

Aurora Borealis Viewing Trip

Alaska, America's last frontier, was purchased by the United States from Russia for \$7.2 million in 1867. In the beginning, to mocking the purchase, people called Alaska the "Seward's icebox" after then Secretary of State William Seward who negotiated the sell. Later people started calling it the "2 cent purchase" after they realized that the \$7.2 million had fetched more than 375 million acres which amounts to less than 2 cents per acre! Now, besides its oil, timber, and other natural resources, tourism became another greatest treasure of the United States. Strategically located in the heart of Alaska, Fairbanks gets the midnight sun in the summer and the aurora borealis, commonly known as the northern lights in the winter. These natural phenomena attract many visitors from all over the world every year.

In early February of 2016, following many pioneers, we visited Fairbanks as well to view the aurora. In addition to viewing the spectacular aurora, our trip turned out to be an adventure by itself among sleepless nights, soaking in hot spring water surrounded by frigid temperatures as well as navigating in the extreme winter driving conditions.



First of all, one should be prepared for only a few hours of sleep each night - It seems that the Alaskans never sleep during the nights. Almost all the flights arrive and depart Fairbanks at middle of night; our plane arrived at 11:55 PM. After picking up the rental car and arrived at our hotel, it was already 2:00 AM to start our adventurous but sleep deprived trip.

One thing worth mentioning is that driving in Fairbanks in winter time is treacherous. Snow and ice are on the roads everywhere and typically the roads are not plowed. Therefore, renting an all-wheel drive vehicle is strongly advised. Driving slowly

and cautiously is essential, especially at the intersections as one may have to break for the traffic lights.



Not until arrived at the hotel parking lot did I realize why the car had an electrical plug came out of its engine compartment. This plug, standard equipment in Fairbanks, is to keep the vehicle's engine warmed over night as the temperature could get down very low which could freeze the engine. Make sure to plug it into an electrical outlet (provided at most hotel parking lots)! Power cords are provided by the rental car companies.





Because the aurora would not be visible until the latter part of the night, it became a challenge to keep us entertained during the day. The city is small with a population of only 33,000, and as many businesses close for the winter season, there is not much to do. Rather than waste our precious vacation time by sleeping during the day, we decided to visit the much publicized Chena Hot Springs Resort located two hours away from Fairbanks.



A stay at the resort costs quite a lot due to its remote location and its fame. Besides the expensive cabins and lodge rooms, the resort has a very nicely rock decorated hot spring pool which is a must-visit for most visitors to Fairbanks Area. It costs \$15/day to

soak in the hot spring pool if you are not an overnight staying guest. All staying guests, of course, will have unlimited use of the pool with the price included in their room cost.



The hot spring water reaches to 110 degrees, with rising steam making the pictures fuzzy.



Of course, the hot spring water makes it easy to stand up in the cold air temperature.





The resort also owns an aurora viewing hill that is only accessible by a specially designed motor coach which offers maximum comfort for viewing the aurora, available only when joining their tour, staying guest or not.

In addition, there is an ice museum on site which has ice sculptures as well as an iced bar. Admission is \$15, a martini in an iced cup will cost extra. Admission is only available at certain times: 1 PM, 3 PM, 5 PM, 7 PM staying for 45 minutes.





Of course, our main purpose in visiting Fairbanks was not to soak in the hot spring water, nor to drink Martinis but to view the spectacular aurora, which isn't available until nightfall. Before left home, we did some homework to find out about the intensity of the aurora at the daily aurora forecast at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks' Aurora Forecast Website: <http://www.gi.alaska.edu/AuroraForecast/Alaska/20160130>

Since this phenomenon is produced when the magnetosphere is sufficiently disturbed by the solar wind which can take up to 40 hours to reach earth surface the forecast is pretty accurate. I am convinced as such from our experience. As for the intensity, it calls 4 active, 3 moderate, and 2 low. The forecast was 4 for both nights when we were there.

Another factor for aurora viewing is the weather. The aurora is NOT visible when you have an overcast sky no matter how intense the activity is! We were fortunate enough to have clear skies which is not common during the Alaskan winters. Aurora is the best if viewed under a clear sky, high intensity aurora activity and a crescent moon

when the sky is darker. However, one may not have the luxury to be that choosy, it is difficult enough to get the first two important factors already, let along the third.

Though one can see aurora at any place when it appears but for the best viewing, one should go out of town away from the city lights and on a higher ground so there will not be any obstructions. There are many tour operators in town that offer aurora viewing tours but the cost were high. Being frugal travelers, we decided to save money to find a viewing spot on our own giving up the comfort, safety and convenience that tour operators offer. Of course, nobody, tour or not, can guarantee that one will be able to see aurora.

