



if you go...

TO SEE THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

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Lights are most intense from December to March, during times when nights are really cold, really dark and really clear.

They are said to be most active late at night or very early in the morning.

Factors such as geographic location (i.e., how far north you are and if there is light pollution) and the amount of disturbance in the atmosphere will have an effect, as will the phases of the moon. For information, check out the Northern Lights Centre (northernlightscentre.ca) in Watson Lake, Yukon.

looking at the northern lights

We celebrate a nostalgic country pastime

WE KNOW, NOW, what forms those ghostly, evanescent ribbons of light we call the northern lights, but their otherworldly appearance makes it far too tempting to believe the explanations offered in the old legends. In medieval times they were thought to be harbingers of war; the Inuit of Alaska believed they were the spirits of the animals they hunted; other aboriginal groups thought they were ancestors dancing around a ceremonial fire.

The northern lights—or aurora borealis—are, indeed, as elusive as spirits, as awesome as rumours of war, as lovely as dance. Sheets, curtains, and shafts of light bloom, pulse, and fade across the northern night sky. Mutable, vast, they dance

like solemn, grave beings, veiled in tissues of pale green, pink, red, blue, violet, or yellow.

The aurora is formed when electrons and protons, blown toward Earth by the solar wind, enter the Earth's magnetic field where it is weakest, at each pole, and collide with gas particles in the upper atmosphere. The lights extend from 80 to 970 kilometres above the Earth's surface. The most spectacular display ever witnessed, by all accounts, was in September of 1859. The lights were reported throughout Canada, the United States, Europe, Japan and Australia, and were so extraordinarily brilliant that the *New York Times* wrote, "Ordinary print could be read by the light of the aurora."

The aurora borealis can be seen from every province, and are as much a Canadian icon as the Rockies or the Bay of Fundy. Yet, unlike mountain or ocean, they are elusive. Sightings are hard to plan. The best time to view the aurora is between September and April. Look up from any backyard during these months, especially if there is no light pollution. But in the Yukon, Nunavut, or the Northwest Territories, outfitters specialize in northern light adventures. Travel by dogsled to a remote cabin, wait for nightfall, and then watch, amazed, as the great lights dance, it seems, to music we cannot hear.

Beth Powning is the author of *Edge Seasons* and *Shadow Child*, available from Vintage Canada.

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