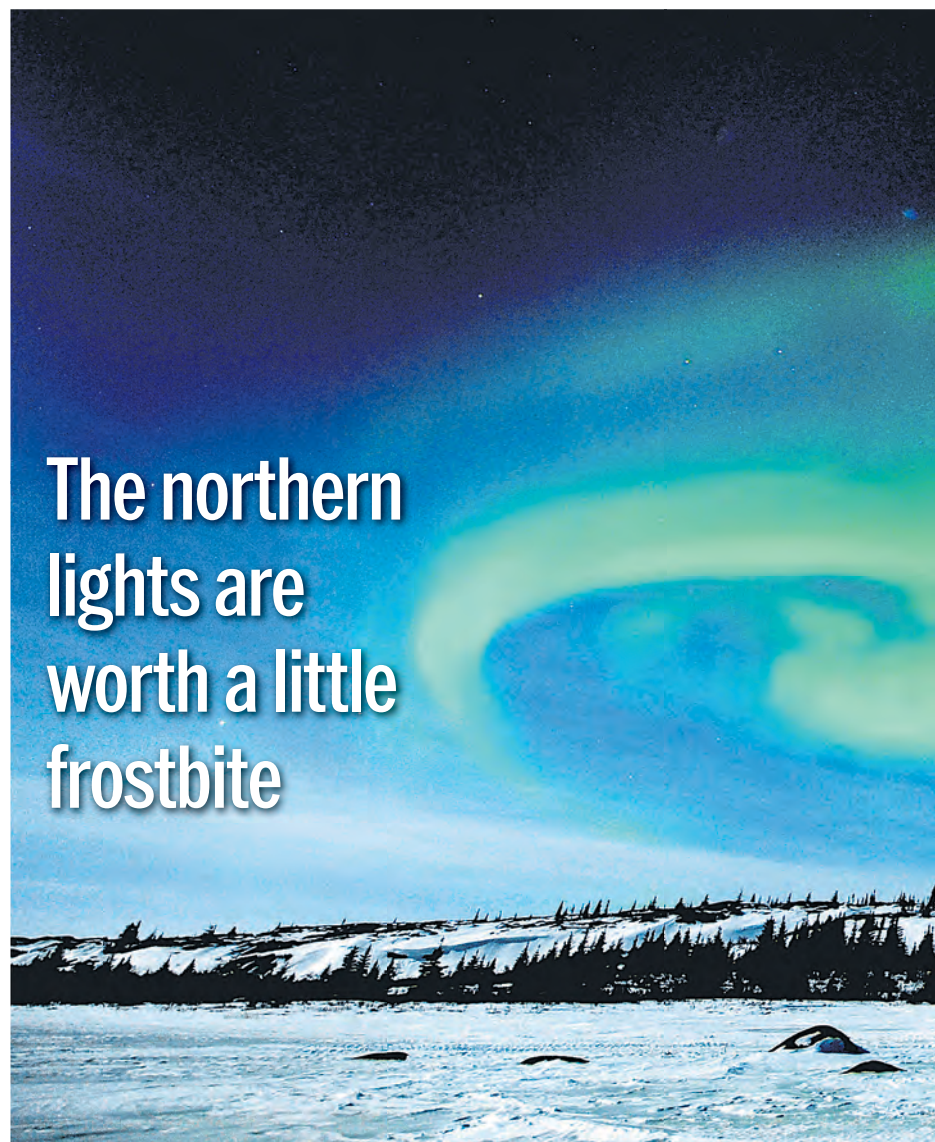


# the big chill



Snowshoeing near Hudson Bay; the rifle is in case of frisky bears.



## The northern lights are worth a little frostbite

BY DAVID HANDSCHUH  
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

It's 46 degrees below zero, Fahrenheit I think, but when the air is that cold you don't split hairs over Celsius or Fahrenheit. I've stored a glass of red wine on the tundra, under my camera and tripod, and it has the consistency of a slurpee after only five minutes.

A dozen fellow visitors to Churchill, Manitoba, have just climbed out of a "Tundra Buggy," an all-terrain vehicle driven by adventure travel company Frontiers North.

