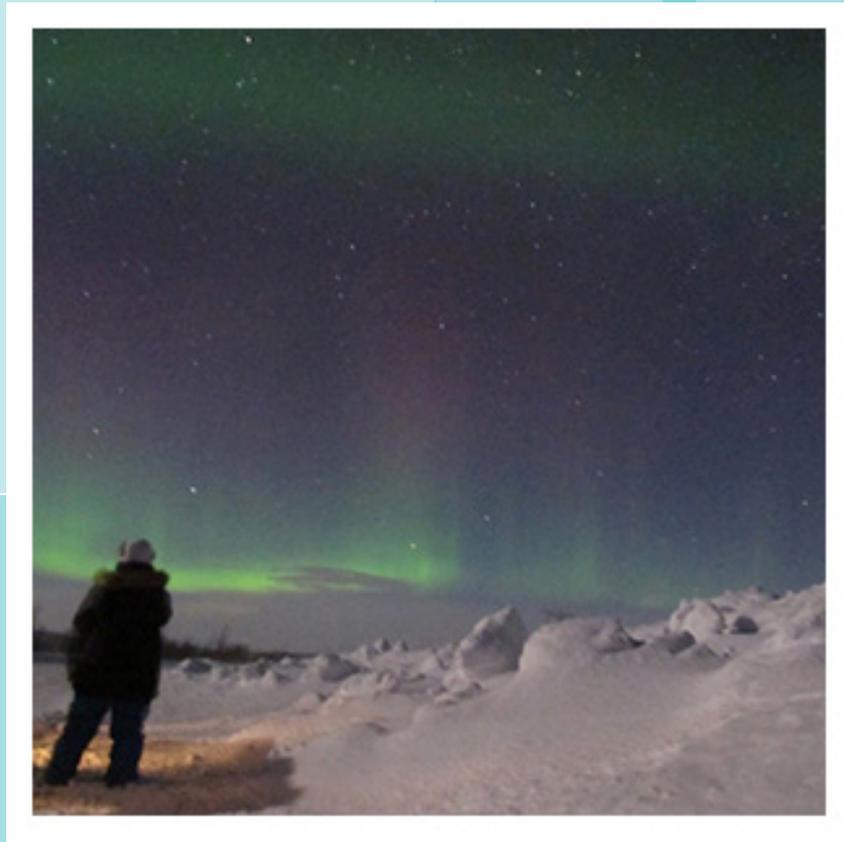


Northern Lights Tourism in Iceland, Norway and Finland

2014

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1 Introduction

This report is the result of fieldwork in Iceland, Northern Norway and Finnish Lapland, undertaken by tourism researchers from the three countries in 2014. One aim of the study was to establish comparative knowledge on Northern Lights tours. The research is part of the ‘Winter tourism’¹ project at UiT The Arctic University of Norway.

During the last decade Northern Lights tourism has boomed in the case study areas. Important destinations for Aurora tourism are: Reykjavik and Akureyri in Iceland, Tromsø and Alta in Norway, and Rovaniemi and the region around Muonio in Finland. A common feature of this type of tourism is the increased interest from international tourists, mainly from Europe, Northern America and Asia. Moreover, these tourists travel to both large scale and small scale destinations. In common are also the development of mass tourism in the bigger cities, in regards of the number of tour providers and number of tourists, and a more moderate development in the smaller cities. In spite of commonalities several factors also separate the tours and destinations. The Norwegian Northern Lights tours, for instance, tend to be more expensive and they often last longer. In Finland most of the tours are in combination with other outdoor activities and mass tourism is the most noticeable in Reykjavik. Thus, there the tours are the cheapest. Furthermore, in Iceland and Alta mostly local guides are employed, whereas in Finnish Lapland and Tromsø many workers are from other European countries.

The researchers participated in 17 tours in total. Consequently this report gives only a glimpse of various ways of guiding and how skills, knowledge, equipment, weather and so on affect Aurora Borealis performances in a toured setting. This report continues with a presentation of the Northern Lights tourism development and offers in each country. In the description of each country we also point to guiding practices that enhance and diminish the experiences with the tours. In the last section we discuss the Northern Lights tourism in the three countries, and reflect upon the importance of the guide, safety and infrastructure and some other aspects of the tours.

¹ Winter: New Turns in Arctic Winter Tourism. For more information see: http://uit.no/prosjekter/prosjekt?p_document_id=345272

2 Northern Lights Tourism in Iceland

Northern Lights tourism is a recent product on offer in Iceland. It can be said to have started slowly but steadily by demand from Japanese travellers in the first years of the 21st century. Northern Lights tours have also been part of the portfolio of tourist firms for some years but a distinctive break in the positionality of the Northern Lights as a tourist product can be identified in the years 2007 to 2009. At that time, Icelandair, one of two domestically owned airlines offering flights to and from Iceland and part of, the by far the largest tourist firms in the country, Icelandair Group, started to work systematically on the marketing of Northern Lights tours to Iceland from Britain. At that time, they were inspired by the success of Norwegian and Finnish firms offering Northern Lights tours to Northern Scandinavia. When the Icelandic economy crumbled due to financial meltdown in autumn 2008, Icelandair decided to focus their marketing efforts during the winter season on the Northern Lights and offered short city breaks with an added Northern Lights tour, first in Britain and Europe, then later in North America. This turned out to be decisive for the development of Northern Lights tourism in Iceland. Currently Northern Lights are by far the largest and most important winter product of Icelandair as of many other companies. According to Iceland Tourist Board's visitor survey for the winter season 2013-14 some 40 per cent of foreign guests paid for Northern Lights tours and around 15 per cent mentioned Northern Lights as one of the three most memorable experience during their trips, with only the Blue Lagoon having more mentionings (Iceland Tourist Board, 2014)².

