



SWEDEN



SWEDEN
Discover the World
44/(0) 1737-214-250,
discover-the-world.co.uk

From \$1,867 for a four-day trip, including lodging, some meals, and roundtrip flights from London.

Night Lights

"The Northern Lights were so much more than I expected," says Jennifer Farrell, from North Ridgeville, Ohio, who saw the lights for the first time about two years ago. Farrell traveled to Swedish Lapland—a province in the far northwest of the country that's known for its indigenous Sami culture and snowy sweeps of forests, mountains, and plateaus—with tour operator Discover the World. From December to March, the company offers a four-day Northern Lights trip that begins in Lapland's Abisko National Park. Here, the lights, also called the aurora borealis, are especially likely to appear due to the park's clean air and lack of clouds. The lights may illuminate the sky in arcs, patches, or rippling sheets of green, red,

violet, white, or blue, and some observers say they can even hear them swish and crackle.

On the first evening of the trip, travelers dine on venison and arctic char at the Abisko Mountain Lodge, then bundle up in snowsuits for a bracing chairlift ride to the Aurora Sky Station. "The lights started out as a greenish fog as we walked up to the chairlift, and I was worried I'd be disappointed," Farrell says. "Then, as we ascended into the cold, cold air and wind, the lights shifted. They were spectacular."

At the station, visitors can take in the view from an observation tower and explore a science exhibit on the aurora, which is created when solar wind particles collide with Earth's upper atmosphere. "I stayed outside as long as

I could, slipped into the station to get warm, then went back out to admire the lights," Farrell says. "It was surprising how they slowly changed, and how downright huge they were. They were definitely worth the trip."

After leaving Abisko, travelers spend two nights at the Icehotel (pictured). Rebuilt every winter from giant blocks of ice, the hotel has beds made of snow covered with reindeer pelts. Ice sculptures serve as decorations. (Warmer accommodations are also available.) The hotel runs nightly trips by snowmobile, bus, and horseback to the best aurora-viewing spots. If guests are lucky, the lights might simply appear above their room in a ghostly green swirl.

STAR APPS: Point your iPhone or iPad to the sky, and the Star Walk and Pocket Universe apps direct you to thousands of stars, constellations, and planets. (Google Sky Map and Celeste SE do the same for Android phones.) Download the Solar Walk app to virtually wander our solar system.

Other Sky Gazing Trips Worth Taking



AUSTRALIA

Voyages Ayers Rock Resort
61/(0) 2-8296-8010,
ayersrockresort.com.au

The Sounds of Silence tour at Ayers Rock Resort begins at sunset, when the iconic rock formations of Uluru (pictured, above right) and Kata Tjuta glow fiery red. Take a short walk through the dunes to a panoramic viewpoint, then dine outdoors on Aussie fare, including crocodile canapés, barbecued kangaroo, and wild barramundi. When night falls, an astronomer directs you to sights in the southern sky and explains the stars' significance in the culture of Uluru's traditional landowners, the aboriginal Anangu people. \$158 for a four-hour tour, including dinner and drinks. Rooms at the resort from \$188 per night.

CANADA

Fox Bay Retreat
(867) 668-4899,
foxbayretreat.com

Situated on Lake Laberge in the northern Yukon Territory, Fox Bay Retreat is owned by locals Scott and Joanne McDougall. (Joanne proudly traces her ancestry to the Southern Tutchone/Tlingit people of the Wolf Clan.) From November through April, the couple invites travelers to stay in Fox Bay's cabins and experience the Northern Lights along with a mix of wintry activities: hikes in the snow to track deer, coyotes, and wolves; a midnight sleigh ride; and, for an additional fee, snowmobiling, snowshoeing, and ice fishing for trout and burbot. Nights are spent drinking hot chocolate around the campfire and watching the otherworldly spectacle of the aurora borealis. From \$1,395 for a five-day trip, including meals and lodging.

CARIBBEAN

Insight Cruises
(650) 787-5665,
insightcruises.com

Cruise the eastern Caribbean on Holland America's *Nieuw Amsterdam* while you learn about astronomy from experts on Insight Cruises' Cosmic Trails 2 trip. Between stops in the Turks and Caicos Islands, Puerto Rico, St. Maarten, and the Bahamas, professional astronomers teach seminars on such topics as the search for life on other planets, upcoming voyages to Mars, and celestial navigation. At night, head to the ship's top deck to spot planets and galaxies far, far away. Arranged in association with *Sky & Telescope* magazine, the trip's excursions include behind-the-scenes tours of NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida and Puerto Rico's renowned Arecibo Observatory. From \$2,480 for an eight-day cruise (March 6–13, 2011), including all seminars and meals. (Excursions are not included.)

CHILE

QuasarChile
56/(0) 2-434-5359,
quasarchile.cl

Chile's Atacama Desert is one of the best places on the planet to stargaze, thanks to its nearly cloudless skies, high altitude, and low light pollution. On QuasarChile's Highlights of San Pedro and the Atacama Skies tour, take day trips to such sights as the desert's rugged Moon Valley, the Miscanti and Miñiques lagoons at 14,100 feet, and the Atacama Salt Flat—a hangout for pale pink Chilean flamingos. During nighttime sky-watch sessions, staff from the area's many observatories show you where to see supernova remnants, star clusters, and galaxies. The small town of San Pedro de Atacama serves as your base. From \$3,115 for a four-day trip, including lodging and meals.

NAMIBIA

Sossusvlei Desert Lodge
(888) 882-3742,
andbeyondafrica.com

In the daytime, explore NamibRand, the largest private nature reserve in southern Africa, on guided walks through sand dunes, drives into the desert, and rides on ATVs. Ostriches, oryx (a kind of antelope), and Hartmann's mountain zebras might cross your path. At night, in the Sossusvlei Desert Lodge's observatory, an astronomer leads a safari of the desert sky (pictured, above left), using a computerized telescope to point out star clusters, the constellations Sagittarius and Scorpius, and other sights that are visible only in the Southern Hemisphere (best seen from April to October). Retire to one of the lodge's 10 stone villas, each with a skylight above the bed for stargazing until sunrise. From \$415 per night, including meals, lodging, and activities in the reserve.