

BY ELIZA REID

PHOTOS BY PÁLL STEFÁNSSON

# A Winter's Quest

Seeking a glimpse of the elusive northern lights can be like chasing the Pied Piper, a dream rekindled each time those dancing colors appear on our TV screens or in the pages of our books.

Pilgrims may or may not ever see this Piper, but they feel drawn into the emptiness of an Icelandic winter, watching and hoping that just maybe, tonight, the dream might come true.

TAKE ONE: WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 29. 2100 HRS. WIND: EASTERLY, 10 METERS PER SECOND. TEMPERATURE: 3°C.

"I came to Iceland for three things," says Londoner David Beswick, celebrating his 58th birthday. "Whale-watching, diving, and the northern lights." Beswick has already discovered there is no whale watching and no diving in November, so now, on the last evening of his holiday, he and most of the other tourists in the country have placed all their chips on the *aurora borealis*.

Beswick and about 60 other heavily layered passengers have filled a Reykjavík Excursions bus for the company's nightly "Northern Lights Tour", a hugely popular three-hour quest from the capital into the countryside with the aim of witnessing one of nature's most revered phenomena.

The mystique of the *aurora borealis*, more commonly known as the northern lights, has permeated northern cultures for centuries. In scientific terms, they are the energy released by the collision of charged particles from solar wind with atoms like hydrogen and oxygen in the Earth's atmosphere. For the less-technically minded, they are a spectacular display of smoky colors which dance and sway across the night sky.

But there are no guarantees when it comes to catching a real-life glimpse. The lights only occur in a 2,500-kilometer band around the magnetic north pole and are only spotted when weather

conditions are ripe: clear skies, low temperatures and an absence of other light sources are all assets. Beswick wryly notes: "There's things you can't control in life, like birthdays and northern lights."

As we drive northeast along Vesturlandsvegur and away from the lights of Reykjavík, our guide, Helgi Gudmundsson, declares that it looks like a good night to catch the *aurora*. He's been guiding in Iceland for over 25 years and has been on the northern lights beat since daily tours began in 2005. Apparently, NASA operates a website which displays auroral activity across the globe in almost real time. Activity levels over Iceland tonight are ranked at an 8 out of 10 and skies are clear – both good omens.

Our bus heads for Thingvellir National Park, a 45-minute drive from downtown. Helgi has called contacts in the areas where there's good potential for light-spotting – often Hvalfjörður, Selfoss and the Reykjanes Peninsula. Tonight his sources have told him the chances are best at the park (and, he pragmatically confides to me later, "the toilet facilities are better").

The atmosphere of our all-ages international crowd is remarkably jovial and conversations between strangers have erupted, many initiated





by an English man named Frank who appears to have imbibed a little liquid courage before embarking on the journey. (“I love Iceland,” he tells me. “The ground farts and everything!”)

We turn east onto Highway 36 in the direction of the park and our eyes gradually adjust to the lack of light. Shapes emerge from the different shades of gray, and snow-covered mountains appear in the distance.

“OK – if you look to your left at 10 o’clock you might see something,” announces Helgi tentatively. The bus slows. Necks crane.

“Yes, maybe a little line over there...,” The bus stops. Nothing.

“This is arse,” complains Frank loudly.

Helgi ignores him. “Well, we will just let it brew for a while,” he says, and the bus continues its journey.

We reach the parking lot at the park. Discouragingly, clouds have started to roll in off the mountains. We shuffle off the bus and into the cold to see if anything appears. In the meantime, Helgi and Siggí, the driver, prepare hot chocolate and donut-like *kleinur* as a late-night snack.

We cluster in groups to keep warm, while a few intrepids scan the horizon. Finally, after about 15 minutes, something appears in the distance. It starts with a small vertical line on the horizon and spreads, curving to the east, and then drizzling upwards, like ink running. They are green, but

critically faded by the haze of the clouds. They are northern lights, but barely.

It’s enough for tonight, though. We’ve witnessed something, even if it’s not very much, and the experience of seeing the countryside at night is a worthwhile novelty for some. “How often do you get to have cocoa in the middle of nowhere?” observes Carol Newman, visiting from the US.

I return to my home in Reykjavík just after midnight, where I find my husband is still awake.

“I just got home from a long walk,” he remarks happily. “I was watching the northern lights. They were magnificent – just dancing all across the bay.”

I think I need to try this again....

(Continued on next page »)



TAKE TWO: TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5. 2100 HRS. WIND: NORTHEASTERLY, 2 METERS PER SECOND. TEMPERATURE: -8°C.

I’m optimistic. It’s been sunny – well, pinkish – all day today and it’s chilly outside. NASA is predicting only a level 5 of activity, but after last week’s letdown, I am no believer in the science of these sightings.

There’s a full moon tonight, and with the lack of clouds, it’s like a huge spotlight in the sky. When we descend from the bus onto the slippery pavement of Thingvellir’s parking lot, the moon’s light lands on the volcanic crater islands of Iceland’s largest lake, and across rocky fissures to Ármannsfell mountain. Even if there is no visible solar activity tonight, this view is worth the journey. Well, that and the *kleinur*.

We don’t see the elusive lights. While the most cynical of our group wait inside the warm bus to depart, the majority huddles in a sheltered corner by the toilets, clutching Styrofoam cups of hot chocolate in gloved hands. A few brave the open areas to set up tripods and cameras in the rather quixotic hope of capturing something

from the sky they can’t see with their eyes, if only they can leave the exposure long enough.

After 45 minutes in the cold, we leave the park, again unsuccessful. Helgi picks up his microphone and re-iterates to a disappointed audience what we’ve learned about Icelandic nature and geography on this trip, as if to emphasize the added value of the tour, even if the main target has not appeared. “We will offer you a 50 percent discount if you wish to try again,” he concludes.

He is interrupted by a cry from the back of the bus. “There! On the right!”

The Pied Piper has finally made an appearance.

We pull off the road on the turn-off to Hvalfjörður. The lights aren’t in many colors, mostly green with a hint of purple, but they’re still impressive, defying the moon with their clarity. They prance and spread across the horizon in a huge horseshoe.

“No discount now!” says Helgi.

The lights fade and then flare. I pick an area and focus on it for a while, because if I turn away and then look back again everything has changed. We are outside for about ten minutes, and no one complains about the sub-zero temperatures.

Then, just as quickly as they appeared, the northern lights evaporate and are gone. We head back into town, where, impossibly, they come back, brighter and more active than before, sparking *oohs* and *aahs* from the passengers.

“We’ve been waiting 60 years for this,” I overhear the woman next to me say to her husband, tucking her arm in the crook of his elbow.

Helgi likes to remind his customers, “We are not in control of the northern lights.”

It’s only after tonight I realize that there’s more to this adventure than spectacle. The unpredictability of the journey itself is as alluring as its target – almost. [a](#)

Both Reykjavík Excursions *Kynnisferðir* and Iceland Excursions run nightly “Northern Lights” tours, weather permitting, from October to April. [re.is](http://re.is); [iea.is](http://iea.is)