The silence is overwhelming, broken only by the creaking and cracking of ice. The darkness is everywhere but for the full moon and the twinkling of stars in the clear sky.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a small flash in the sky to my left — and it's not from a camera shutter being tripped. Another little blip of green light hits my peripheral vision and I turn to look. All of a sudden it's like someone's flipped a giant light switch. The green light grows and twists and moves and teases.

It looks like curtains fluttering in an open window. The shapes are amoebic and form letters like a green "V." The shimmering continues and the waves turn to question marks, squiggles of green flames, diagonals.

This is what I've been chasing for years, traveling above the Arctic Circle in Norway in the dead of winter with no success. Two trips to Alaska, in February

and March, with no sightings. To the Yukon in Canada, where frostbite was a challenge during the day and almost a given late at night.

But today in northern Manitoba, my mouth opens but no words come out and my brain struggles to form the words ... "northern lights."

To get to Churchill, a tiny town on Hudson Bay known as the "polar bear capital of the world," you fly from New York to Winnipeg, Manitoba, overnight there and then take a small plane another 600 miles. Plan B is a train trip on Via Rail, which takes 48 hours, if snow

doesn't block the route. We check into the Tundra Inn and it's clean and, most importantly, warm. If you're used to the Waldorf, stay home. If you want a memory-building adventure, then you're in the right place.

We rest during the day, grab a filling dinner, and around 10 p.m. we get picked up by our "taxi." Frontiers North's Tundra Buggy is the size of a small house, and sits on 6-foot-high tires. Climbing up into the monster truck and settling on a comfy, full-size couch is something of an out-of-body experience.

Off we go, down Kelsey Blvd., Churchill's main drag. There isn't one other vehicle on the road, but it's doubtful that any of the 900 residents would even look twice as we bounce down the snow-covered street.

We descend the embankment of the Churchill River at a 45-degree angle and

**TRAVEL**

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Visitors take the Tundra Buggy to a prime viewing spot to see the otherworldly northern lights.

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Keeping warm while waiting for the dog race.



PHOTOS BY DAVID HANDSCHUH/DAILY NEWS



The Hudson Bay Quest dogsled race gets under way; at left, dogs in their mobile kennel await their turn.



The next day, we tried our luck at mushing a team ourselves. Gerald Azure of Bluesky Expeditions has teams made up of six dogs. After a brief introduction to mushing commands, we set off on our run.

drive onto the ice. Driver John Gunter mans a tractor-trailer-size steering wheel, easing us over 5-foot-high icy speed bumps as we head away from the lights of town.

A few miles down river, we set the brakes, wait and watch. It's not long before the lights begin their mystical performance. Chances are good that the aurora borealis will come out to play on clear nights from January through April.

The Churchill Northern Studies Center says that auroral activity occurs more than 300 nights a year here. Location is everything, and Churchill is located directly beneath the auroral oval.

Auroras occur when charged particles from explosions on the sun stream through space at high speeds and collide

with gas molecules in our atmosphere, causing them to glow in dancing curtains of colors, according to Neil deGrasse Tyson at the Hayden Planetarium.

Meanwhile, our days were packed with outdoor adventure. Churchill is the start and finish line for the Hudson Bay Quest dogsled race, and we went out early on Saturday morning to cheer on the mushers as they departed on their 250-mile trek.

All of Churchill turned out, lining the shore as the huskies were put into their harnesses. Logs were tossed into warming fires and muktuk, the skin and blubber of a whale, was cooked over the open flame.

A word of advice about the dress code: I'm glad that we rented heavy boots and Canada Goose Snow Mantra parkas – the kind of gear that's not hanging in the average New Yorker's closet. It came in handy when we went snowshoeing with Mike Macri of Sea Tours North Ltd. Over frozen tundra, hills and rocks, we headed for the shore of Hudson Bay, Mike carrying a big gun over his shoulder in case any sleeping bear woke early.

It was hard to explain the sunburns we had when we got back from our midwinter adventure just south of the Arctic Circle, especially when the days are short and the nights are long. But we have great photographs and memories of viewing the northern lights and meeting the people of Churchill.