult to perceive with the naked eye, and travelers often must engage in a form of technologically enhanced rapture.

The best chances of seeing the lights are in the elliptical area known as the Auroral Oval, which is centered on geomagnetic north. The Earth's magnetic field becomes almost perpendicular to its surface here, drawing the solar particles into the atmosphere. Much of Siberia falls within the zone, but I decided to visit northern Scandinavia, where the art of maintaining extreme comfort in the face of extreme cold seemed likely to be more advanced. Among the region's more tempting accommodations are the glass-igloo hotels of Finland, where you can simply lie back and watch the show in bed.

I stayed at a newish igloo hotel, the Aurora Village, near the town of Ivalo, in the far north of the country. It sounded more appealing than the much Instagrammed original, in Kakslautanen, having fewer igloos and no Santa's Home on the compound. I arrived late, exhausted from the knock-on effects of a canceled flight. The hotel's twenty-eight Aurora Cabins, set around a large reindeer paddock, looked like quaint log huts from the front, with twenty inches of moonlit snow on the eaves. Inside, the rustic gave way to the futuristic. A glass-paneled dome loomed over the north-facing end of a single room, with luxe bedding and a complimentary drinks tray arranged below, like the furnishings of a tastefully debauched starship. Slipping under a reindeer-fur coverlet, I found myself facing the first conundrum of northern-lights tourism, which is that the more comfortable your viewing situation the more likely you are to be insensate when the lights appear. I was eager to see them, naturally, but not obsessed. I had a whole week, and, from what I'd read, at the time of my visit there were good odds for a display on most nights. With this comforting thought, I fell asleep.

You can be woken in the middle of the night if you wish and there are apps that will rouse you at the right moment but you can't do anything about cloudy skies or daylight. (The phenomenon that produces the lights can occur at any hour.) For the tourist, the question arises: what do you do when there's no prospect of seeing the lights, which is much of the time? The answer is activities, although “safari” is the perversely tropical



# The lack of light pollution supposedly raises the chances of seeing lights.

term of choice: you can go on a reindeer safari, a husky safari, an ice-fishing safari, a snowmobile safari, a king-crab safari. I talked to the activities manager at the Aurora Village, Abraham Montes, over breakfast in the resort's dining hall—a conical structure made of spruce planks—and it became clear that his job had as much to do with managing expectations as activities. "The first thing people ask is 'What time does the aurora begin?'" he told me. He was exaggerating, but only a bit; in recent years, he acknowledged, tourists have become increasingly fixated on the goal of catching a brilliant display. Montes hedged against their disappointment by recommending at least one activity a day. In addition to the safaris, you could visit a sauna, or go on a cultural excursion called the Authentic Sámi Experience, in which native Laplanders welcome guests into a lávvu, a tepee-like shelter, and sing traditional songs around a fire.

I joined an ice-fishing safari that Montes was leading. We climbed into a covered sled with portholes, and zipped out onto a frozen river nearby. A cutting wind blew across the ice,



*Ice fishing is a form of entertainment to pass time. Local guides provide experiences with ice fishing to the tourist as a way to produce income.*

and I was glad of the day that I'd spent in New Jersey malls, buying advanced thermal gear. With me was a German couple, who seemed serious about the fishing, and a Malaysian family, with a young daughter, who'd come to Finland because the lights were on their bucket list—a term that has gone global. Montes showed us how to drill holes with an auger, and baited our hooks with plastic worms. (He'd planned to use real ones, but they had frozen during the night.) The fishing rods seemed absurdly short and bendy, like something that you might use to win a prize at an amusement park. We squatted at our holes, dipping and raising as instructed. The flat landscape around us was more built up than I'd expected this far north, but pleasant enough under the fresh snow, with the wide sky showing different pinks and yellows every time you looked at it. Now and then, dog sleds carrying tourists hurtled by; each time, we laboriously took off our mittens and glove liners and rummaged for our phones, in order to take photographs.