During the last five years Northern Lights tourism has blossomed. At the same time the rapid increase has also created challenges that providers and authorities constantly need to cope with, not least in regard to infrastructure and accessibility to central spots where it is convenient to see the Northern Lights. A plethora of firms offer Northern Lights tours and a wide range of products are now available, ranging from highly exclusive tours for individuals or small groups to mass tourism products. Below, we focus on Northern Lights tourism in the capital area of Reykjavík and in the town of Akureyri, located in the North of Iceland. These are two central Northern Lights destinations but of course

² Icelandic Tourist Board. (2014). Erlendir ferðamenn á Íslandi - vetur 2013/2014 [Foreign tourists in Iceland - winter 2013/2014] Retrieved 10.11.14, 2014, from http://www.ferdamalastofa.is/static/research/files/2014-10-24_ferdamalastofa_erlendirferdamenn_maskinuskvyrsla_islenska-pdf

Northern Lights tours are provided in many other places around the island. This limitation of our study is first of all due to practical reasons.

2.1 The Development of Northern Lights Tourism in Reykjavik

The development of Northern Lights tourism in Reykjavik is synonymous to the general story of the country. The vast majority of tourists visiting Iceland come to Reykjavik and spends some time there, not least during the winter season. Many tour providers have recently started to offer Northern Lights tours and the variety in product offers is increasing. Most tours are operated daily and if one happens to experience no-show one usually are offered a free tour the following night.

2.1.1 Product Offers in Reykjavik, Winter Season 2014-2015

The product offers in Reykjavik is quite vast. The list below is not comprehensive since many companies offer occasional tours or do Northern Lights tour as part of another product from time to time. Private and customized tours are also available from numbers of firms. Furthermore, multiple day trips around different regions of the country with various degrees of Northern Lights experiences are offered from companies located in Reykjavik and are not included in this overview. Table one shows tours offering Northern Lights experience in one way or another. The vast majority of tourists buying Northern Lights tours take the bus tours, offered by three companies. These products are all very similar, operated in 30-60 seat buses with a driver and a guide. On some nights more than 20 buses leave the Reykjavik city centre for hunting the Northern Lights. Obviously these trips do not provide the same sense of solitude as the more private super jeep tours since often a number of buses park at the same spots in order to let people watch the sky and wait for the lights to appear. The season in Iceland usually starts 15 September and last until 15 of April. Most of the trips are done within approximately 60 minutes' drive from the city. Some tours, especially those that make use of glacier surroundings last from October to March.

The Aurora Experience row also includes tours with less emphasis on the Northern Lights or with Northern Lights in combination with other experiences. The packages include nature sightseeing and cave diving to name some examples. The prices range from ISK 5,800,- to 36,500,- (NOK 350,- to 2,200,- and €45,- to 270,-).

Table 1 Northern Lights tours in Reykjavik, winter 2014-15

	Type of product	No of comp.	No of prod.	Duration	Price adults (ISK):	Season starts:
Northern Lights Hunt	Super Jeeps	6	6	3-7 hours:4	14900-33000	15 September
	Bus	3	3	3-4hours:3	5800-6400	15 September
	Mini bus	2	2	3-4hours:2	7000-7500	15 September
	Boat	2	4	2-3hours:4	8500-11900	15 September
Aurora Experience	Horse theatre	1	1	5 hours:1	11900	15 September
	Snow mobile	1	1	9-10 hours	59500	October
	Culinary	3	1	5 hours	33500	15 September
	Spa and wellness	1	1	7 hours	14900	15 September
	Photo	1	1	4 hours	15000	October
	Packages	5	5	8-12 hours	19900-36500	15 September



2.2 The Development of Northern Lights Tourism in Akureyri

Winter tourism in Akureyri has been fast developing the last five years. Occasional tours have been provided by the main bus company in the region and private entrepreneurs providing super jeep tours. Tours focussing on the Northern Lights had not been available until 2009 when the company Saga Travel was established and started to offer Northern Lights hunts. The first season, 2009-10 approximately 80 tourists bought Northern Lights tours by the company while in 2012-13 the number had risen to approximately 6,000 tourists. One of the main reasons for this rapid growth was that Icelandair Group built a new hotel in Akureyri (2011-12) and offered Northern Lights package tours from Europe and North America. Saga Travel operated Northern Lights tours for these guests and is currently by far the largest provider of Northern Lights tours in the Akureyri region.

