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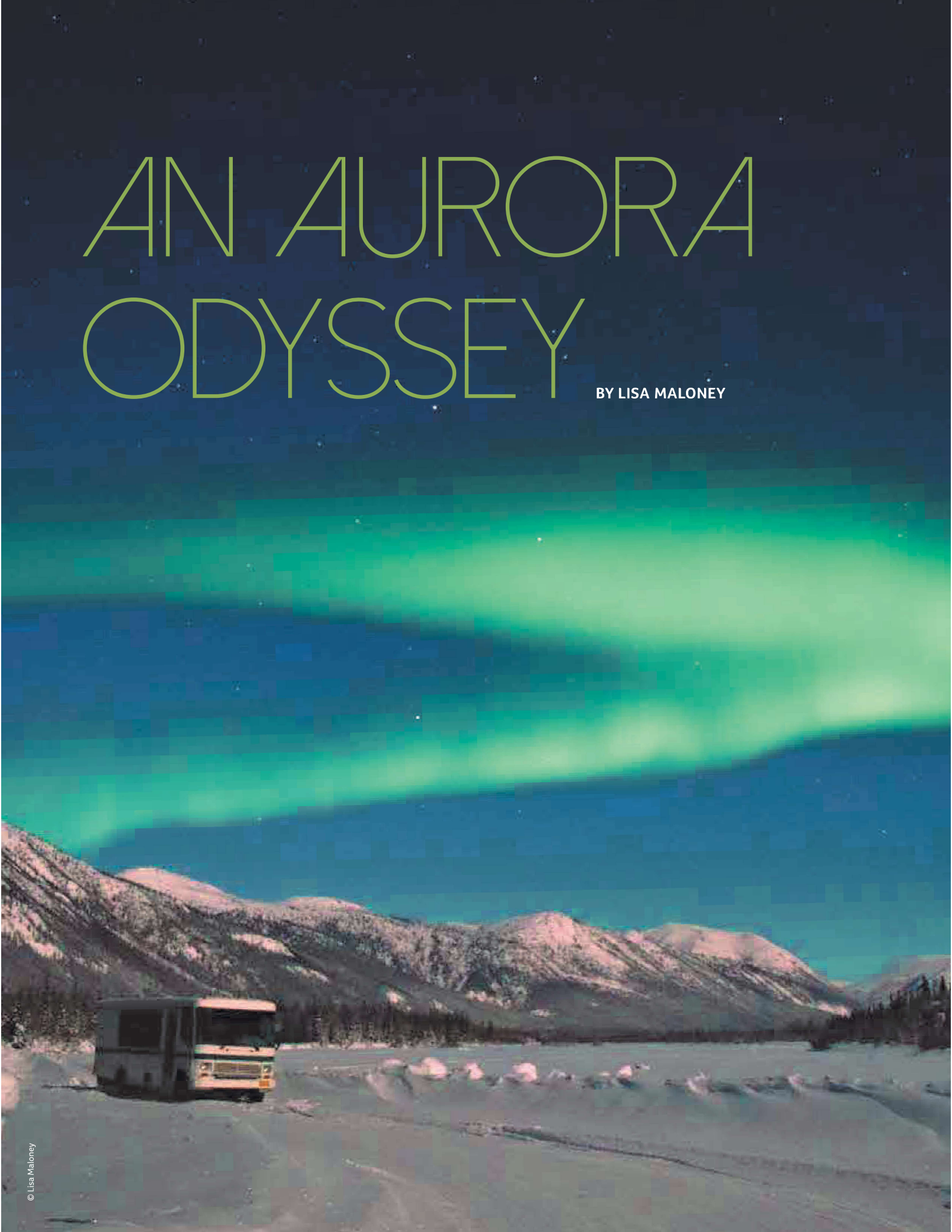
Display until December 31, 2018



NWTRAVELMAG.COM

AN AURORA ODYSSEY

BY LISA MALONEY





“YOU WAIT, SIPPING HOT
CHOCOLATE AND CHATTING
WITH OTHER TRAVELERS, UNTIL
SOMEONE RAISES THE CRY.
“THE AURORA IS OUT!”