I asked Montes what role social media had played in northern-lights tourism, and he gave an exasperated laugh. The Ivalo hotel was constantly being approached by YouTubers and Instagram influencers who offered publicity in return for free accommodations. "It's hard to calculate the benefits, but they post pictures, and it's good for us to have





*The Icelandic village of Öskuhlio is near the mountains and water, where the northern lights give a magical feel. The village has a high chance of spotting the aurora during certain times of the year.*

people know there are glass igloos beyond Kakslauttanen, so sometimes we say yes,” he said. “We just had two of them staying, with five hundred thousand followers each. They wanted free rooms—free everything.” He mentioned a 2012 BuzzFeed article on the Kakslauttanen igloos, citing it as a pivotal event in the Aurora industry. It was published on the eve of a “solar maximum,” a high point in the eleven-year cycle of solar activity, and many people who visited the Arctic soon afterward were treated to glorious displays. The article also coincided with Instagram’s drift from cats and food to landscapes and natural phenomena. “The image of those igloos was suddenly everywhere,” Montes said. We were nearing the low point in the solar cycle now, he noted, though he assured me that the lights could still be thrilling, adding, “You just have to be lucky.”

The Germans were looking a little frustrated by their ice hole, and I got the feeling that we weren’t presenting much of a threat to the pike and grayling allegedly massing below us. Nobody caught anything. We headed back to the hotel, where I ate a bowl of spaghetti with a reindeer Bolognese sauce. I returned outside for a happy few hours of cross-country skiing. That evening, the forecast apps suggested that I had a less than twenty-per-cent chance of seeing an

aurora. It didn’t seem worth mounting a vigil, and once again I fell guiltily, expensively asleep.

Something woke me at three. Groggy and myopic, I caught a promising green blur overhead and grabbed my glasses. The color of an aurora depends on which atmospheric gases are being pelted by solar particles. Oxygen emits a greenish hue and, occasionally, red; nitrogen emits violet and blue. In this case, the green turned out to be emitted by a light on the thermostat—its glow was reflected in the glass dome. Nevertheless, the sky had cleared, and the stars glittered promisingly above the snowgloved spruce trees. I stared up for a while. Gazing at the sky at 3 A. M., however, in the hope of being granted a vision of dancing emerald lights is an activity that quickly starts to feel absurd, even delusional, and I soon passed out again. In the morning, I learned that I hadn’t missed anything.

Over the years, I’ve sampled some extravagant framings of natural wonders: a helicopter ride into the Grand Canyon; orcas seen from a hydrofoil in Puget Sound. I have some puritanical distrust of good things being handed to one on a plate, but I can’t pretend that I haven’t enjoyed these adventures. In those cases, the fun was partly about comfort, but it was also about the feeling of accelerated gratification.



My igloo was extremely comfortable, but it lacked that crucial element of being able to speed things along. You need just as much patience in a glass igloo as you do in a motel.

I went a bit farther north, to the vast frozen lake of Inari, where the lack of light pollution supposedly raises the chances of seeing the lights. Here, as everywhere, my hotel was packed: tour buses and S. U. V.s lined the parking lot. Guests in puffer jackets were riding fat-bikes on the ice. Inside, at the buffet, they piled plates with sautéed reindeer and lingonberries. The Activities Book at the front desk offered the usual excursions, along with a Lappish Dinner featuring “a real Sámi person.” I signed up for Aurora Camp, which promised warm drinks “while waiting for the sky to show its magic.” I liked the confidence of the description; it made the magic sound more like a scheduled event than like a mere hope. *Fiat lux*.

At eight o’clock, a dozen other campers and I were issued stiff blue-and-black snowsuits that turned us into identical Lego people. A snowmobile towed us across the lake in a train of open sleds. Once we were on the other side, a guide lit a fire, draping reindeer hides over logs for us to sit on, and hung a kettle to boil. The simplicity of the arrangement appealed to

said. They talked about the disparity between photographs of the Aurora Borealis and what you can actually see, making some technical point that I didn’t take in at the time, and grumbled, “They ought to tell you about this.” I asked them if they regretted coming. Not at all, they said. They had enjoyed the activities and appreciated the differentness of the place: the Finnish tundra is another world from Surrey. “It’s like in Africa, where you know you might not see anything but you just enjoy the whole experience,” they said.

Our guide, young but practiced in the art of distracting cold tourists, poured hot berry juice and discoursed on Arctic matters. He told us the average number of hairs on a square centimeter of a reindeer’s back—seventeen hundred and explained the logic behind the Kp index, a tool for predicting auroras.

