

TRAVEL

Huddled inside a lavvu, a Sami tent, around a blazing pinewood fire, we binged on coffee and “almost homemade cake”—almost because Knut, our guide for the night, bought the chocolate cake with coconut and sugar dusted on top from a store and sliced it in the kitchen at his home! We learnt from him about the Sami. Historically known as Laps or Laplanders, they are the natives inhabiting, primarily, the countries of Norway, Sweden, and Finland. They gained recognition as indigenous people in Norway following the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (ILO convention 169), and are thereby entitled special rights and protection. They herd reindeer for a living and are the only people to legally own the animal.

Sharing laughter and stories, and more cake, we awaited the appearance of Aurora on a bitterly cold January night in Kvaløya (commonly, Whale Island), an island some 30 kilometres away from Tromsø. The hands on the clock marched on. Seven to eight, nine, and then ten, still no show except a faint glimmer of hope, like a wispy cloud. Soon clouds started to drift on the vast canvas overhead. The moon peered through the cloud-blanket to greet us, a silent nod,



PHOTO COURTESY: KNUT OF TROMSØ FRILUFTSENTER

DANCING WITH THE ARCTIC SKY

MADHULA BANERJI

before disappearing. The wind grew stronger, colder. As a legend goes, whistling or singing teases the Lights into appearing. Someone hummed *I gotta feeling that tonight's gonna be a good, good night*; the rest of us chimed in. Would the Elusive Aurora pay us a visit tonight?

Aurora, or polar lights, is a natural display of light near the northern and southern magnetic poles, caused when charged particles from the sun come in contact with atoms in the upper reaches of the Earth's atmosphere. While it is known as Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights) over the Arctic, it is called Aurora Australis (Southern Lights) over the Antarctic. Up until a century ago very little was known about what caused this natural phenomenon. Ancient Chinese legends held the Lights to be a battle between gods and fire-breathing dragons. The Cree of North America considered them to be the spirits of the departed souls trying to communicate with those they left behind. In Greenland they were thought to be the souls of stillborn babies. The French considered them to be bad omen, bringing along plague, war, death, when they saw the sky turning red weeks before the French Revolution. The Estonians believed them to be horse-drawn carriages carrying heavenly guests to a celestial wedding. A myth in Finland notes how an Arctic fire



PHOTO COURTESY: KNUT OF TROMSØ FRILUFTSENTER

The Lights are stunningly beautiful but also extremely temperamental. Dependent on clear, dark skies, viewing them also rests on luck. There are various sites and apps that inform you when and where to view the Lights—norway-lights.com being one such source—but never consider them a guarantee. It is after all a natural phenomenon.

fox ran so swift across the sky that its bushy tail brushed against the mountains and caused sparks that lit up the night sky (the Finnish word for the Northern Lights is *revontulet*, or fire fox). In Sweden, the Lights were seen as a portent of good news.

The Sami thought them to be an ill omen and that they will come down and slice your head off, while Norse mythology held that Aurora was the glowing arch which led the fallen warriors to the final resting place in Valhalla. In modern times, author Molly Larkin has remarked: “When I look at the northern lights ... I see our ancestors dancing around a sacred fire, lighting the way for us when it's time for us to cross over from this physical world and join them.”

The Lights are stunningly beautiful but also extremely temperamental. Dependent on clear, dark skies, viewing them also rests on luck. There are various sites and apps that inform you when and where to view the Lights—norway-lights.com being one such source—but never consider them a guarantee. It is after all a natural phenomenon. In north Europe, the Scandinavian countries are the best bet: Reykjavik and Kirkjufell mountain in Iceland; Tromsø, Lofoten Islands, Nordkapp, Kirkenes, and deep in the Norwegian Sea in Norway; Kiruna and Abisko in Sweden; Rovaniemi in Finland; as also north Greenland, Alaska, Canada. People from all over the world flock to these destinations for a glimpse of the magical skies.

A Northern Lights tour is one of the most sought-after trips on bucket lists in recent decades: many travel companies offer group as well as customised tours deep in the European winter; the best time to view the Lights. Toasting

Continued to page 13

TRAVEL

DANCING WITH THE ARCTIC SKY

After page 12

marshmallows in the fire, I heard someone recount that while on a mission to buy essentials for this adventure to Norway, a store in Chennai (a city that has never seen snow nor experienced cold nights) ran out of winter wear because a group of ninety-odd people were headed to Iceland!