2.2.1 Product Offers in Akureyri, Winter Season 2014-2015

The product offer in Akureyri has increased since the initial start in 2009. In basic terms the most popular products are similar to those on offer in the capital area of Reykjavík. However, there is marked differences in size. There are smaller groups of tourists and companies take much pride in offering personal service sometimes splitting large groups up in smaller ones in order to preserve the privacy of the tours as well as securing guides with distinct local knowledge. The prices range from ISK 7,700,- to 39,500,- (NOK 470,- to 2,400,- and €60,- to 290,-).

Table 2 Northern Lights tours in Akureyri, winter 2014-15

	Type of product	No of comp.	No of prod.	Duration	Price adults (ISK):	Season starts:
Northern Lights Hunt	Super Jeeps	4	2	2,5-3 hours	7700-12300	15 September
	Mini bus	1	1	2,5-3 hours	9900	28 August
Aurora Experience	Snow mobile	1	1	3 hours	19900	
	Photo	1	1	Info missing	Info missing	
	Packages	1	2	5 hours 11 hours	14900 39500	28 August 28 August

2.3 Northern Lights Tours in Reykjavik and Akureyri

The research team participated in one tour in Reykjavík and two in Akureyri in February 2014. Both were bus tours like the ones the majority of tourists choose in their attempt to hunt the Northern Lights. In Reykjavík all of us (five researchers) went on the same bus in a tour that included eight 50-60 seat buses. In Akureyri the whole group went on a mini-bus tour two nights in a row with a smaller group of tourists (between eight and 15 people).

We also interviewed tour providers and guides. The role of the guide in Northern Lights tours is crucial and this was stressed by our interviewees and confirmed through our experiences. Below we list some positive and negative experiences with the guides and the tours but.

- ☺ Language and communicative skills of guides were usually very good.
- ☺ Guides and drivers assisted tourist with their cameras and photo shooting.
- ☺ Guides were honest in terms of giving information about chances of spotting the Northern Lights.
- ☺ Guides were skilled in handling no-shows through storytelling and by giving the tour a personal twist and by choosing interesting sites for photo shooting and storytelling.

- ⊖ Lack of infrastructure such as toilets.
- ⊖ Security issues were not dealt with in very comprehensive ways.



3 Northern Lights Tourism in Norway

Inspired by the winter tourism success in Finnish Lapland, the development of Northern Lights or Aurora Borealis tourism started in earnest in Troms and Finnmark in the early years of the twenty-first century. Back then, Northern Lights tourism was simply one of many products to be developed for individual tourists, mainly in combination with dog sledging tours and evening snow mobile safaris. However, its growth in the last decade has been so rapid that it is now the core winter product in this region (in particular in Tromsø). Moreover, not only has the number of providers and products increased, but so too has the range of product offerings. Today the majority of Northern Lights tourists take individual or group tours by coach or minibus, whilst the cruise-led Northern Lights market has also expanded considerably.

In this section we focus on the offers in Tromsø (county of Troms) and Alta (county of Finnmark). This does not mean that Northern Lights products are not offered elsewhere in Northern Norway, but these are the main land based destinations. We thus do not include Hurtigrutens 'Hunting the light' cruises which started in the winter season 2004-5.

3.1 The Development of Northern Lights Tourism in Tromsø

In 2004-5 Tromsø's individual tourists, for the first time, were offered one Northern Lights excursion every evening of the week. In the winter season 2013-14 tourists could choose from some 65 products. From 2008-9 Northern Lights (mini)bus trips and Northern Lights photography tours began to be offered.

3.1.1 Product Offers in Tromsø, Winter Season 2013-2014

In the marketing of Northern Lights tours, the local DMO, Visit Tromsø, separates between Northern Lights hunts and Aurora Experiences (table three). The main aspect of the former type is the possibility to travel long distances in search of the lights. The latter type is more 'place specific' and often involves other activities such as snow mobiling, dog sledging and horseback riding. The Northern Lights hunts (some 35 products) slightly outnumber the Aurora Experiences (some 30 products). Regardless of type of tour, most of them are offered on a daily basis from September, October or November till April. Depending on duration of the tour and what is included, the prices varies from NOK 550,- to 4,790,- (ISK 11,840,- to 103,125,- and €70,- to 605,-)

