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# Weekend

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The 50 books we secretly love





# Northern lights

Don't miss  
• Nature's  
super show

With scientists predicting a vintage winter for aurora watching, James Ellis reveals the best places to go

When is the best time to see the northern lights? It's one of the questions *Times Travel* is most often asked. The answer is that this is one of the best years to see them; we know we told you that last year, but it seems Nasa got it wrong.

Scientists at the American space agency spend a great deal of time tracking the 11-year cycle of the Sun, trying to predict a solar maximum — the point of greatest activity — which coincidentally offers the best conditions for seeing Nature's light show, known as the aurora borealis.

However, the Sun is fickle, producing different peaks of activity at different times, and so while we have already had one peak on this particular solar cycle in 2011-12, Nasa's revised calculations tell us another one, greater in intensity, is predicted for this winter.

"Nasa's predictions are based on historic sunspot activity, and basically they got it wrong," explains Alistair McLean, the founder of the Aurora Zone, which offers northern lights tours. "They now estimate that solar maximum is due

and vivid stripes streaking the skies. If you want to head off on a northern lights hunt, here are some of the best breaks.

## Aurora and astronomy

**Will I see the lights?** 4/5

Beneath the auroral oval (the main area of activity, 10-20 degrees from the magnetic North Pole), Churchill in Manitoba claims to be the best place in the world to see the northern lights. Head there on a "learning vacation" to the area's Northern Studies Centre (NSC) and spend your evenings looking for the lights through the NSC's heated viewing dome — essential given that it can reach -35C outside.

Accommodation is in dorms with shared bathrooms at the centre itself and so is pretty basic — but with scientists on hand and in a remote location, you've every chance of seeing the lights.

**Details** Five nights' full board is from £670pp, starting on February 7 or February 28 (001 2046752307, [churchillscience.ca](http://churchillscience.ca))

## Let the train take the strain

### Murmansk, Russia

## Will I see the lights? 4/5

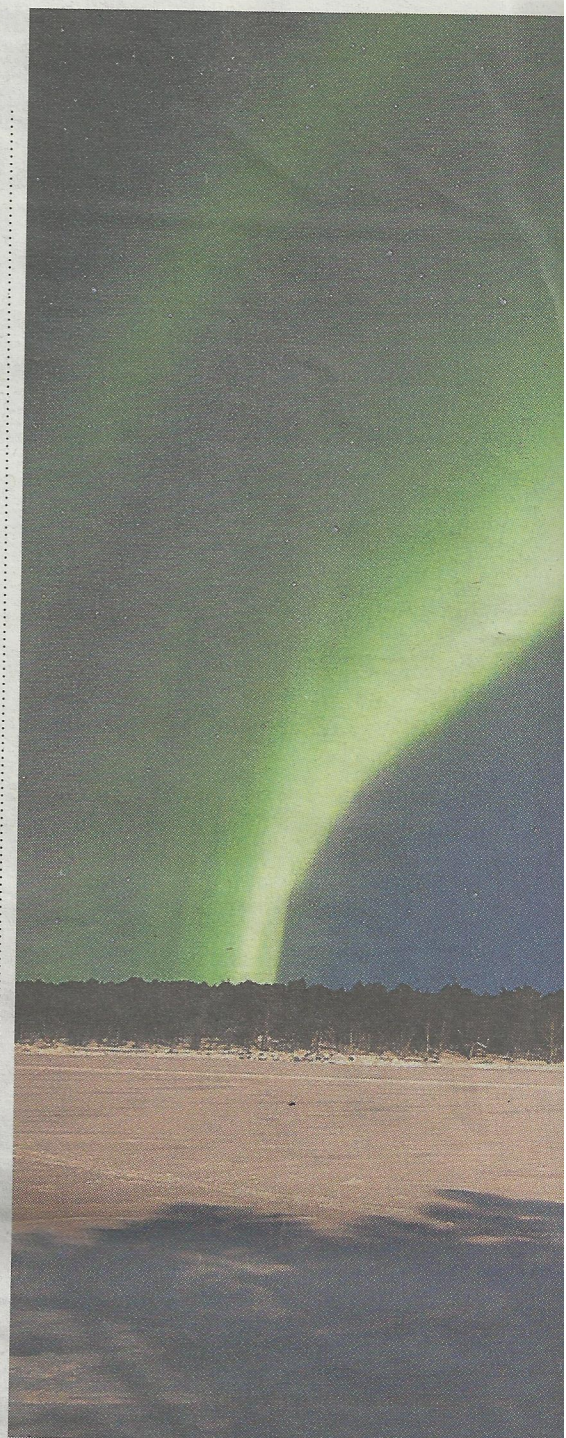
Travel to Murmansk in the Russian Arctic by luxury train and search for the lights over new year. The *Golden Eagle* is the only all-suite private train in Russia and special touches include large picture windows and L'Occitane bath products. There's also an observation car, a restaurant car, a lounge bar, plenty of chances to spot aurora on field trips and stops in Moscow and St Petersburg at both ends of the trip. At the right time of year, you've great chances of success