The index, in use since 1939, measures disturbances in the Earth’s magnetic field, with stronger disturbances indicating higher chances of seeing an aurora. A smudge of light appeared to the west, and we looked at our guide hopefully, but he shook his head: it was just snowmobile headlights reflected by clouds. Someone asked him what it felt like to see a truly powerful display, and he replied that it was “a spiritual experience.” I pressed him on this. “Well, it’s about community,” he said. “One person’s

## The best chances of seeing the lights are in the elliptical area known as the Auroral Oval, which is centered on the Geomagnetic North.

my sense of how these things ought to be conducted, and even though there was thick cloud cover, I felt optimistic. We had two and a half hours to kill, and the weather, as we reminded one another at regular intervals, was unpredictable in these parts.

Most of the people in our group were Chinese, on vacation for the Chinese New Year. But I also heard Italian voices, and the genteel tones of Home Counties English. Those came from a British couple, recent retirees from Surrey who were checking things off their bucket list. A safari in Zambia would follow the northern lights. They’d been in Inari for four nights, and had seen a faint glow one evening, after being roused by the hotel’s Aurora Alert. It hadn’t impressed them. “Definitely not worth being woken up for,” they

wonder communicates itself to the rest of the group, and you get this flow of emotion.” It seemed like a good answer. It certainly accounted for a vague feeling I’d had in my glass igloo, which was that even if I did see the lights there’d be something sad and incomplete about not having anyone with me to share the experience. I’d been with an old friend when I helicoptered into the Grand Canyon. My son was with me for the orcas in Puget Sound.

The sky showed no sign of clearing, and the Kp-index reading had plummeted. Meanwhile, the temperature had fallen to minus ten degrees Fahrenheit, which turned every gust of wind into a scouring assault. People were pulling up balaclavas and stamping their feet. No surprises occurred overhead, but an earthly one did: a woman suddenly slipped her arm through mine and began





murmuring in my ear in Italian. I looked at her, and she gave a shriek: she'd mistaken me, in my snowsuit, for her husband. Peals of unnerving laughter broke from her as we sledded back across the lake. The incident gave concreteness to the dim sense of cosmic disfavor beginning to take hold in me. The nature of these wonder-chasing trips is that your success rate sooner or later gets entangled with your feelings about what you deserve. I had four more nights, so there was no cause for serious alarm, but I'd started entertaining irrational thoughts all the same. Was I unworthy in some way? Could I be harboring attitudes uncondusive to the granting of heavenly visions?

A couple of incidents the next day deepened this mood. I was on my way to Tromsø, in Norway. To get there without making an extended southern detour to Oslo, I had to take a three-hour taxi ride from Inari to the Norwegian village of Laksely, which has an airport. As we drove northwest, the landscape and the sky merged into a white haze, with only the dark-etched undersides of branches to distinguish one realm from the other. It was beautiful in an unearthly way, as if the world had become a silver- nitrate photograph of itself. Road signs grew fewer and farther between, with Sámi place-names appearing under the Finnish. The road was covered with packed snow and the driver was going fast. On a long, straight, desolate stretch, we came over a rise and saw five reindeer galloping straight toward us. The driver cursed in English: "Shit. " I braced myself, felt a slam, and saw one of the animals thrown into the air. It had antlers, and, as the previous night's guide had informed us, a deer that still had them in late winter was female, and probably pregnant. We backed up and found it lying, dead, in the snow. The taxi was dented but drivable, and after reporting the accident we continued on our way, both of us badly shaken.

We arrived at the airport at 11 A. M. I got out of the taxi and approached the automatic door, but it didn't open. I turned to call back my driver, but he'd sped off into the frozen wilderness. I shouted and banged on the airport windows, but nobody was inside. A stuffed reindeer, harnessed to a sleigh, stared at me through the plate glass of the empty departure lounge. Under the circumstances, it was impossible not to read judgment in its blank expression.