Alaska may be a mecca for those in search of the northern lights, but not all parts of the state were created equal: With its clear nights, open topography, limited light pollution and prime location under the “aurora oval,” which means the lights often shine right overhead, Fairbanks reigns supreme in the world of aurora hunting.

That’s why I found myself boarding a jet from my home city of Anchorage to Fairbanks, 350 miles to the north. What would have been an eight-hour drive in dubious winter conditions became a one-hour flight, and the walk to my rental car was quick enough that the minus 30-degree temperature only had long enough to grab at my face, the one patch of skin I’d left free of my layers of wool and puffy down.

LESSONS LEARNED IN THE COLD

I thought I’d brought everything I needed: Camera, tripod, hand warmers and warm clothes. But my first night in Fairbanks, tucked in the cozy Taste of Alaska Lodge with its quilt-covered beds and heated aurora-viewing yurt, was spent on the one thing I’d neglected: Learning how to adjust the shutter speed, ISO and aperture on my camera and to set the lens near infinity focus without the help of daylight. It was a humbling reminder that interviewing experts about photography and doing the photography are two different things.

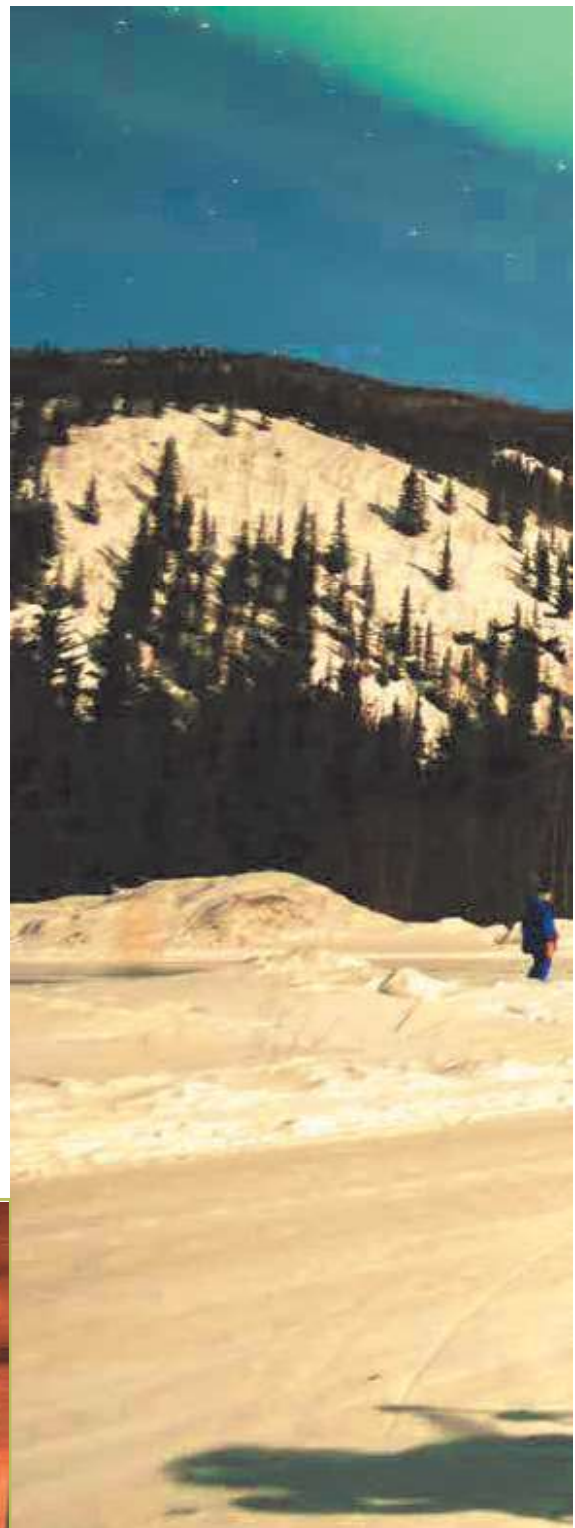
The aurora spared my dignity and didn’t appear that night; even in Fairbanks, sightings aren’t guaranteed. But the next day I was ready for it as I made the 60-mile drive to Chena Hot Springs Resort, the go-to winter vacation spot for this part of the state. An unseasonable melt and freeze had turned what should have been a dry road into a curling match, with my rental car as the curling stone; but the resort was still bustling as usual.

