

# Luxury lights

A customised trip to view the Northern Lights in style makes for a perfect winter break

BY RAHITA ELIAS



**NORTHERN EXPOSURE**  
(Main) Mount Nuolja and Lake Tornetrask, Lapland, Sweden;  
(below) Northern Lights

PHOTO: ISTOCK

ON the bucket list of many a seasoned traveller is the sighting of polar lights Aurora Borealis and southern sister Aurora Australis. These auroras can be anything from a sliver of light barely discernible to the naked eye to an all-out spectacle of shimmering and shifting greens, reds and blues exploding in the cold winter sky. Between the two, the Northern Lights are the more popular.

James Ferguson from luxury tour operator Scott Dunn's European Escapes team says: "The Northern Lights is a phenomenon which has always been fascinating for travellers. In order to see them, it's necessary to travel to the most extreme regions of the globe and be lucky with weather conditions. Only a very few lucky people have the chance to experience the aurora, making it a popular addition to the bucket list of any adventurous traveller."

Given that the main drawbacks to viewing the Northern Lights are the freezing cold and the capricious nature of the lights, your best option is to go at a time when and a location where the lights are generally known to make their appearance. Ultimately, though, it is all down to the luck of the draw.

Elgin Xiao, head of Europe at Singapore-based luxe tour com-

pany Lightfoot Travel, says: "We personally prefer the period of mid-January to early March as you avoid the school holidays which can get very busy, and the skies are usually clearer than early winter, which tend to be cloudy, lessening your chance of seeing the lights. That said, the period for the Northern Lights is from September to April, and our clients have seen them at different times throughout this period – a little luck is always required when going on a quest for the Northern Lights!"

Both Lightfoot Travel and Scott Dunn recommend Iceland, Sweden, Norway and Finland as ideal destinations for Northern Lights spotting. Within these countries, the best locations for viewing the lights tend to be the most remote ones with little light pollution from built-up areas.

Mr Xiao says that to get to these places from Singapore, Lightfoot recommends flying Finnair via Helsinki. According to Finnair.com, a return business class ticket to Helsinki in January would cost from S\$5,700 onwards.

Scott Dunn particularly recommends Grimsborgir in Iceland, Bjorkliden and the Aurora Sky Station in Sweden, and Lyngen Fjord in Norway, while Lightfoot Travel suggests Hotel Ranga, which is an hour outside of Iceland's capital, Reykjavik, and at Bjorkliden and Narvik in Sweden.

For Finland in particular, Kaisa Kosonen, programme manager of Stopover Finland, says: "As long as the nights are clear and dark enough, you can see the Northern Lights all around Finland. But the further north you go, that is above Rovaniemi, the higher your chances of spotting them."

Statistically, she adds, Northern Lapland provides the best possibilities to see the lights. According to the Finnish Meteor-



PHOTO: HELI MENDE, VISIT FINLAND

ological Institute, four nights out of five are illuminated by the Northern Lights in Northern Lapland in the Kilpisjärvi-Utsjoki area if the sky is relatively cloud-free.

Ms Kosonen points out that while many associate the aurora with cold and snowy winter scenery, the most active seasons are actually in autumn and spring when the earth's orientation towards the sun maximises the probability of solar flares interacting with the planet's magnetic field to generate this phenomenon.

However, since the lights can only be seen at night, she says that the best time to see auroras is between 9pm and 1am.

"The best months are February-March and September-October. During summer months you cannot see aurora due to the light nights."

Finland offers a wide range of luxury accommodation options, including Harriniva's Aurora domes, the country's first glamping destination, and Arctic Tree House Hotel in Rovaniemi, which opened its doors in November this year. Another option is the Levi Spirit which offers luxury villas in Lapland, and was named by Elle France as one of the most romantic destinations in Europe.

Even if you do not get to see the lights, the luxe traveller to these countries can avail themselves of other fun activities.

Ms Kosonen says: "Relaxing and being in nature is the epitome of Finnish luxury. Therefore, travellers should try some of the outdoor activities such as hiking and foraging in autumn, and different kinds of snow activities such as reindeer, husky and snowmobile safari, snowshoeing and skiing in winter. As we are in Finland, we should not forget the sauna as well!"



PHOTO: HELI MENDE, VISIT FINLAND

## REST AND RELAX

(Left) Arctic Snow Hotel, Rovaniemi, Finland;  
(below) Iceland's Blue Lagoon



PHOTO: ISTOCK

If you do not have the time to visit a sauna during your actual stay, you still have the opportunity to do so at Finnair's airport lounge before you fly off.

Mr Ferguson says: "If you head to the middle of nowhere with nothing planned except for Northern Lights viewing you risk having a terribly boring, cold, miserable time. So Scott Dunn would usually organise a full programme of activities – snowmobiling, husky sledding, skiing, cultural activities, sightseeing so that Northern Lights or no, you'll have an unforgettable holiday.

"We'll look after not only flights and accommodation but all activities and excursions, as well as restaurant bookings. We'll discuss each guest's interests and requirements in detail and tailor-make the perfect winter break, choosing together the perfect destination. We always put together a package which will include all travel, accommodation and experiences, and often meals too. We don't offer group trips, only top-end, tailor-made experiences. Prices for a four-night Northern Lights trip are likely to start from approximately £2,500 (S\$4,300) per person."

Lightfoot Travel also offers customised packages. Says Mr Xiao: "We typically include flights, hotels, transfers and activities on the ground. You tell us what you want to do, and we can arrange it. Some guests prefer to book their own flights. In these cases, we'll still pick you up from the airport and give you the Lightfoot experience from the moment you land. Since all of our holidays are tailor made, the prices vary. To give you an idea, a 10-day journey through Iceland and Sweden would cost from US\$5,300 per person, excluding flights." ■