*For traveling outside in the freezing weather it is recommend to have thermal clothes or wear layer of clothing to fight the cold.*



Nordic folklore tends to view the northern lights as a not entirely benign phenomenon. Sámi mythology, in particular, invests them with highly equivocal powers. They can predict the weather, but they can also whisk people away. You can attract them by whistling, but you do so at your peril. As I stood on the airport curb, wondering what to do, it struck me that the aurora industry was a kind of elaborate whistling for the lights, with all the folly and hubris that this entailed. It sold itself as a romance with nature at its most magical, but it was premised on a comprehensive battle against nature. Its imagery of cozy warmth and gliding ease had been concocted in defiance of a lethally dangerous environment where you were entirely dependent on protections devised by other humans. It seemed to me that I was now being shown what happened when those systems malfunctioned. I felt scared and stupid. I was a fool about to freeze to death in pursuit of a high-end tourist fad.

I'd been advised to try looking for them from the water, and went out in a catamaran. The city sparkled on either side of the boat as the skipper and I cruised down the sound, but the sky was solid cloud, and we soon gave up craning our necks and chatted about the aurora craze instead. Everyone seems to have a different origin story. The skipper attributed the boom to a 2008 BBC show on the lights, featuring Joanna Lumley. As he put it, "There was before Joanna Lumley, and there was after."

Six million people had watched the "Absolutely Fabulous" star diffuse English poshness into the Arctic mists as she traveled northward through Norway. The sites she visited were soon struggling with sudden popularity. (Google the Lofoten Islands, an archipelago south of Tromsø, and you'll learn more than you wanted to know about their insufficient number of public toilets.) Lumley was as unlucky as I was until she came to Tromsø, where her guide and photographer, Kjetil Skogli, finally delivered the goods. In the show's orgasmic climax, the

## The Lights are caused by high-velocity solar particles...interacting with the Earth's magnetic field and atmosphere.

Eventually, I flagged down a passing car, whose driver promised to make a call on my behalf, and after a long twenty minutes an airport worker appeared and opened the doors. He laughed at my story, telling me that I'd arrived far too early for my afternoon flight. Two hours later, just before takeoff, other passengers began strolling in blasé locals in T-shirts and sneakers.

Tromsø is a compact, gleaming city set dramatically on two sides of a sound, with an old quarter of timber buildings, a thriving fishing industry, and the world's northernmost university. I ate quantities of smoked and pickled fish, and visited the Polar Museum, with its baleful dioramas of trapped foxes and hunters clubbing baby seals. I took a dogsled safari, and guided Siberian huskies on a wobbly but exhilarating ten-mile dash, by moonlight, across stunning upland fells. In every one of Tromsø's hotel lobbies, screens glowed with images of the lights.

actress lies on her back in the snow as the sky explodes in jets of green.

I met with Skogli in Tromsø. He is a slight, unassuming man in his fifties, with an impish way of deflecting questions about his post-Lumley celebrity clients (Brian May, of Queen, is among them). Skogli grew up in a small village where elders spoke the Sámi language and children hid from the lights, fearing cosmic abduction. An evening outing with a photographer friend in the fall of 2003 coincided with a series of unusually intense solar storms, and the spectacle awakened Skogli to the lights' glory. "Mostly, you just see green," he told me. "But you saw all the other colors that night. The snow was colored red." He was also awakened to the lights' commercial potential. "The northern lights wasn't a product at that time," he recalled. "But they're one of the purest wonders of the world." Moreover, the lights have the advantage of not being affected by global warming. As Skogli put it, "We can't do anything to spoil them!"



He set up a photography-tour company that pioneered the idea of the Aurora Chase: you're driven around for six or more hours in pursuit of favorable conditions for viewing the lights. Every fjord and fell has its own micro climate, and so in theory there's always a chance of finding clear skies somewhere. After the Lumley film aired, Skogli created a four-day Lumley Route and, as other Scandinavians got into the aurora-chasing business, he began working with local landowners to set up "base stations" for the tourist traffic that had spread across the region. "It's not good to see fifty or sixty coaches parked on the side of a road," he said. "There have been some very close accidents."

