

## How I shot the Northern Lights

The Times, 6/10/2018

The aurora's such a capricious lady," said our guide, Paul Goldstein, pacing up and down the coach like a caged lion. Through the windows we watched wisps of white light shimmering in curves and swerves across the night sky, or sometimes arching across the road like a monochrome rainbow. "This is killing me," he admitted, "but it would be madness to stop."



The tension was palpable. We'd spotted the northern lights unusually early, at 7pm, but we were only an hour into our journey from Evenes airport, not even halfway to our lodge on Norway's remote Vesteralen Islands, and we were desperate to get there before they disappeared. "When we arrive, unload your bags quickly — it'll be chaotic, but if there's any fannying around you'll miss the

show,” Paul, an award-winning photographer, told us emphatically. All indications were that this would be no ordinary night — and that our guide was no ordinary guy.

Although this five-day photographic tour was the first aurora trip for my sister Kath and me, the rest of our 18-strong group had travelled with Paul before, clocking up a staggering 83 trips with the guide they call “Marmite man” — “You either love him or hate him,” Val said. “He can reduce some people to tears. But we keep coming back for more . . .” She was on her sixth Goldstein adventure.



The sun setting on Vesteralen Islands SUE WATT

En route, Paul explained how to photograph the elusive aurora borealis, a phenomenon created when electrons caused by solar activity collide with gases in the Earth’s atmosphere. “Take your tripod and a wide, fast lens —  $f/1.8$  or  $f/2.8$  . . . Set it to manual, find the sweet spot by focusing on the stars, generally moving the lens slightly back from infinity . . . Push the ISO up high — to 2,500 minimum, depending on the potency of the show. Set the camera to bulb. Aim for an exposure of anything between 3 to 12 or more seconds.”

My brain hurt. This was all new to me. I’d hired some impressive kit to help me take half-decent photos, including a full-frame Canon 6D camera and a super-fast lens, but had little idea how to use it.

At last we reached our lodge, Andoy Friluftssentre, with the lights still sashaying across the sky. After grabbing cameras and extra clothing to fend off the way-below-freezing temperatures, we rushed to the shore of Buksnesfjord 25m away. “Switch off your torches,” Paul barked. “They’ll ruin the photos.” He dashed between us as we prepared our cameras, bemoaning our different models and settings, and swearing repeatedly at our collective inability to erect tripods in the dark.

Finally I took my first photo, then stared in awe at the image on the screen. What my eyes had seen as pale white ribbons in the sky my camera saw as glorious neon-green bands with tinges of purple curving above snowy hills. Grainy and out of focus, the photo was rubbish, but I was smitten.



The northern lights over Norway's Vesteralen Islands SUE WATT

There then followed two hours of extraordinary celestial ballet as the aurora beguiled us with her elegance and ever-changing forms, which I tried to capture on camera. One minute she'd appear like a ghostly mirage, the next a giant wriggling snake or a genie emerging from some hidden lamp, while her colours intensified from cool mint to DayGlo green. Even Paul declared those "two hours of the sky being torn asunder" the best that he'd seen.

After that incredible start, our days were spent exploring these far-flung, frozen islands. We drove along the coast between small fishing towns spotting white-tailed eagles, otters, seals, whooper swans and moose. There were plenty of photo opportunities — mountains, derelict harbours, sunsets and patterns on ice, landscapes of pure beauty filled with snow-clad hills and valleys.

We walked to a frozen lake and skimmed across it on sledges, acting as models for those practising panning photography. And we tried fishing after drilling a small hole through 1m-thick ice with something resembling a giant corkscrew. Our collective haul was a solitary sardine-sized char. Fortunately, the lodge owner, Nigel Turrell, had brought plenty more fish for a sizzling barbecue around the campfire.

Dining at Andoy was always a treat, with fresh local fare that included reindeer chateaubriand, halibut steaks, creamy trout parcels and its famous moose pie. Yet the best thing about our lodge was its location within the Arctic Circle. Under cloudless skies devoid of light pollution, it was perfect for photographing the northern lights, whether from the fjord shore, the nearby dam or right outside our cosy log cabins.

By now I'd come to appreciate why people travelled with Paul time and again despite his insults, expletives and seriously cringeworthy jokes. There was another side to the Marmite man: entertaining, encouraging, sometimes even charming, he was a whirlwind of positive energy, tirelessly bringing out the best in our photography with infectious enthusiasm and passion. Even my photography skills improved; when he described some of my images as "good work" I could have hugged him.



A frozen lake on Vesteralen IslandsSUE WATT

“We’ve seen extraordinary lights,” Paul said of that first magical evening. “They’re in the bag. Now, take time to get things absolutely right. Watch out for messy foregrounds; focus on the stars — they shouldn’t look like blurry raindrops; take portrait shots; experiment . . .”

Every night, the aurora danced across the sky. One star-lit evening, like a true diva, she made us wait until 11pm, finally emerging as slow-moving arcs of green below the Milky Way. The next night she kept us in raptures until 2am despite temperatures of minus 14. It was so cold that one of our group put a metal torch in her mouth to free up her hands and it froze instantly to her tongue.

On our last evening, no longer feeling compelled to photograph every moment, Kath and I walked away from our tripods, lay on our backs in the snow and simply watched the blazing skies.

If the first night had been a ballet, tonight was like a breakdance, with frenetic bursts of energy in wild curls and curves, or swaying curtains across the heavens, disappearing and reappearing moments later. This time, even without the camera, we could see intense vivid greens, purples and pinks reflected brilliantly in the ice.

Lady Aurora was truly at her most intoxicating and capricious. It seemed that she’d saved her best until last.