Table 3 Northern Lights tours in Tromsø, winter 2013-14

	Type of product	No of comp.	No of prod.	Duration	Price adults (NOK) and number of tours	Season starts and number of tours:
Northern Lights hunts	Coach	2	2	5-7 hours: 1	950: 1	Nov
	Minibus	17	23	4-6 hours: 6 6-10 hours: 17	550: 1 600-1000: 6 1100-1350: 13 Groups: 3	Sep: 16 Oct: 4 Nov: 1 Dec: 1
	Photo	5	5	4-6 hours: 1 6-12 hours: 4	1000-1500: 3 1750-1900: 2	Sep: 2 Oct: 3
	Boat	4	5	2-3 hours: 4 6 hours: 1	900-1000: 2 1250: 2 2200: 1	Oct: 2 Nov: 1 Dec: 1
Aurora experiences	Horseback	1	1	4,5 hours	1350	Oct
	Snowmobile	3	3	7 hours: 2 24 hours: 1	1600-1800: 2 4790: 1	Oct: 2 Nov: 1
	Dog sledding	6	8	4 hours: 2 6-7 hours: 3 8 hours: 1 19-20 hours: 2	1200-1500: 3 1600-2000: 2 3400-3700: 2	Oct: 1 Nov: 5 Dec: 2
	Overnight	9	9	14-17 hours: 3 19-20 hours: 2 21-28 hours: 3	990: 1 1950-2000: 3 2490-2980: 4 3680: 1	Sep: 1 Oct: 5 Nov: 3
	Reindeer sledding	2	2	4 – 7 hours: 2	1400-1595: 2	Nov: 2
	Northern Lights visits	4	4	4 hours: 2 5-7 hours: 2	590: 1 890: 1 1000-1180: 2	Sep: 1 Oct: 2 Nov: 1
	Packages	2	3	24 hours: 1 72 hours: 1 96 hours: 1	3385-3500: 1 4310: 1	Oct: 1 Nov: 1

3.2 The Development of Northern Lights Tourism in Alta

In the winter 2004-5 individual tourists in Alta were offered three Northern Lights products two, three or five times a week. Over the next ten years the number of products and providers has barely changed, yet the frequency of the tours has increased so that they are now offered on a daily basis during the season. From 2008-09 Northern Lights (mini)bus trips were offered.

3.2.1 Product Offers in Alta, Winter Season 2013-2014

In the winter season 2013-14 five tour providers offered seven Northern Lights tours to individual tourists, on wheels, snowmobiles and with dogs (table four). One of the tours was a one-time offer focusing on photography. Moreover, another tour was a combination of dog sledding and Northern Lights hunt on the road. Additionally, one of the companies also sold Northern Lights hunts to cruise tourists (12 cruise ships called at the port in Alta this season). The Northern Lights tours by motor vehicle started in September and

October, whereas those using dogs and snowmobile started in December. The prices ranged from NOK 1,200,- to 4,490,- (ISK 25,837,- to 96,665,- and €150,- to 565,-).

Table 4 Northern Lights tours in Alta, winter 2013-14

	Type of product	Duration	Price adults (NOK)	Season starts
Northern Lights hunts	(Mini)bus	4,5-6 hours	1500	September
	Photo	3 evenings	4490	November
	(Mini)bus	4-5 hours	1200	October
Aurora Experience	Snowmobile	3 hours	1250	December
	Dog sledging and (mini)bus	5,5 hours	2750	December
	Dog sledging Overnight stay	2,5 hours	1250 1490	December

3.3 Northern Lights Tours in Tromsø and Alta

In Tromsø we participated in eight tours during three evenings of March 2014. Each researcher did three tours. We mostly operated as three teams of researchers (Norwegian/UK team, Finnish team and Icelandic team). All the tours were labelled Northern Lights hunts by Visit Tromsø. The tours differed in price, duration and destination; some stopped along the road and some used camps. In Alta we participated in three tours on one stormy evening in March 2014. Again we operated as three teams of researchers. Here two of the tours were Northern Lights hunts by van/minibus available for individual tourists and one was tailor made for cruise ship passengers. When evaluating these tours we focused on factors that contributed to positive and negative experiences.

The most important factor in Northern Lights tours in Tromsø and Alta was the skilled tour guide who was able to find a good spot for gazing at the sky and taking photos of the lights. The guide's skills were also related to the relevance of the stories told en route/at camp and his/her ability to keep the tourists safe. Below we list some positive and negative experiences with the guides and the tours:

- ☺ Nine tours included food (snack, cake) and beverages (hot drinks). On one of the tours, the guide even served a hot meal.
- ☺ Six tours included toilet stops.
- ☺ Four guides used microphone while guiding to the location.
- ☺ Four guides loaned tourists tripods.
- ☺ Four guides shared Northern Lights photos with the tourists.



- ☺ Three guides used a film to communicate the Northern Lights.
- ☺ Three tours included thermal clothing.
- ☺ Three tours focused on security; safety belt while driving and reflexive west outdoors.

When the guides were skilled in entertaining the tourists the travel distance was not that relevant. On one bus trip to the Finnish side of the border, for instance, the two guides alternated in guiding and told relevant stories about Northern Lights myths and science, and gave insightful information about local culture, history and ways of living. The guiding also was well scripted and structured. On several tours the guides were very informative, friendly and able to create a nice atmosphere. However, the less time spent driving was positive to the experience. Thus a three hour boating trip outside Tromsø was an excellent way of experiencing the lights; en route it was possible for the guests to move around and bond with each other. On site it was easy to get inside to warm up. Other positive experiences were related to taking photos of the lights and engaging in the Aurora hunt:

- ☺ On several tours the guides were good storytellers.
- ☺ On several tours the guide pointed to the necessity of being patient and that no-shows were a possibility.
- ☺ On several tours the guide selected scenic locations, excellent for taking photos of and gazing at the Northern Lights.