We discussed why the aurora often looks so much better in photographs. He explained that a camera on a tripod, set for a five-second exposure, takes in far more light than the human eye does when it looks at something, and consequently it produces a more vivid image. A camera can turn even relatively weak displays

into dramatic pictures—and these images can then be subjected to digital enhancements. Posted online, the pictures are automatically sharpened by the high-contrast settings of most social media platforms, and further boosted by the backlit screens of our devices. Cumulatively, these improvements have encouraged unrealistic expectations. "It's a shame," Skogli said. "You have a responsibility to show the truth." He has tried to open a discussion on the subject within the tourism industry, without success. In a rare departure from diplomatic geniality, he dismissed most Instagram photos of the lights as junk "digitally colorized files to produce likes."

Thinking that I might win over the aurora gods by trying something more primitive than my other accommodations, I'd signed up for a night with a Finnish company that takes you out to a "wilderness camp" and leaves you alone until morning. That night had come around, and I was slightly regretting my plan. I had no idea what to expect, but various scenarios had begun filling the void, mostly turning on the idea of abandonment and slow death. It didn't help that the tour-company driver

*The northern lights can have shades of blues, greens, purples, and pinks but the colorful skies give a magical feel no matter the color.*





had a penchant for morbid tales. There was the story of his grandfather, who had died of a heart attack while herding reindeer and had been left in a tarp on the roadside, where his son recognized the boots sticking out. There was the whale that starved in a fjord, whose corpse had to be towed out to sea and exploded. Then, there were the two snowmobilers who'd recently disappeared after going off-piste. "They say the cold gives you a gentle death," the driver observed.

We crossed the border and entered the village of Kilpisjärvi, in western Finland. I climbed into a sled, and my amiable and capable guide, Jussi Rauhala, used a snowmobile to tow me to the camp, two and a half miles across the frozen surface of Lake Kilpisjärvi. At the midpoint of the journey, he stopped and got off the snowmobile, to see how I was doing. "The ice is fifteen per cent thinner than usual this year," he remarked, in halting but studious English. "But for a snowmobile it should be fine."



We rounded a promontory with scrubby birches doubled over by snow, and came to a dark hut, raised up on sled runners, on the ice. An outhouse stood off to the side. It was cozy inside the hut, with a banged-together quality that I liked, though spending the night there still seemed disconcerting. Jussi turned on a propane heater, which blasted ferocious heat at wooden furnishings a few feet away. He attached several spare cannisters of fuel to the heater. "Just in case they run out," he explained. "But they won't." The door had been fitted extra tight, to prevent it from being blown open by the wind, and you had to give it a mighty kick to get out. The possibility of being unable to tug the door back open was enough to rule out any thought of a solitary nocturnal visit to the outhouse. Jussi, possibly noting my anxiousness, pointed to a transparent section of roof above the bed, and told me that it was made of riot-shield plastic. I tried to look reassured.

We walked about thirty feet to the shore of the lake, and set up a fire. Jussi assembled a camera tripod. The Kp numbers were promising, and a pool of clear sky had opened among the clouds, with the Big Dipper brightly visible. Jussi programmed his camera to take a long exposure photograph every few minutes; after a while, he checked the monitor and saw a faint green glow. At first, I couldn't see anything in the sky, but after a minute what had looked like an oblique bar of cloud began turning a dim grayish green. It was tremendously exciting. The camera then began registering bands of red although they weren't visible to the naked eye, they signaled that there was a strong solar wind. The bar in the sky grew brighter, but a terrestrial wind had also risen, driving thick clouds straight toward it. A tense couple of minutes followed, in which we seemed to be watching an elemental standoff between darkness and light. For a few moments, the green bar was surrounded by tinges of violet: the effect of atmospheric nitrogen complementing that of the green-glowing oxygen. But the clouds kept moving implacably forward, and, crushingly, the bar began to fade.

I could now say truthfully that I'd seen the northern lights, and I was happy, though my happiness had more to do with relief—mission accomplished—than with joy. It had been a very minor spillage of the green grail. The camera kept seeing it for a while, and Jussi was able to take some photographs of me posed against it with a thumbs-up and a grin—a triumphant bucket-list warrior. It's hard to gauge the documentary status of such images. Do they memorialize my evening, or the camera's? The question goes to the heart of what I was beginning to think of as the second conundrum of northern-lights tourism: its seemingly inextricable incorporation of digital technology into human sensory experience.

It was time for Jussi to leave. He gave me a basket of food and a Nokia phone for emergencies.●