Through The Lens

A guide to digital photography for computer enthusiasts.
After the click of your camera, you're only half done!

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Shooting the Northern Lights

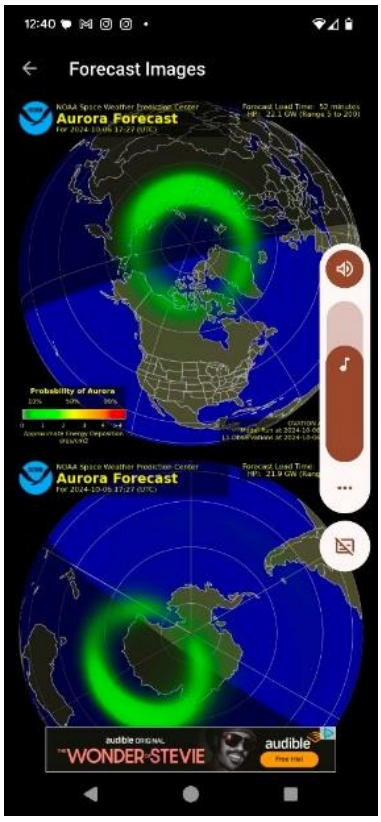
by Lynda Buske

While not an everyday event, the aurora borealis (northern lights) do appear every now and then in the Ottawa area, typically in late summer or fall/winter season. But it certainly can vary from year to year. This article contains a few tips based on my rather limited experience of how to shoot this wonderful phenomenon if you get a chance.

So how do you know when the northern lights are going to appear? Well, sometimes you will hear it on the news or from photography groups via social media but there are free apps that you can download onto your phone to see what chance there is for seeing the northern lights in your area. For example, I use one called **My Aurora Forecast & Alerts** and it can be downloaded from either the Google Play store or the Apple store:
https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.jrustonapps.myauroraforecast&hl=en_CA

https://apps.apple.com/us/app/my-aurora-forecast-alerts/id1073082439

Below is a screenshot from the app:



Or you can check out websites such as the one below:
https://www.swpc.noaa.gov/products/aurora-30-minute-forecast

You may wish to use the app in conjunction with a comprehensive weather app since the appearance of the northern lights doesn't guarantee good photo ops if there are clouds obliterating your view.

To set up your shot, leave the city limits and find a place with a dark star-filled sky. I would suggest setting up at least 15-20 minutes past the city limits in a lowly populated area. [Light pollution filters are available which may help].

To include a lot of sky, use a wide-angle lens or set your zoom lens to its shortest focal length. If possible, include interesting foreground and background such as trees, mountains or a shoreline to add interest just as you would with a sunrise/sunset photo. Make sure these objects of interest are not moving since you will probably be using a long exposure to shoot such a dim scene. If you want to include a person, ask them to stay still for the duration of the exposure.

If you are shooting with a traditional camera (DSLR, mirrorless, or bridge) and the northern lights are bright, you probably only need 5 seconds but if they are slow moving or faint you may wish to expose anywhere from 10 to 25 seconds. Beware though that super long exposures may cause the stars to show trails. Make sure your EV adjust is set to -2 or -3. You can adjust your aperture to get the exposure time you desire. You do not need to set your ISO low to get long exposure times but you may want to keep it fairly low to reduce noise in your image. Either of these adjustments tells your camera that you do not want a bright sky.

Unfortunately, this year, I have not been lucky enough to catch the northern lights locally but our club president, Chris Taylor, did at Shirley's Bay (see below).

I did, however, have the opportunity to shoot some in Norway in September. They are not guaranteed at that time of year but certainly in the winter months you would definitely have the opportunity to see them providing you have clear skies.

Even though the northern lights did appear for me in Norway, the conditions for traditional photography were not ideal. Since I was unable to go ashore, I was limited to shooting onboard a moving ship with winds strong enough to shove the camera around. Not only were we underway, the sea swells were causing a noticeable up and down motion as well. This meant the camera was in constant motion so a tripod was neither practical nor used!

Instead, I used the *Night sight* setting on my Google Pixel 6 cell phone and just hand held it. The computational creations the phone made from taking multiple images over a period of about 5 seconds resulted in some lovely souvenir images.

I made sure to include fellow passengers in a few shots to remind me of the excitement we all felt in experiencing these breathtaking skies!