- ☺ On a few tours the Aurora forecast was used to engage the tourists in the hunt.
- ☺ On a few tours the guides were very passionate about the Lights, devoted to providing knowledge about Aurora Borealis and never giving up hunting the Lights.

- ☺ A few of the tours started indoors where the guides talked about Northern Lights and prepared the tourists for the chase, involving them in the decision where to go.
- ☺ On some tours the guides went outside the bus to report activity to the tourists.
- ☺ On one tour the bus driver took an interest in the tourists; helping them with camera settings on site.
- ☺ On one tour the guide helped each tourist with camera settings in the bus.
- ☺ On one tour camera instructions were given by a professional photographer.

In four of the eleven tours in Tromsø and Alta the sky was too clouded to spot the lights.

The main challenge with Northern Lights tours is thus the guide's handling of no-shows:

- ☺ On one tour the guide strongly warned the tourists about the possibilities for no-shows, and eventually cancelled the tour due to a storm.
- ☺ On one tour the guide gathered the group around the open fire in the *lavvo* (Sami tent) to converse with them about the Northern Lights and their trips, and showed a funny video about Norwegian culture. The guide also took the tourists on walks to the nearby beach and up a hill. She ended the trip a bit earlier than announced.
- ☺ On one tour, while waiting for the Lights, the guide encouraged the tourists to 'play' with their cameras, teaching them to set it right and to shoot different lights.
- ☹ On one tour the guide made it into an endless drive and was not able to engage the tourists; except for a few toilet stops the tourists never left the van. This affected the atmosphere in the van negatively.
- ☹ On one tour the guide was not able to make the tourists feel safe in the bad weather and made them decide what to do.

We also had some other challenging experiences with the tours and guides. Below you find a list of different aspects that did not enhance the experience:

- ☹ On some tours the guides did not focus on security.
- ☹ On some of the tours the guide did not communicate where they were going; the tourists felt a bit lost in the dark.
- ☹ On a few tours the guide was not proficient in photography and could not give advice on shooting the Lights.
- ☹ On one tour the guide talked about other nights with more intense Northern Lights.
- ☹ On one tour too many tourists were on the same spot; it felt crowded and noisy.
- ☹ On one tour the guide smoked while entertaining tourists.
- ☹ On one tour the guide did not connect with tourists on site.
- ☹ On one tour it was hardly any guiding at all; the minimal guiding mostly revolved around irrelevant information.

- ⊖ On one tour the guide did not advise the tourists against wearing thermal cloths while in the vehicle.

In sum, most of the tours we took in Tromsø and Alta were well performed by skilled guides. However, there was still room for some improvements. While driving, for instance, it was often difficult to hear the guide when s/he did not use a microphone. It was also difficult to take photos of the Northern Lights without a tripod. Moreover, some of the guides needed more training in how to entertain and engage with the tourists, and how to handle no-shows. Some also disregarded safety issues, in particular when stopping by the road. A successful tour thus involved relevant scripting of the guiding and the tour, a good plan B in case of no-shows, access to toilets, catering, proficiency in various camera settings, and access to tripods, and an attentive, friendly guide that was able to create an including and safe atmosphere.

4 Northern Lights Tourism in Finland

Northern Lights tourism does not have an independent role in Finnish Lapland's tourism marketing, as it has in Northern Norway and Iceland. In Lapland's tourism strategy (2011-14) Northern Lights are not mentioned at all, the main emphasis is on activity products and productization of Santa Claus. However, Northern Lights trips are arranged in all destinations in Finnish Lapland. For instance, glass igloo accommodation is offered in Levi and in Kakslauttanen, Inari, in order to give the possibility to see the Northern Lights throughout the night. One interesting curiosity was in autumn 2014 when a tourist company searched for a Northern Lights guard who were to alarm the clients if the Lights appeared. In 2013, in Ylläs resort, in the northwest of Lapland, an official decision was made to turn off the street lights in the best Northern Lights period so that the tourists could better see the Lights.

Aurora Alarm service to mobile phone has been offered in Muonio for some time for 20€ and in Rovaniemi it is a new product for the winter 2014-15. In Rovaniemi the service is called Aurora Alert Realtime. Anyone can buy it for 15€ for the maximum use of 14 days. The alert is delivered by SMS and email. Similar service is also used in other destinations in Finnish Lapland. Thus, the conditions for seeing Northern Lights without participating on a specific trip have been improved all around Lapland.

At large, in Finnish Lapland Northern Lights tours are often combined with different kinds of accommodation and activities. The Northern Lights tours are offered, however, in all destinations. Often the trips are made by snowshoes, snow mobiles or in husky safaris. Also bus and car tours specifically for Northern Lights exist. What is also typical to Finnish products are that they have a base camp with fireplace and are not performed along the road side.

4.1 The Development of Northern Lights Tourism in Rovaniemi

There has been some demand for Northern Lights tours for decades in Rovaniemi. However, the number of products has increasing the last four years and still is. In the beginning, the night safaris also called Northern Lights safaris were arranged by snow mobiles and later also as reindeer and husky safaris. Bus trips have been arranged for about ten years.

