They are nature’s light show. The northern lights rank at the very top of the night sky’s most awe-inspiring phenomena that can easily be observed with the naked eye. The month of March, just as Alaska’s winter draws to a close and the obscuring cloud cover lessens, is one of the best times of the year to see the aurora borealis. The nights are still long—and a white blanket of snow still covers the land.

These magical lights are just one feature of the surprising week of photography in and near Fairbanks, the gateway to the Arctic. The diverse photography of this adventure highlights not only on Alaska’s spectacular and colorful night sky, but also the exciting daytime activities that coincide with the dates of the tour—the action-packed Limited North American Championship Sled Dog Races and the World Ice Art Championships.

The aurora borealis has both fascinated and terrified humans for millennia. The aurora is probably the progenitor of dragon mythology in China and Europe, a supernatural omen prophesying war, doom and destruction as the heavens “turned red with blood.” For northern peoples living under the “aurora belt,” the northern lights have been incorporated into their stories and legends of creation, death, and even celestial sports.

In the past, photography of aurora borealis was a difficult proposition. Exposure calculations of light intensity, and lengthy shutter speeds using film, were usually hit-or-miss—and a night of shooting could have been lost by a
simple mistake. Now, in the digital age, with relative ease we can take a few test shots to check exposure and set our ISO, aperture and shutter speed accordingly. And the results can be spectacular!

Our time in Fairbanks corresponds with the winter sled dog races and ice sculpture championships. During the day we allocate time along the dog team racecourse, capturing action images of the teams, sleds and “mushers” as they run through photogenic birch and aspen woodlands during 8-dog, 6-dog and 4-dog competitions. In the evening we photograph the intricate large-scale ice sculptures created during the Fairbanks World Ice Art Championships. Just at dark and thereafter, the numerous carvings are lit with a variety of colored lights that radiate a photogenic internal glow. Then, as the night fully darkens, with a clear sky, we concentrate on photographing the aurora.

Sixty miles northeast of Fairbanks is the acclaimed Chena Hot Springs Resort—world renowned as one of the best places on Earth to see the northern lights. The resort is located directly under one of the world’s most active regions of magnetic fields producing aurora borealis. It is away from the light pollution of cities, and the skies over Chena are clear more often than those over Fairbanks. To see the lights all you have to do is walk out of your room—and they are there. There is no time wasted driving somewhere while the lights are happening overhead.

We have scheduled four nights at the resort to maximize our opportunities for aurora photography. Prior to our nighttime photography sessions, we spend a portion of our days photographing iconic Alaska winter landscapes, learning about sled dog racing, or simply relaxing at the resort.

This photo shoot is a rare combination of excellent conditions for viewing the Northern Lights, along with snowy northern landscapes with a perfect selection of photo subjects to line up on the horizon, plus exciting sled dog racing and a colorful and photogenic ice festival. Join us in March for a wonderful variety of photo opportunities that should be on every photographer’s bucket list!

Check out Eric Rock's trip report from our 2018 aurora borealis photo tour

Tour Itinerary

Day 1 (Mar 8)
Our group meets in the lobby of our Fairbanks, Alaska, hotel for an orientation session followed by dinner at a local restaurant. (D)

Day 2
We drive to Chena Hot Springs Resort, photographing wintry Alaskan

https://photosafaris.com/Photo-Tours/2020-Tours/Aurora-Borealis-Fairbanks-Alaska
landscapes and watching for moose and other wildlife along the scenic route. We have time to relax before dinner and then shoot late into the night if the aurora activity is good. At the resort, it is possible to just step out of your warm room to see the aurora—with no wasted drive time! (BLD)

Day 3
We have the option of getting some extra rest this morning in preparation for our late night of aurora photography. Bring your bathing suit if you want to enjoy a relaxing soak—Chena Hot Springs Resort is known for exceptional indoor and outdoor hot springs. This afternoon we photograph wintry landscapes and ice carvings at the local “ice museum” and have time to enjoy an apple martini—served in a martini glass made of ice!

Day 4
We sleep in this morning after our late night. In late morning a private tour of the lodge’s sled dog kennels is a unique opportunity to learn about the history of sled dog racing and to photograph a few of these hearty canines. In the afternoon, we photograph amid the snowy landscape and explore some of the resort’s diverse photo subjects, including rustic old cabins, classic old cars, a river and creeks—all great foregrounds for photographing the northern lights later tonight. (BLD)

Day 5
Today we experience one of the most popular activities at the resort—sled dog riding! Following an afternoon nap and dinner we head out to shoot the aurora late into the night. (BLD)

Day 6
Following breakfast we load our vans and head back to Fairbanks, photographing along the way. In the evening, ice sculpture photography at the World Ice Art Championships is our focus, with amazing large and intricate ice sculptures colorfully back-lit by floodlights. They glow like jewels! From the “ice festival,” with clear skies, we head out for another opportunity to photograph the northern lights. (BLD)

Day 7
During the day we photograph the Limited North American Championship Sled Dog Races. The races are a three-day series of sprint sled dog races and skijoring (skiers pulled by dogs). Later, if time allows, we photograph the World Ice Art Championships or, if conditions are right, have one final opportunity to photograph the northern lights. (BLD)
Photographing the aurora borealis had been a lifelong dream. This trip exceeded all my expectations in making this dream come true. The auroras were amazing as were the ice carvings and the dogs, too! I highly recommend this to anyone with a desire to photograph the aurora borealis, you won’t be disappointed.

—J. Graybill

The Aurora Borealis tour was a wonderful, exciting and very different kind of tour. To see the lights dance above us was something else; an out of this world experience! Though there were late nights and freezing cold temperatures, it was all worth it to see the swirls and waves of the northern lights! The people in the group were very nice and the tour leaders were excellent and helpful. I can’t wait to sign up for another tour.

—A. Gershin