Here, winter is high season, and there's plenty to keep you occupied during the scant daylight hours, from jaunts in a dog sled to snowmobile rides and tours of a museum carved entirely of ice. But once night falls the aurora reigns supreme, and if you're not watching for it from the rock-lined hot springs pool or the "aurorarium" (a converted solarium), you'll probably be out on a Sno-Cat tour, riding in tracked vehicles that trundle you up through the snow to a hilltop yurt.

Once there, the guides shovel windblown snow away from the door and ignite propane heaters to beat back the chill. Then you wait, sipping hot chocolate and chatting with other travelers, until someone raises the cry, "the aurora is out!" and you scatter, everyone grabbing for camera and gloves in the rush to get out the door.

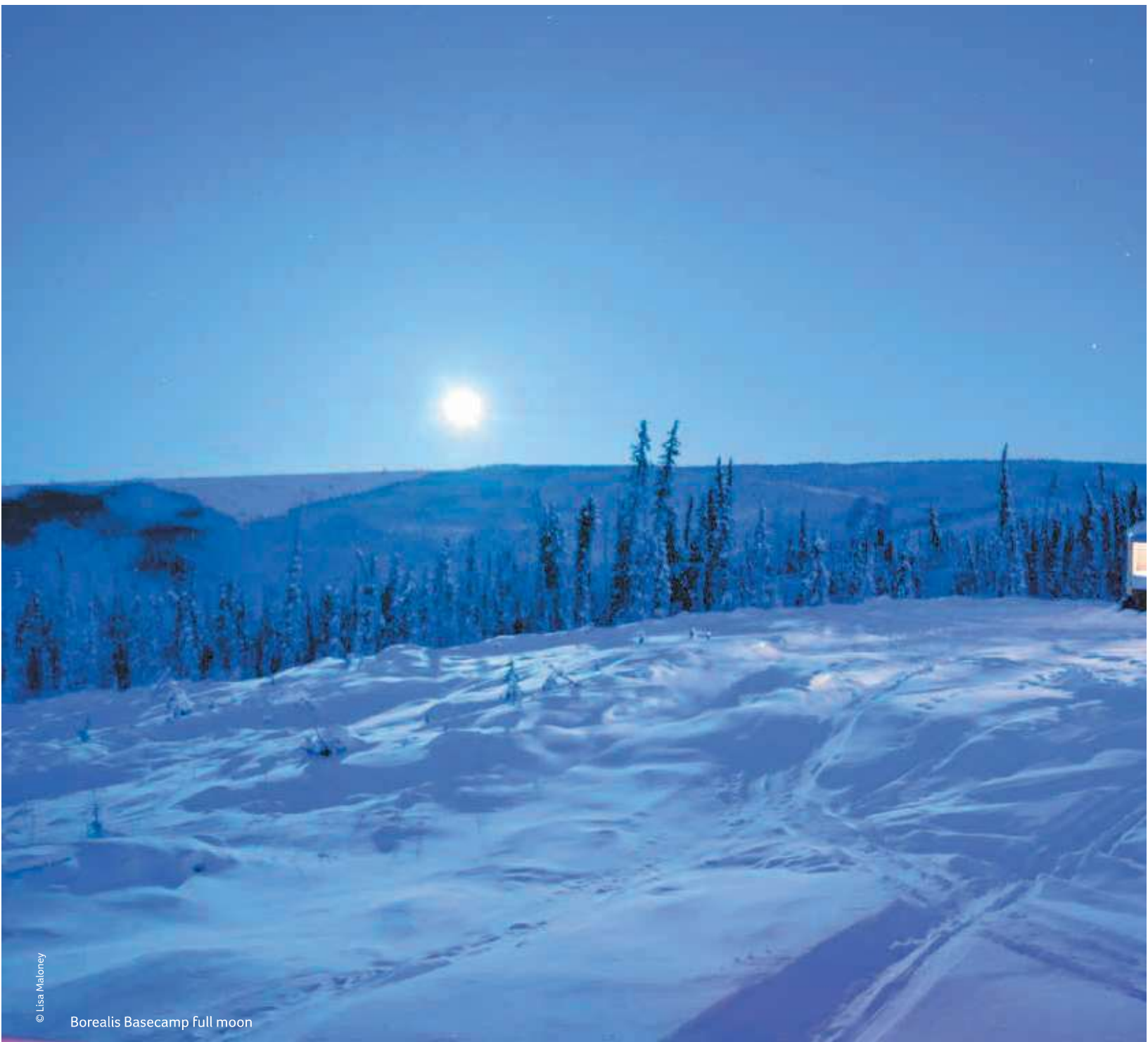
That night on the hilltop, I saw the most breathtaking aurora of my thirty years in Alaska: dancing explosions of green light lined with red and purple. It's also where I discovered that at thirty below, tripods freeze. And then they break, leaving you no choice but to set the camera aside and marvel at the natural light show in front of you, since nobody's hands are steady enough for blur-free exposures at the low shutter speed it takes to capture the lights.