One speciality in Rovaniemi has been Moi Moi bus operated by Tumlare Corporation. It offers Japanese guided Northern Lights tours only. The bus departs every evening from the beginning of December to the end of March.

4.1.1 Product Offers in Rovaniemi, Winter Season 2014-15

In Rovaniemi all safari companies and many other tourism providers offer Northern Lights tours. In many cases the Northern Lights are a reason to offer evening products. Table five may lack some products as the selection is very varied and wide, but it gives a picture of the main products and the price levels. The column “Other” is added since many of the products includes some other programme than looking for the Northern Lights. The Rovaniemi figures are from the season 2014-15 but the product offers, or even the prices, have not changed from the previous year. The prices ranges from €57,- to 199,- (NOK 500,- to 1,750,- and ISK 10,600,- to 37,000,-) .

Table 5 Northern Lights tours in Rovaniemi, winter 2014-15

Type of product	No of comp.	No of prod.	Duration	Price adults (€) and number of tours	Season starts and number of tours	Other
Bus/Minibus	2	2	4-5 hours	79: 1 85:1	Aug: 1 Dec: 1	Base camp; The other one with only Japanese guidance
Car	2	2	3-4 hours	57: 1 99: 1	Dec: 1	The other one includes a visit to a reindeer farm
Car + snow shoes	1	1	3	73	Oct:1	Includes picnic dinner
Snowmobile	4	4	3(-4) hours	100-124	Dec: 4	
Car /farm visit	1	1	3 hours	95	Sep: 1	Includes farm visit
Car/visit to the Snow Hotel	1	1		79	Dec: 1	Includes three-course dinner
Floating on a lake	1	1	4 hours	125	Dec: 1	Floating and floating suits, sauna, hot drinks
Photo	1	1	3-4 hours	79	Sep: 1	
Reindeer	1	1	3 hours	140	Nov: 1	
Package	1	1	Overnight	199	Aug: 1	

4.2 The Development of Northern Lights Tourism in Muonio

Muonio is a very small place and a small destination. However, it has two big tourism enterprises, Lapland Safaris and Harriniva. Tourism is based on wilderness areas and activities such as snow mobile safaris and husky safaris but also cross-country skiing, car

testing and hiking. Tourists come mainly from abroad, especially from Central and Southern Europe. In Harriniva, the number of Northern Lights related products has been increasing all the time. Northern Lights have been added to all types of tours and Northern Lights are a reason for evening programs. Harriniva has also expanded with a new hotel deeper in the wilderness where they concentrate specifically on Northern Lights.

4.2.1 Product Offers in Muonio, Winter Season 2013-2014

The product offer in the Muonio area consists of one company's offers only (table six). It has four hotels in the area and a wide selection of Northern Lights related products. There are also other product providers and safari companies operating in the Muonio area, but the biggest of them do not offer Northern Lights products and the smaller ones are mainly subcontractors to the bigger companies or have tailored products for very small groups. The prices range from €60,- to 845,- (NOK 530,- to 7,450,- and ISK 11,150,- to 157,000,-).

Table 6 Northern Lights tours in Muonio, winter 2013-2014

Type of product	No of comp.	No of prod.	Duration	Price adults (€)	Season starts and number of tours
Package	1	5	3 days – 1 week	695-845	Nov: 2 Jan: 3
Reindeer	1	1	2 hours	110	Nov: 1
Husky	1	1	2,5 hours	145	Nov: 1
Snow shoes	1	2	3 hours	60-65	Nov: 1, Dec: 1
Minibus	1	1	4 hours	90	Dec: 1
Snow mobile	1	1	2 hours	100-124	Nov: 1

4.3 Northern Lights Tours in Rovaniemi and Muonio

In Rovaniemi and in Muonio we participated in four tours during two evenings in March 2014. Each researcher did two tours. We had one team consisting of Icelandic and Finnish researchers and another team with Norwegian and Finnish researchers. In Muonio one of the tours was a snow shoe trip and the other was a snow mobile trip. In Rovaniemi one of the trips was made by van and the other one with bus and snow shoes. Weather was all the time quite cloudy, and no Northern Lights were seen during the trips here. However, the experience varied a lot depending on the guide's performance and the vehicles used.

The skills of the guides were especially important since the Northern Lights were not seen at all during these four trips. Below we list some positive and negative experiences with the guides and the tours:

- ☺ None of the tours took place along the roadside with dangerous traffic.
- ☺ Three of the trips had a base camp with open fire and some food and drinks.
- ☺ Three of the organizers provided overalls.
- ☺ On one tour the guide had very good knowledge about northern nature and Northern Lights and he was very skilled in sharing his knowledge and creating inspiring atmosphere even without Northern Lights.

- ☺ In the lack of Northern Lights one guide interestingly used the stories of New Year tins and let the participants tried melting a tin on an open fire. After that the shape of the tins were used in foretelling.
- ☺ On one trip, Northern Lights related myths and stories were used.
- ☺ One guide showed the Northern Lights forecast on the tablet.