show, the lack of light pollution here means you'll get a great view of the constellations. Similar accommodation can be found at Nellim. Trips include expert tuition on the science behind the lights, aurora hunting trips on sleighs, snowshoes, and a heated minibus, and the chance to go mushing with huskies. A six-night trip with no light pollution means you should see the lights.

**Details** Six nights' full board is from £2,030pp, including flights from London and all activities (01670 785012, [theaurorazone.com](http://theaurorazone.com))

## Get a wake-up call Hella, Iceland

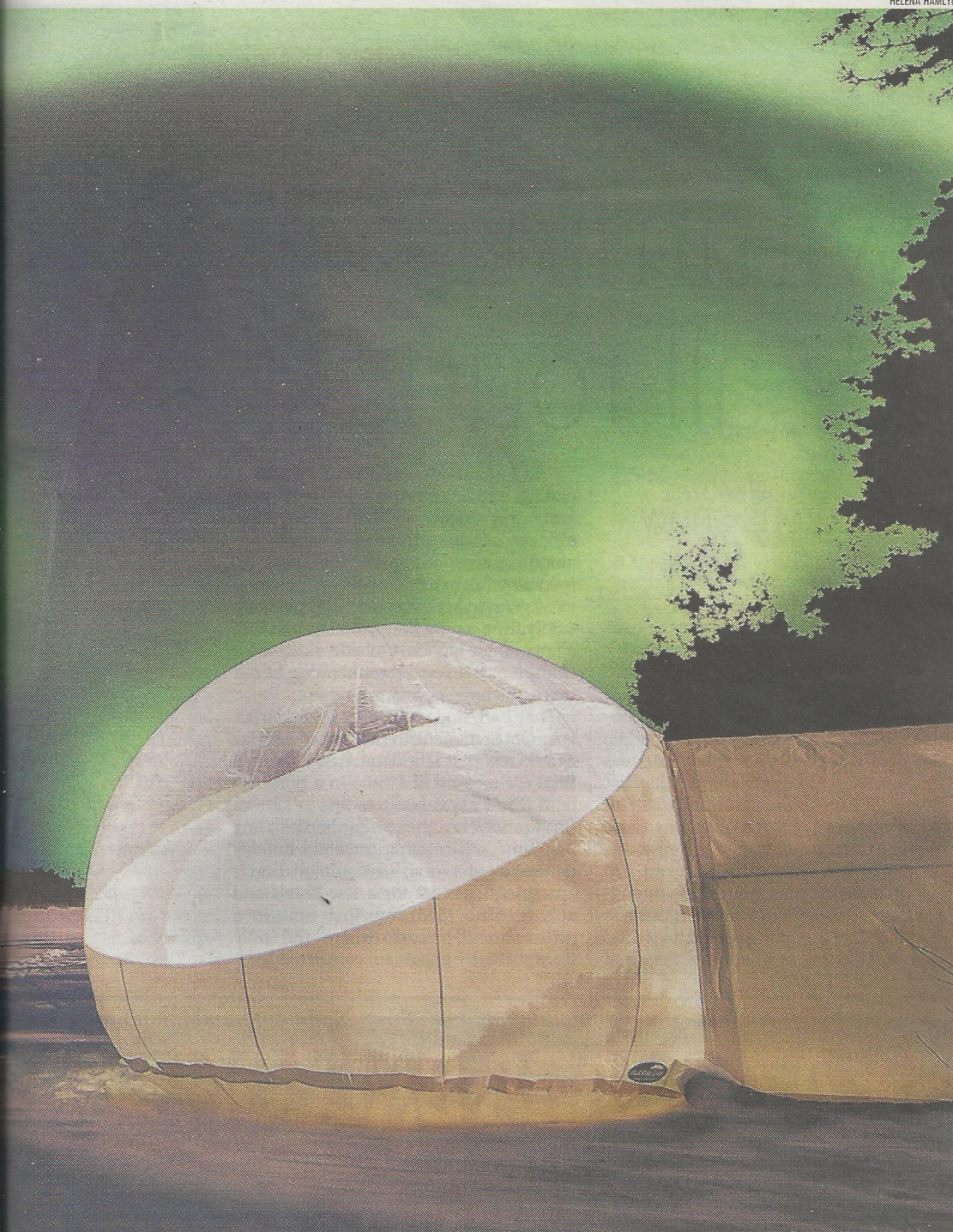
**Will I see the lights?** 3/5  
Iceland is the only country that



