TRIP THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

The world's most elusive light show, the aurora australis, is now just a flight away. Susan Elliott joins Chimu Adventures on its inaugural journey to see the Southern Lights from the air.



SCAN THIS CODE to be transported to the skies above the Southern Ocean. Or head online to our website and search 'aurora australis'.

01 A light show from the wings © Brad Phipps

A scenic flight at night? Sounds unlikely, even mysterious. But then again, the Southern Lights are a mystery to me. I'm seated with an airline blanket shrouding my head, pressed against the aircraft window to keep out every lux of light, a camera poised to view the aurora australis, the most elusive light show on the planet.

This is the first Australian flight to see the Southern Lights – our equivalent of aurora borealis (the Northern Lights), which attract thousands of tourists to Scandinavia.

But rather than sitting on a freezing rock near the North Pole, I'm in the business-class comfort of a Qantas Dreamliner chartered by Chimu Adventures, a Sydney travel company that specialises in Latin American adventures and polar cruises.

The pandemic put these itineraries on ice, and with his ships all port-bound, Chimu's co-founder, Chad Carey, came up with a new polar experience: showcasing the lesser-known aurora australis – by aircraft.

"Without the landmass that you have around the North Pole we knew we had to do this by air," says Carey. "We are going to be chasing the auroras across the Southern Ocean. When you are stuck on land, you have to hope they appear. We are going to hunt them down!"

Auroras are created when solar wind – the high-speed protons and electrons shedding from the sun's outer layers – hits the Earth's magnetic shield. It is only at the North and South Poles that those solar particles find gaps in the shield and collide, at high speed, with atoms in Earth's atmosphere. And what a reaction. The atoms glow like massive neon lights.

Most of the 240 passengers know this. They are a mix of photographers, astronomers, 'aurora hunters' and curious retirees seizing the unique opportunity to see a natural phenomenon that, until now, has largely been a private light show for disinterested penguins.

"We're going to zig-zag across the skies, this is definitely not a regular commercial flight," says Dr Nicholas Tothill. The renowned astrophysicist from Western Sydney University is on board to guide Qantas captain Lisa Norman toward the most active auroral activity.

"Seeing an aurora is seeing the Earth and the sun actually interact. We live inside the sun's magnetic field. We live inside the sun, in some ways. And when you see the aurora you can really understand that."

I've got chills – but that's the deliciously frosty glass of champagne in my hand as our Dreamliner flies through the night sky from Sydney to the Antarctic 'aurora zone'.

It's a 10-hour return flight with a full international meal service. I choose an entrée of seared tuna, then a beef fillet drizzled in sage brown butter.

I resume my blanketed window position, knowing that 9,000 metres below, the Southern Ocean is surging, and 100 kilometres above, my 'in-flight entertainment' is ready to perform.

Over the PA, captain Norman announces the aircraft will soon go into 'stealth mode'.

All of the aircraft's cabin and external navigation lights are turned off so passengers' eyes can adjust to the darkness for the best possible aurora views. It's a highly unusual procedure on a commercial flight, but we are reassured there is no other aircraft within 1,000 kilometres.

Three hours from Sydney and the ghostly shimmer of the first aurora appears as a delicate gossamer curtain strung from the stars. That's with the naked eye. Through my camera lens, the aurora bursts out of the darkness like a proud debutante in a gown of billowing green. The plane banks left then right so that all passengers can admire the vision. But this debutante is a temptress, vanishing into the ether, leaving us scanning the sky for another performer.

There's no rush. We spend three hours zig-zagging through the aurora zone with a passenger seat-swap so everyone has the chance to be near a window.

"Our eyes and brain absorb and process light instantly," says David Finlay, the guest astro-photographer on board. "The human eye isn't very good at picking up detail or colours when it's dark, but a camera can have the shutter open for an extended period and absorb the lights and colours."

Green hues are predominant with occasional hints of blue, and the 'cast' in this aerial light show appear in all shapes and sizes, from patches that look like clouds to rays that resemble pleated fabric and arcs curving across the sky.

Seven hours later the aircraft turns back for Sydney as one last glorious green aurora appears for a curtain call, like a crumpled sheet shimmying in space.

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