

Northern Lights Cruises Light Up the Shoulder Season With Bucket-List Itineraries

By Erica Silverstein

Interest in aurora chasing has skyrocketed since the recent solar maximum brought northern lights viewing outside of the Aurora Zone. More travelers are willing to brave short days and cold climates for a chance to view the aurora borealis.

Cruise lines have turned the trend into a business opportunity, extending their northern Europe seasons with sailings targeting northern lights hot spots. Astro-tourists recognize that cruise ships are an ideal base for sky watching since ships can sail away from light pollution, and guests are just an elevator ride away from expansive sky views from their ship's top deck.

This new traveler obsession with night-sky tourism has reinvigorated the northern Europe shoulder season with itineraries that fulfill cruisers' bucket-list goals.

Both expedition and ocean-going cruise lines are hopping on the trend

Expedition cruise lines that explore the Arctic are well suited to offer northern lights cruises because they already have ships stationed within the prime aurora-viewing zones of Greenland, Iceland, and Norway. Aurora Expeditions and HX Expeditions are among lines with dedicated north lights itineraries. Luxury lines Silversea Cruises, Ponant and Quark Expeditions might not label their late-summer Greenland expedition itineraries as "northern lights cruises," but they're well times to coincide with celestial light shows.

It's not just small ships embracing the trend. Holland America Line has new north lights cruises in Norway in fall 2026. P&O Cruises offers fall and early spring northern lights cruises in Norway aboard its aptly named ship, Aurora.

"In recent years the auroras have been more visible further south, and this increased interest in travelers wanting to see them in a more authentic setting like Northern Europe," says Robert de Bruin, Holland America's Director of Deployment and Itinerary Planning. "Not only are we able to offer our guests an itinerary that is unique and special, but we're also able to deliver an experience that is at the top of their bucket list."

Close to home, Holland America, Norwegian Cruise Line, Princess and Royal Caribbean are among lines that offer late-season Alaska sailings and add-on land tours with the possibility of aurora sightings in island destinations – such as Fairbanks.

Smart itinerary planning is the key to optimal northern lights viewing

A successful northern lights cruise hinges around port selection and timing. Mainstream lines schedule their northern lights sailings to take advantage of ships already positioned in Northern Europe.

Coincidentally, the prime aurora-viewing seasons around the equinoxes fall at the beginning and end of the summer cruise season in this region and in Alaska, as well.

Cruise lines prioritize time in ports that have a reputation for frequent and reliable aurora displays, like Tromsø or Alta, Norway. Holland America schedules overnights in Alta for additional aurora opportunities.

Northern lights cruises are more than just sky-gazing

Onboard programming and operations support guests in their quest for the perfect viewing opportunity. Cruise lines will share aurora forecasts, issue wakeup calls on request when the lights are spotted (even in the middle of the night) and dim lighting on the upper decks to aid in viewing.

Some bring scientists and experts onboard to educate guests about the phenomenon. Cunard regularly hosts astronomer John Maclean, who lectures on the science and mythology surrounding the northern lights and spends evenings pointing out celestial features to fellow sky-watchers.

Itinerary planners also make sure daytime hours are filled with memorable experiences – even when it's dark. Excursions might include snowshoeing, kayaking, polar plunges, and cultural interaction with the Arctic's indigenous communities. Evening options beyond sky-viewing include night hikes and bonfires.

In this way, northern lights cruises are an entry point for cruise travelers to slow down and experience a destination in a new way.

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