

Mesmerised by the Northern Lights



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DURING our journey to the Nordic countries in autumn 2013, my wife and I were extremely lucky to witness the natural phenomenon known as the Northern Lights which had lately attracted the attention of many people in our country. We saw this not once but three times!

Northern Lights, also known as aurora borealis, is a natural light display in the sky particularly in the Arctic region, caused by the collision of energetic charged particles with atoms in the high altitude atmosphere. The charged particles originate in the magnetosphere and solar wind and are directed by the Earth's magnetic field into the atmosphere.

We saw the first Northern Lights in Sortland, a town on the island of Langøyain Norway, at latitude 69°, i.e. well above the Arctic Circle. We had arrived in the town after a whale-watching excursion in Andenes and the owner of the convenience store in the bus terminal got us a cabin within our budget in his friend's campsite located 1½km from the town.

Three nights earlier, the Northern Lights was observed here but the sky was so full of clouds that we went to bed that night without any hope of seeing that natural phenomenon. However, when I woke up after midnight to relieve the pressure in my bladder, I casually took a peek out of the window and saw many stars – an obvious sign that the sky had cleared up. I immediately opened the door, stepped out and looked up. Lo and behold, there was the Northern Lights. I quickly woke my wife and we spent more than one hour in the cold enjoying the magical display.

Four days later in Tromsø (about 70°N), after an expedition to Svalbard, we saw the Northern Lights again. A man at the Tourist Information Office told us that Tromsø was right in the centre of the Northern Lights band and therefore, was one of the best places to observe the phenomenon. He advised us to cross the bridge and look for a place with less light pollution as this would improve our chances of seeing the Northern Lights. As the sky was clear that day, we heeded his advice and walked over to the other side of the fjord after dinner. We had wanted to visit the unique Arctic Cathedral near the bridge, but it was closed. We hung around there until about 10 p.m. and were duly rewarded for our patience with a dramatic display of mesmerising colours, a much more impressive show than that in Sortland that had kept us enthralled for a full 1½ hours.

Our 3rd encounter with this natural phenomenon took place in Jokkmokk, a little Swedish town just above the Arctic Circle. We had come here for its distinctive Sami culture, Sami being the only aboriginal people in Europe.



Again, there was a clear sky that day. When I stepped out on to our hotel balcony at about 10.30 p.m. and looked up, I was so happy to see the Northern Lights again. My wife and I quickly put on warm clothes and we walked about 1km to the nearby lake as there were no street lights there. The magical light show in the sky became better and better as time went by and we left reluctantly only because our feet had become numb from standing on the cold grass for a prolonged period of time.

From our 3 encounters with the Northern Lights, I can safely conclude that if the 3 following conditions are all present, one has a very good chance of seeing it (1) near or above the Arctic Circle, (2) a clear sky, and (3) a dark sky. ■

Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.