Aurora viewing is a main attraction at Chena Hot Springs Resort, about 60 miles from Fairbanks. The resort offers many places that are perfect for unobstructed viewing of the northern lights, both indoors and outside.





People gather at Chena Hot Springs to watch the northern lights.



© Lisa Maloney

Borealis Basecamp full moon



© Chena Hot Springs



The dining yurt at Borealis Basecamp is a gathering place for aurora watchers. On a clear night, like this one with a full moon, it's an ideal spot to watch the sky while dining, relaxing and sharing stories with fellow aurora watchers.

CLICK, CLICK, CLICK

Aurora yearnings sated, but tripod destroyed, I got a solid half-night of sleep before returning to Fairbanks, just in time to catch the start of the Yukon Quest. In even-numbered years, this thousand-mile dog sled race starts in Fairbanks and ends in Whitehorse, in Canada's Yukon Territory; in odd-numbered years the course is reversed.

Long-distance dog-sled races in Alaska are a true spectacle, with around a dozen dogs in each team, yapping and lunging in their excitement to be off and running down the spectator-lined starting chute.

Even if the Quest isn't in town, winter is festival season in Fairbanks, full of bustling First Friday events, a world ice carving championship and a steady flow of live music.

But I was still on a mission to capture the aurora and bring it home with me in photo form, and after those first frustrating nights I'd learned a few tricks. So, as the brief daylight faded I drove to Borealis Basecamp, a collection of transparent domes that look like they dropped straight out of a Scandinavian tour brochure. In truth, they're perched on 100 acres of pristine land just 40 minutes outside Fairbanks.

Here, you can stargaze from the comfort of your warm bed, and if you doze off, a watchman triggers a soft chime inside the domes when the aurora is visible. But first, I took the time to set up the heavy-duty tripod I'd borrowed in town. It still froze solid within a couple of minutes, but at least it wasn't going to break.


Camera batteries die fast at thirty below, so once I had everything positioned I took the camera back inside with me, wrapping it in a plastic bag to keep the lens from fogging over from the sudden change in temperature. I didn't have long to wait before a few faint traces of green light arced over the horizon.

The chime sounded as the green took form, sketching an eerie rainbow of aurora, barely damped by the light from a full moon. That's when I deployed my secret weapon. After a quick trip outside to snap the camera onto the tripod I hustled back inside, curled up in bed, pointed my new remote shutter release at the camera through the clear dome wall, and pushed the button.