We went to a place called Cleary Summit off Highway 6 approximately 20 miles north of downtown Fairbanks. There was an open field where one can park at the intersection of Highway 6 and Fish Creek Road. By the way, this spot is also marked on Google Maps as “the best place ever for aurora viewing”.

Just a few minutes before midnight, we were treated with a display of the aurora borealis, which painted the sky with a brilliant green color. This rare cosmic light show was just like the northern lights danced across the night sky. The show lasted until about 1:30 AM which was about the time that we had to go back to our hotel anyway as the temperature got down to -5 degrees (that’s -21 degree in Celsius) and our hands and feet started to feel numb.





The first thing we did when got back to our hotel was to submerge ourselves into the hot tub to bring back the normal feel of our bodies. By the way, this is a good time to mention Wedgewood Resort and Conference Center - our chosen hotel:

The cost was at a fraction of that of Chena Hot Spring Resort's, at \$75/night for a one bedroom suite! It offers oversized guestrooms and one and two bedroom suites. We stayed in a one bedroom suite which had very large sized living room, kitchen, dining area, in addition to the bed and bath rooms. If I have to guess, I would estimate the entire unit was about 1,000 square feet. The advantage of having a large living area is that one will probably be spending a lot of time there due to the short day light hours in Northern Alaska Winters. When we were there, sunrise and sunset were at 9:45 AM and 4:15 PM, respectively.



This resort has a main building with conference rooms, restaurant and at least ten out buildings to make it into a large compound. We requested a north facing room on the top floor (3 stories) since the aurora appears to the north and I was hoping to be able to view it inside while lying in bed. Because it was in the middle of the winter (low season), we were accommodated with a one bedroom suite on the third floor in Building K. It turned out to be the best building (location wise in my opinion) since it offers several trailheads that lead to the nearby 2,000 acre Creamers Migratory Waterfowl Refuge and the resort's own 75 acre Wedgewood Wildlife Sanctuary. So, we had easy access to the hiking trails as well as the 24 hour hotel gym which was located right in the next building.







The large living room was tastefully decorated and equipped with a flat screen TV, sliding glass patio door that leads to a large balcony. The kitchen was fully stocked so one can cook meals as the restaurant food in Fairbanks is not to be complimented. In fact, many restaurants were closed due to lack of business in the winter time.





Most of the hotels do offer wake up calls when the aurora becomes visible at nights, however, I would not recommend people to totally depend on it because the hotel employees may not always be as diligent workers as one would expect. In our case, even though we placed one wake up call for 11:00 PM with or without aurora sighting but we didn't receive it until 2:30 AM when the aurora was long gone the first night.

During the day when there is not much to do, one can drive to the imagery line of Arctic Circle to be certified that having to traveled to the Arctic Circle which is 196 miles from Fairbanks on an mostly unpaved road. Again, one should consider the treacherous driving conditions since the road is not the greatest in the world and most car rental companies will require additional charges and insurance to do that drive anyway. One word of caution: Cell and Wi-Fi services come in scarce outside of populated areas and there are not many people around to offer help in case of need.

Another great option for fun is to try dog mushing. Most outfitters are located outside of the town. The rides will take you on a two-person sled pulled by 8 to 10 Alaskan Huskies into the wooded trail. Snow is everywhere, of course. One useful tip from our experience for taking photos/videos: the rides will start out going fast as the dogs are excited to make the run, this is a good time to just enjoy but not to take photos/videos since you are going fast and the rides are bumpy. At towards the latter half of the rides, significant fatigues will slow the dogs down, thus the sled, then the ride becomes smoother to take steady photos/videos.



We went to one for its location, it is on the way to the hot spring resort where we went the day before and again after the dog mushing since we didn't have anything else planned for the rest of that day. The cost were: \$65 for half an hour, \$95 for an hour, per person. The owner is a nice lady named Eleanor. She provides heavy coats, boots, hot chocolate and cookies. Here is her website in case anyone is interested:

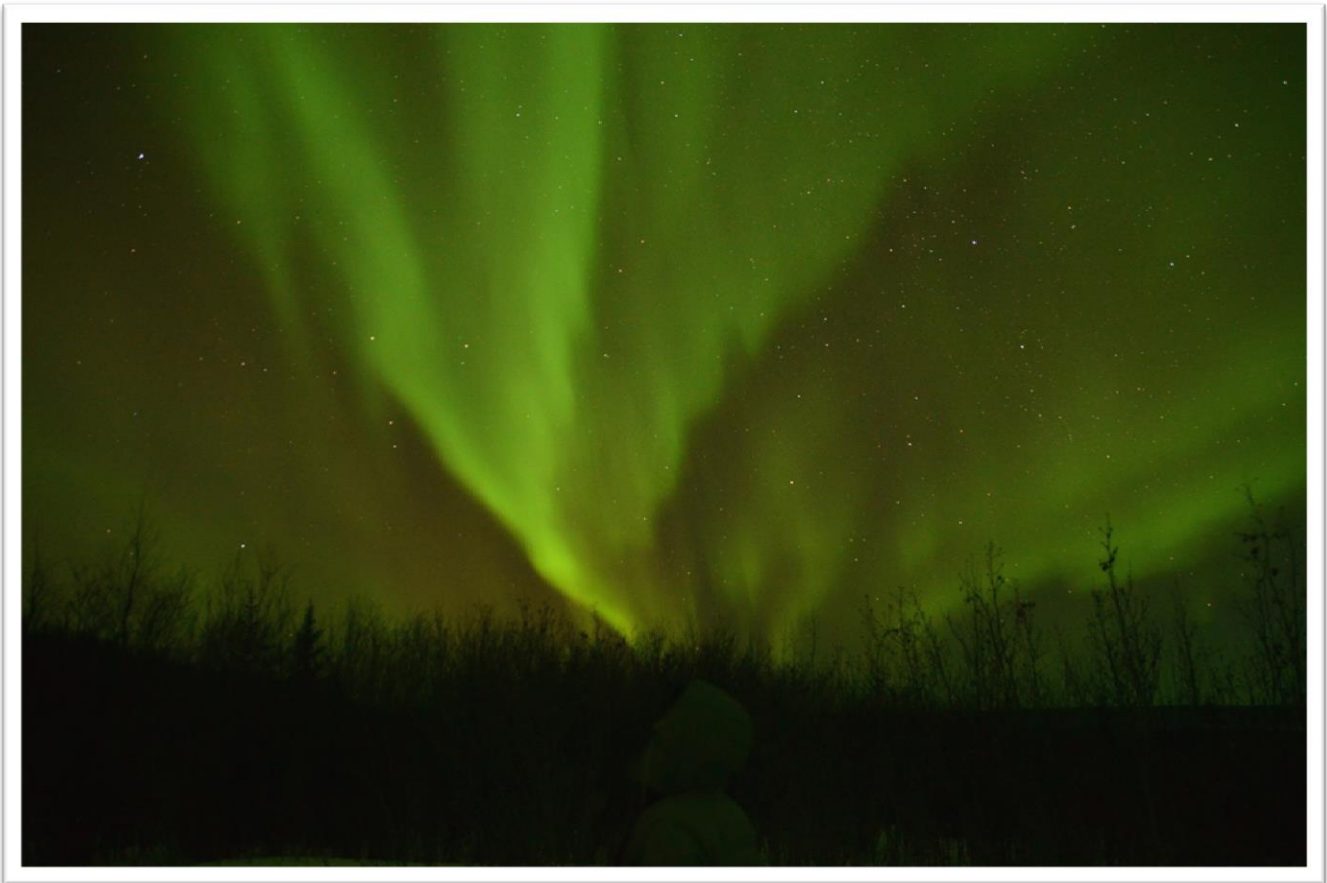
www.justshortofmagic.com





Running out of things to do and our flight wasn't leaving until 2:00 AM in the morning, we decided to go back to the same spot to view the aurora again the next night after a day spent dog mushing and revisit to Chena Hot Springs Resort. One can tell how boring people gets in Fairbanks, as we drove up to the viewing spot, the same group of Chinese girls from Los Angeles Area whom we met the prior night rushed to our car and told me that they had been expecting us again this night. I could sense the happiness when they saw us. Obviously, they were happy not because they necessarily have any reason to like me, but only because they were bored. They told me that they spent the whole day sleeping. They also wanted to make copies of my photos since they only had cell phones as their cameras which didn't take any satisfactory photos.

Just as forecasted, the aurora appeared again just as good as the first night.





This trip was a memorable, rewarding, adventurous and exhausting trip for us: we were fortunate to have clear skies, high intensity aurora activity and a crescent moon for maximum enjoyment of viewing the spectacular aurora shows two nights in a row. We soaked in the world famous Chena Hot Spring's mineral water two days in a row. We snow hiked and dog mushed in the snow covered Alaskan forests. The price we had to pay was that there were three sleepless nights to make up this trip. The first night, we didn't arrive at the hotel until 2:00 AM; the second night, we went to watch the aurora and didn't get back to the hotel until 2:00 AM; the third night, we watched aurora again before went to the airport to catch our flight which didn't depart until 2:00 AM.

My advice to anyone who is thinking of doing the same thing is that plan ahead, pay close attention to the aurora activity and weather forecasts and bring ample cold weather clothing because it will be COLD!