- ☹ Some guides were not talking about Northern Lights. Instead they were chatting about this and that.
- ☹ In some cases the guide was not interacting with the tourists.

Experiences in Finland differed from the other two countries as two of the trips were arranged by snow shoes and one by snow mobiles. Also the fourth one included walking on a hill. Experiences related to these activities were both positive and negative:

- ☺ Being in a forest by snow shoeing kept the participants warm and gave a new experience and some active doing.
- ☺ Walking outside on a silent hill was an experience in itself.
- ☺ For some driving snow mobiles was an important experience which compensated for the absence of Northern Lights.
- ☺ Spending time outside and performing some activity was a positive experience.



- ⊗ On the walk the slope was slippery and made the activity difficult and even dangerous.
- ⊗ Snow shoeing needs careful instructions and in one case the guide was not always attentive; some participants had troubles in deep snow.
- ⊗ Snow mobiles were so noisy that the nature experience suffered.
- ⊗ Snow mobiling needed so much skills and force that it took attention from nature experience and also the speed was too fast sometimes.

The tours in Finland were often shorter than in the other two countries as less time was needed for bus transfers to dark areas, but it was also due to the small chances of seeing Northern Lights in the selected cloudy nights.

- ⊗ Shortness of the snow shoe trips was a disappointment for some.

5 Northern Lights Tourism in Iceland, Norway and Finland

Northern Lights tourism is a relatively recent phenomenon as an independent product in all the three countries. Above we have presented our experiences and our views on the pros and cons of guide performances and the set-up of different tours. It is important to note that these points only relate to the tours we participated in and that this report is primarily meant to give insight into the workings of Northern Lights tourism.

Furthermore, some of what we judge as weakness of tours may in some cases be linked to the type of product and the philosophies of each company in question, and even the guides' view on their role. This includes, for instance, the use of technology such as showing Northern Lights forecast on a tablet at the start of the tour. While in some cases guides like to use such forecasts, in others they find it more disturbing. However, issues concerning safety and infrastructure are more universal in the development of winter tourism in the Arctic. The strengths and weaknesses identified above thus give us platform to raise discussions on different things in regard to Northern Lights tourism in the three countries. In what follows we will mention critical issues of concern, both in the sense of challenges and opportunities.

5.1 *Guides*

The Northern Lights tours are extremely volatile products as they depend on the fluctuating rhythms of the sun and weather. Moreover, this product has to be “served” outside and in darkness, in an environment that is unfamiliar to most international tourists. The flickering nature of the product puts pressure on the guide who has to mediate the encounter between the tourists and the Northern Lights. From our interviews with tour providers and guides it was made clear that being a Northern Lights tour guide was not a profession for everybody. The fact that the guide never knows if the group will see the Northern Lights makes these tours challenging. The guide must every night be prepared for no-shows and has to deal with groups of tourists with different expectations, skills and knowledge, not only about the Northern Lights, but also about spending time outdoors in the winter.

This demands flexibility on behalf of the guide and a readiness to put plan B into action on short notice. In doing this language and communicative skills are crucial, so is also creativity in keeping the tourists happy and satisfied. This could be achieved by engaging

and helping the tourist in playing with/setting cameras, visiting a local site of curiosity and storytelling, both effective ways to entertain the group within the confinement of a bus or other types of vehicle. Moreover, in the vehicle (also the smaller once) it is important that the guide use a microphone to ensure that all tourists can properly listen to him/her. On the camp site sitting around a bon fire and stimulate group conversations through activities such as the New Year tin or taking the tourists on a joint walk are other examples of successful guiding. With larger groups this is perhaps more difficult, in particular when the guide is alone. The bottom line is that the Northern Lights experience is about connections; connections between tourists and a flickering natural phenomenon and between the people participating in the tour; the guide, the driver and the tourists. Issues of sharing, communicating and co-producing seem to be highly significant in producing a positive experience even on tours with no-shows.

The most successful tours that we participated in, regardless of country, were only partly related to seeing the Northern Lights. The guide's skills and knowledge were also very important. A guide's competence is in most cases not given, but the result of training in storytelling and how to be sociable with new people. When hiring inexperienced guides the company thus needs to provide proper training in how it want the tour to be scripted (what to communicate to the tourists during a tour, how to help them with cameras, how to use computer technology, how to deal with no shows and so on) and it needs to make sure that the guide knows how to communicate with tourists from various cultures with different language backgrounds, with annoying tourists, and so on. These kinds of measures could also include the drivers on coach tours as they are potential assets for the guide on the camp site. By doing this the company is proactive in reducing negative reviews on social media, such as TripAdvisor.

5.2 Safety and Infrastructure

The tours had different emphasis on safety measures. Given the fact that many of the tours take place close to or on the side of a road, sometimes even a highway, some sort of reflectors should be mandatory while outdoors. Some tourists get so captured by gazing at the sky that they forget about traffic precautions and wander around without thinking. Many tourists are also unfamiliar with being outside in the dark and have little knowledge about walking on uneven and slippery surfaces such as snow, ice and lava fields. The guide thus needs to advice the tourists on such issues.

