TRAVEL

On board the Yukon's first northern lights flight

Viewing the aurora in an aircraft is a high-flying bucket list adventure that we get to experience in the Yukon.

By Mike Fisher Special to the Star
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AD AND THE CONVERSATION

Aurora borealis as seen from Dawson City, with an Yukon Airlines Cessna Caravan in the foreground, during the inaugural aurora between flights. Photo: Yukon Airlines

Mark Gallop / Life Health

WHITEHORSE, YUKON. Stars, it's a fine thing watching the aurora borealis from the ground, dark jewel and shying heavenward. It's quite another charging straight toward it in a B737 jet at 36,000 feet with your nose pressed to the window as the almighty thing bumps there, a great fiery green curtain, fluttering as if on an invisible line.

It's sticky, the aurora.

Subject to solar wind variances and weather conditions that can obscure your view, it teases the eyes and even the ears — some say you can hear its ghostly chatter. Folklore has it being a harbinger of war or a glimpse into the spiritual world of ancestors or the mysterious dance of animal spirits. Famous yet fickle, it invites a good chase.

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The Air North "Aurora 360" charter flight that just soared far above pesky clouds at 8000 per seat was the best shot for the 90 people aboard to get face to face with the northern lights. Seventy-three paying guests were joined by 17 media and dignitaries.

If all the world's a stage for viewing the colorful collision of gaseous particles in the Earth's atmosphere with particles released from the sun's atmosphere, this was the nearest thing to a backstage pass.

Anybody set on the pulsing chemicals northern lights from the ground. A lucky few get to see them from Air North's maiden aurora borealis flight seeing adventure.

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Partners Air North, the Yukon Astronomical Society and the Yukon government created a high-flying experience specifically for aurora viewing, a first in North America on Nov. 29 when the flight of more than three hours began and ended at the Whitehorse airport.

Air North will analyze data and feedback from this inaugural flight to determine if it will provide more of them.

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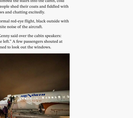
"The difference between watching the aurora from the ground and taking a flight like this is that we get to into the stratosphere, far above the clouds and above the weather that makes viewing difficult at times," said Anthony Guscinski, a founder of the Yukon Astronomical Society, who helped to plan the trip.

"In 700 kilometres an hour we're keeping pace with the rotation of the earth, which makes for good photography — and a lot of people on the flight been cameras."

It started with pre-flight cultural entertainment and eats at the Kwanlin Dun Cultural Centre in downtown Whitehorse.



Air North flight attendant Anja Beamer of Whitehorse serves cocktails.

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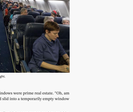
There were mountains of food set up at stations by participating chefs — tuna and elk pâté bites, Dromedary lightning on the walls spelled YUKON Larger Than Life."

Rare flight of Vancouver, wearing a fur coat and a pair of blinking red antlers on her head, couldn't wait to get aboard. "I lived many years in the Arctic watching the aurora and I know this flight will be fantastic."

We rode in buses right up to the aircraft, guided by orange batons held aloft by a ground crew member. As passengers climbed the stairs into the cabin, cold gusts of air gave way to giddy warmth. People shed their coats and fiddled with their cameras, heading near the windows and chatting excitedly.

For the first five minutes, it was like a normal red-eye flight, black outside with occasional lights scattered over the white noise of the aircraft.

Within half an hour, pilot captain Don Kenny said over the cabin speaker: "We're getting a bit of a show here on the left." A few passengers donned at others to turn off any lights as they strained to look out the windows.



Aurora borealis as seen from Air North's maiden aurora borealis flight seeing adventure. Photo: Yukon Airlines

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Then, in, now and again faces were lit by the eerie green of LED ice cubes as passengers sipped themed Aurora 360 gin-based cocktails created by onboard mixologist Grant Surrey from the Fairmont Pacific Rim in Vancouver.

Soon, Guscinski was acting as a guide in the jump seat near the cockpit and the area usually stuffed by flight attendants became a kind of astronomy salon.

"We know what time (the aurora) would come so we're flying right into it, then we'll turn around a bit and chase it," he said.

Adjustments had been made to ensure people could see the aurora and photograph it to the best possible conditions. Cabin lights were dimmed, and the blinds on the aircraft's windows. Cowling above cabin windows helped to block extraneous light.

At times, it was like a touring wilderness bus, people jostling for position. There was a collective anxiety to get the perfect view and snap a once-in-a-lifetime shot.

The aurora borealis flight started off like any other flight.

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While there was assigned seating, the windows were prime real estate. "Oh, am I taking your spot?" asked one guy who'd slid into a temporarily empty window seat.

"Yeah, I've never seen the northern lights," said the seat owner, as they quickly switched.

Passengers were generally cooperative and everyone gained the hushed reverence sought by so many travelers — bragging rights.

Of course, not everyone can take an aurora snowmobile and reach a town of 1,000 people in Canada's Arctic, where the lights are so bright and frequent aurora activities are touring the Yukon Wildlife Preserve and taking a dip in the Takhini Hot Pools. A highlight for me was flightseeing in a small aircraft over Kluane National Park with Rocking Star Adventures.

Aurora. Two major aurora tour operators are Arctic Range Adventures and Northern Tales Travel Services, both of which have their own viewing facilities.

Do your research: TravelYukon.com

Anthony Guscinski, a founder of the Yukon Astronomical Society, helped plan the aurora viewing flight.

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Yukon sees a bright future for aurora tourism as it innovates with products including the Aurora 360 flight, said Air North chief commercial officer Benjamin Ryan, who acknowledged the region faces competition from other destinations.

"The aurora market is seeing huge demand and the Yukon is expanding its public accommodations. The Yukon has affordable accessibility during air traffic including Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton and Ottawa. We have a growing industry number and a lot of outdoor activities that complement anyone's aurora experience."

During the flight, Kenny and first officer Daniel Hartman kept the doors to the cockpit open. A line of people waited their turn to talk with them and watch the show from the best seat in the house.

When I inched into the cockpit, it was as if the aurora snapped into focus — a magnificent blazing glow of green. For me, it was downhill from there. But from the beginning to the end, wow, what a ride.

Mike Fisher was hosted by Tourism Yukon and its partners, which didn't review or approve this story.

When you go

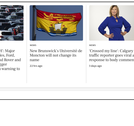

Photo of aspect of Aurora 360 as aurora scoreboard.

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Stay: I stayed at the Edgewater Hotel in Whitehorse. It's just steps from the riverfront, where you can walk and might see the aurora on a good night.

Eat: Giorgio's Cucina offers great Italian and Greek. The nautically themed Wheelhouse Restaurant has great ribs, steak and fish.

Do: At Big Hight Wilderness Ranch, you can snowmobile and reach a town of 1,000 people in Canada's Arctic, where the lights are so bright and frequent aurora activities are touring the Yukon Wildlife Preserve and taking a dip in the Takhini Hot Pools. A highlight for me was flightseeing in a small aircraft over Kluane National Park with Rocking Star Adventures.

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