is entirely in the zone between so there is a on a trip he have a hotel call if there's sleeping. The hotel close to in southern I is renowned and there are which you can waiting for the wake-up: excellent, you chance of see You can always Aurora Reykj The Icelandic offers planeta



HELENA HAMLYN



off and people switch seats so everyone gets a turn by the window. Astronomers are on hand for expert advice. We've given it a low score because you'll have to be lucky with just a three-hour window. Increase your chances by taking off from a northern airport to get more time closer to the aurora zone.

**Details** The three-hour flight costs £199.95pp with departures from regional airports on varied dates throughout the winter (01524 541800, megahols.reader.travel)

## View them on a voyage Norway

**Will I see the lights?** 4/5

Being all at sea makes for great northern lights spotting as you're looking into

Watch the lights from bed in this bubble in Finland; below far left, the *Golden Eagle* train in Arctic Russia; below left, the Eagles View Suite at the Hotel Iso-Syöte in Finnish Lapland; below, a polar bear set against the lights

dark skies when away from port. You can take a 12-day Astronomy Voyage up the coast of Norway, sailing from Bergen, and be in the company of Dr John Mason, a regular on *The Sky at Night*. Mason gives talks on the lights and the best conditions for seeing them, while there is also a wake-up call service for late night/early morning sightings. With no urban light pollution and sailing right into the aurora oval over a number of nights, your chances of success are very high.

**Details** Eleven nights' full board is from £1,786pp, including return flights from London on November 20 (020-3627 2177, hurtigruten.co.uk)

## On the home front Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides

**Details** Seven nights' self-catering is from £1,100 for two (01851 621771, whitefalls.co.uk)

## See them with the Sami Gunnarsbyn, Sweden

**Will I see the lights?** 3/5

While science can go a long way to forecasting when there will be a northern lights experience, the indigenous Sami in northern Sweden have their own ways of predicting the appearance of the lights. Learn all about it at the Aurora Safari Camp — an African-style camp transported to the Arctic. It is owned by a professional photographer, Fredrik Broman, who set it up specifically for guests to see and snap the aurora. Stay in *Sami lavvus* (tents) with organic food on offer and the chance to meet a family and learn about their way of life. Then transfer to the Sörbyn Lodge in Lulea, where optional excursions include a moose safari, snow-shoe walk, cross country skiing, ice fishing and husky sledding.

**Details** Three nights' half-board at the Sörbyn Lodge in Lulea and one night at the Aurora Safari Camp is from £1,975pp, including flights from London. There are daily departures from December 1 to March 31 (01274 875199, taberhols.co.uk)

## Daytime viewing Spitsbergen, Norway

**Will I see the lights?** 4/5

The further north you go in midwinter, the greater the chance of seeing the lights thanks to 24 hours of darkness. The remote Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard is at 78 degrees north and the Basecamp Spitsbergen's Trappers Hotel, with its end-of-the-world feel, is one of the best places on Earth to see the aurora either during the day, or at night. The hotel is styled with animal pelts and reclaimed wooden furniture and there are a number of excursions on offer, including dog sledging and snowmobile northern lights, visits to the glacier at Longyearbreen and the chance to spot wild reindeer.

**Details** Three nights' B&B is from £1,045pp, including flights from London from October 31 to February 9 (0845 5195242, magneticnorthtravel.com)

## See them in style Syöte National Park, Finnish Lapland

**Will I see the lights?** 3/5

If you don't want to rush about chilled to the bone but would rather lie back and hope for the best, the new Eagles View Suite at the Hotel Iso-Syöte in Finnish Lapland is for you. The super-sexy suite has all-glass walls and roof to give unobstructed views of the skies. You can cuddle up by the cozy