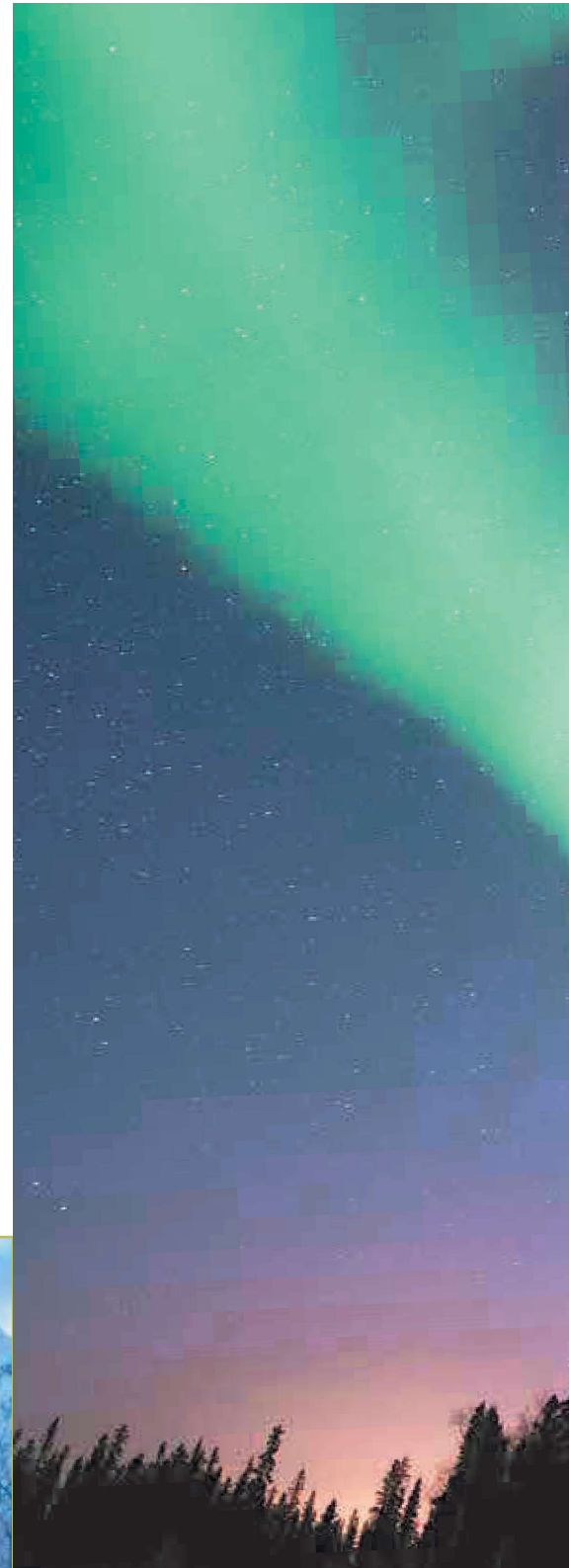
Click. Click. Click. As long as the camera battery lasted, I could take all the pictures I wanted without leaving the warmth of my cozy, heated dome.

The next day, I took one last shot at seeing the aurora as I made my return to Anchorage aboard the southbound Alaska Railroad Aurora Winter Train. But the low-angle sun chased away any chance of seeing the northern lights, instead highlighting fantastical trees frosted with snow, set against the grand sweeps of frozen river and Denali itself, as crisp and clear in the distance as the frigid air that numbed passengers' fingers as we took turns poking our camera out of the cars for pictures of the giant.

That's all right: The train and daily jet flights still run back north to Fairbanks, where every clear night is another chance of seeing the lights dance overhead.

To plan your own Fairbanks aurora odyssey, go to explorefairbanks.com. Book your excursion on the Alaska Railroad Aurora Winter Train at alaskarailroad.com. 

The dynamic interaction between solar wind and Earth's magnetic field keeps the aurora borealis in constant motion. In Alaska, Earth's rotational axis means the best time for aurora viewing is typically from 10:00 p.m. until 3:00 a.m.



Aurora Winter Train



© Alaska Railroad, photo by Mike Criss



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Aurora swirl near Fairbanks