A little after ten, I dragged myself out to gaze up at the sky only to find myself rushing back to the lavvu to thaw my frozen self. Even when suitably armoured with about five layers of fleece and thermals, the cold found its way in somehow. Minus twenty-seven was no joke! I was in the “middle of snow-where”—away from the city lights and “Chasing the Lights”, as the flyer read. But in reality we chase clear, dark skies—Knut corrected us while passing

yet more cake to the bunch. Correct, but “chasing the lights” sounds more dreamy, wouldn't you agree?

Eleven, the clock announced. The clouds decided to stay. We did too, unlike another group on a similar mission that proceeded towards the Finnish border. Eleven-twenty-five. Did the clouds decide to part? No. The wait seemed never-ending. Once again I found my way back around the fire, disappointed. I prepared myself for a no-

show; there were three more nights yet for the chase. Deciding to call it a night, we began to pack up, retract the tripods, and pile on layers to brave the cold till we reached the bus.

Eleven-forty. “One last try,” Knut said. He checked the KP index and silently stepped out. Seconds later he screamed, “Guys, come out and see!”

What was that? The moon had bidden farewell and it was dark all around. The stars

I squealed, I gasped. I screamed with joy, I exclaimed with awe. The others echoed the same enthusiasm. Knut photographed us, with wonder and excitement in our eyes. Jaymes Young's song played in my head: *I wanna touch the northern lights/ We could leave the world behind.*



PHOTO COURTESY: KNUT OF TROMSØ FRILUFTSENTER

glimmered in the ink-black sky. Only once before have I seen such a clear, dark sky studded with so many stars—on a camping trip to Mukteshwar, situated high in the Kumaon Hills of north India. The KP index showed a 4. Good enough chance? Suddenly the sky lit up a pale green and we could see each other and around clearly. The Lights! *Aurora Borealis!* The snow shone, the sky danced. One long streak flashed from right to left. Another intersected it at a forty-degree angle. A sea horse galloped behind us, a reindeer's head flashed before us, a chariot drove at a distance. Among this, a shooting star shot through a green-and-purple performance.

I squealed, I gasped. I screamed with joy, I exclaimed with awe. The others echoed the same enthusiasm. Knut photographed us, with wonder and excitement in our eyes. Jaymes Young's song played in my head: *I wanna touch the northern lights/ We could leave the world behind.* I jumped but fell into the snow. Sometimes faint, sometimes stark, the imaginary formations swirled and shimmered across the sky, a symphony of colours. Then they faded away. But within minutes they picked up because I was still waiting with bated breath. I could not help but smile, brushing aside the tears of joy with the back of my chilled glove. Around twelve-thirty, we began to pack up. The Aurora danced across the sky, with her skirt in shades of green and purple sweeping across the vast expanse. Impossible to capture on film unless you are armed with a manual camera with the correct settings; nevertheless I was here to experience it.

The Lights were there to stay the night. I froze, but did not mind. I danced under the dancing Arctic sky. January 24, 2018. A date well marked in my journal. For, I will remember this as the day when the skies unfolded. As I inched towards fulfilling my long-cherished dream, the sky turned green with envy. I went with my gut and it did turn out to be one of the most memorable travel experiences.

Aurora Borealis. The Northern Lights. #1 on my bucket list even before I had a bucket list. CHECK.

Madhula Banerji has been a publishing professional for a decade. Presently, she is a freelance editor and writer based in New Delhi.

ABOUT TOWN

MindMatters Presents “Sing It Out”
A live musical performance hosted by Gourmet Bazar

SING IT OUT
LIVE MUSICAL
PERFORMANCE

Organiser: Mindmatters
March 23, 6-10 pm, Gourmet Bazar, Banani

UJAANE MRITTU
DRAMA PREMIERE SHOW

Organiser: Palakar
March 16, 7-8 pm, Bangladesh
Shilpakala Academy

Us Women

আমরা মেয়েরা

Date: March 8 - March 22, 2018
Time: 9:30 am - 8:00 pm

US WOMEN
EXHIBITION

Organiser: EMK Centre
March 8- 22, 9:30 am - 8 pm, EMK
Center, Dhanmondi