

TAKE MY ADVICE

"The northern lights will keep you waiting"



ENJOY THE THRILL OF CHASING THE AURORA BOREALIS, SAYS THIS MONTH'S COLUMNIST, OLIVER SMITH – IT MIGHT BE THE BEST BIT

The most wonderful moment of your travelling life goes like this: there's a faint glow in the frosty night sky. Gradually, celestial hues of red, blue and green streak through the heavens. Soon, a Technicolor display dances above your head. Your jaw drops onto the snowy ground with a thud. It is a winter scene that could not be more magical. A wolf howls in the forest. All the citizens of the polar latitudes – the reindeer, the White Walkers, Elsa, Pingu – join in a spontaneous jig, celebrating the northern lights. Aka the aurora borealis. Aka the greatest spectacle on Earth.

Or so I'm told. I wouldn't know, because I haven't seen them. The northern lights have jilted me more than once and they're certainly not a cheap date. I've paid for trips to some of the most expensive countries on our planet, patiently sipping €12 pints, only to be stood up by the aurora.

In case you didn't know, the northern lights are caused by electrically charged particles emitted from the sun. Travelling across the solar system at speeds of 500km per second, these particles bypass Mercury, >



Venus and – being true lovers of tasteful furniture and rainy crime dramas – make a beeline for Scandinavia. Here, they frequent the skies from September to March.

My friends list watching the northern lights as the best experience in the world, outdoing the Taj Mahal, the birth of their first child and Nemesis at Alton Towers. Hoping for the same, I booked a trip to Iceland.

My first date with the lights was near Reykjavik. I stood outside for some

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considerable time, gazing up hopefully. In a low moment it occurred to me that I could have driven to a layby in Berkshire for the same experience. Or climbed into my freezer to enjoy the dark among constellations of frozen peas. I gave up.

“You should have been here yesterday,” said the man back at my hotel. “There was an amazing display then.” Oh well, next time.

Next time was in the south of the country. At one point, a smudge of green lit the sky, prompting excited oohs and aahs from the assembled tourists. I wasn’t convinced. It could have been emissions from a power station. Or a Jean-Michel Jarre concert in a nearby town. It wasn’t the intergalactic performance I’d expected. Certainly not at all like the one yesterday, said the man at the hotel. Never mind. Next time.

And so my third and final attempt, this time in a smart hotel in west Iceland – a place whose website baited me with pictures of permanent northern lights, that presumably could be switched on and off like the hot tubs. I sat in my room looking out the window, waiting for the certain coming of the aurora. Hours passed. Clouds

scudded through the skies. No lights. More hours passed. In boredom, I reached for the minibar, offering a selection of snacks, beers and spirits at rates affordable only to Warren Buffett.

It is a fact well known that Iceland has a proud tradition of distilling enigmatic spirits – schnapps the colour of engine oil and the potency of cyanide, mysteriously unavailable for export. Once the minibar was empty, I opened the bottle I’d bought from duty free.

And lo, like a magic potion, the sky began to change. Greens and reds began to dance outside my window. A vortex glowed in the upper atmosphere as the carpet quaked beneath my feet. To get a closer look, I opened the window with shaky hands. The northern lights streamed into my room, dancing their cosmic dance over the TV and trouser press. And remarkably, even when my eyelids closed, the kaleidoscope of the aurora was still there – the particles hurtling straight from the sun to my head at 500km per second until I could think no more.

I woke up the next day with an astronomical hangover and the minibar bill that made Icelandic banks solvent again. Never mind. Next time.

TAKE OLIVER’S ADVICE...

DO

Enjoy Iceland’s many other winter attractions.

DON’T

Assume you’ll see the northern lights – nature is its own boss.