Infrastructure such as parking space is crucial when it comes to the road based tours. This is not something that individual companies are able to change by themselves but need to work on together with authorities.

5.3 Other Aspects

For a majority of tourists, some basic and simple needs are important. They tend to be content if they are entertained, warm, fed and given the opportunity to use restrooms. When entertaining the tourists, for instance, the companies need a strategy for the use of digital technology (Northern Lights apps and forecasts and so on) during the tour. They also need a strategy on how to shoot the Lights; most tourists, for instance would welcome a photo of themselves in front of the Lights and access to tripods so that they are able to take better photos themselves. Tripods are very cheap and an easy way to help the tourists in photographing. The companies also need to consider how to communicate Aurora Borealis in more ways than through the guides' talks. For instance, again it is possible to use short films to explain science and myths. This will give the tour pedagogical variation as well as kill some time while driving in darkness and silence in a bus. Moreover, it is possible to play appropriate music while driving to put the tourists in contemplative moods. Again, some of this is probably easier to do with smaller groups than larger and more diverse crowd.

In Iceland some of the companies offer a free tour if there are no-shows. This is a practice which might attract more tourists, but which is not economically sustainable for the companies in the long run, especially if climatic changes results in more precipitation and clouds. On our trips in February and March, for instance, we experienced a very mild, humid weather (approx. 1-5° C) in all three countries. This lessened our chances for seeing the Lights. If such weather conditions become the norm in the dark season, it might be more difficult to spot the Northern Lights and instead of offering a free tour, again the companies could use Northern Lights films to give the tourists a sense of the Lights in their absence.

Tourists were sometimes offered thermal clothing to ensure that they were warm while staying outside. This is an investment that requires storing facilities and time for changing cloths. On cold evenings such outfit is a God sent. However, sitting in the vehicle for hours dressed for the outside is not advisable.

Giving tourists a hot beverage and a small snack is a cheap way of ensuring that they are looked after. The preparations, however, take the guides focus away from interacting with the tourists. The following serving, on the other hand, is an efficient way of connecting with them and demonstrates a caring guide and company. To be able to offer a local or national speciality is a trigger for conversation and usually a good conversation or dialogue is worth a lot when it comes to the tourist experience. A shared meal, even a simple one, is also a way of facilitating bonding among the tourists. However this also places high demands on the guide and his or her effort in terms of emotional and hostessing work.

Access to restrooms was offered on most tours in Norway and Finland, but mostly lacking in Iceland. Most international tourists are not used to doing it al fresco, in particular not when it is dark and cold. It is thus a courtesy to offer such facilities.

Finally, many of the guides and companies were quite confident that the Northern Lights trips will be popular in coming years. They also expected that the interest in Northern Lights would rub off to other celestial and night experiences such as star gazing. A broader focus on astronomy could therefore enhance Northern Lights tourism.



Attachments³

Table 7 Price, duration, location and type of transport in Iceland, Norway and Finland, winter 2013-14

Destination		Price	Duration	Location	Type of transportation
Iceland	Reykjavik	ISK 5600 (NOK 340) (€42)	3-4 hours	Road	Bus
	Akureyri	ISK 9900 (NOK 600) (€73)	2-3 hours	Road and by sea	Mini bus
Norway	Tromsø	NOK 550-1400 (€68-171) (ISK 11605-29510)	3-9 hours	Road: 5 Camp: 2 Sea: 1	Coach: 3 Minibus: 3 Van: 1 Boat: 1
	Alta	NOK 1200-1500 (€147-184) (ISK 25325-31655)	4-6 hours	Camp: 1 Camp/road: 2	Coach: 1 Minibus: 1 Van: 1
Finland	Rovaniemi	€57-73 (ISK 10560-13520) (NOK 500-650)	3-5,5 hours	Camp: 2	Bus + snowshoes: 1 Van: 1
	Muonio	€60-100 (ISK 11115-18520) (NOK 530-880)	2 hours	Forest: 2	Snow mobile: 1 Snow shoes: 1

Table 8 Materialities of the tours in Iceland, Norway and Finland, winter 2013-14

Destination		Microphone	Catering	Guide taking photos	Guide sharing photos	Access to tripod	Thermal clothing	Access to toilet	Show film	Reflexive vest/band for tourists
Iceland	Reykjavik (1 tour)	1	0	1	NA	0	0	0	0	1
	Akureyri (2 tours)	1	2	1	NA	NA	0	0	0	0
Norway	Tromsø (8 tours)	4	7	4	3	4	3	6	3	3
	Alta ⁴ (3 tours)	1	2	1	1	1	0	3	2	0
Finland	Rovaniemi (2 tours)	only needed in 1 tour	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	not needed
	Muonio (2 tours)	not needed	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	not needed

³ Table 7 and 8 summarize the tours we took in the three countries and are based on our experiences on specific evenings.

⁴ Because of the storm this evening one of the tours was cancelled. This affects materialities studied.

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