

# White nights, northern lights

Winter is a cool time to see Russian North

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Ever since the Russian winter defeated Napoleon, the cold season tends to scare visitors off. But for me, both summer and winter have their charms, especially in the extremes of the Russian North, where the white nights give way to the wintertime luster of snow and northern lights.

What better place to begin the adventure than Arkhangelsk, the White Sea city where Russia first opened up to the West? In 1553 Richard Chancellor set sail from England, hoping to find a northeast passage to China. He anchored at a small salt-works near the mouth of the Dvina River. Within two years the English had incorporated a trading company that bestowed on the Russians an enduring love of lemons, pepper, and especially the ginger, cloves, and cardamom that flavor the ornamental gingerbread Arkhangelsk is still famous for. The city soon became a vibrant merchant town, though its heyday lasted only half a century. After Peter the Great established St. Petersburg in 1703, Arkhangelsk fell into decline, its port no match for the ice-free Baltic. Today, it's a charming city, with a beautiful waterfront promenade and a profusion of old wooden houses, the crumbling structures even more picturesque than those that have been restored. Just outside the city limits is Malye Korely, one of Europe's largest open-air museums, where you can explore the intricacies of wooden architecture from small villages throughout the Russian North. The city's Northern Maritime Museum is also fascinating, with its excellent installations from Arctic expeditions and artifacts from the famous convoys that carried crucial supplies to Russia during World War II.

Despite the region's harsh climate, its flora is astonishingly diverse. The English naturalist John Tradescant, whose collection forms the basis of Oxford University's Ashmolean Museum, rapturously described the plants he encountered on his 1618 journey to Arkhangelsk. His journals tell of magnificent cloudberry, lingonberries, cranberries, blueberries, bilberries, bird cherries, and red, white and black currants, their luscious flavor a gift of the long white nights. Today these berries

are tucked into open-faced pies, steeped in vodka, whipped into milkshakes, and boiled with sugar or honey into jam. Foraging for berries, and for equally abundant mushrooms, remains a national pastime, and ecotourism in nearby places like Golubino — next to the extraordinary Pinega Caves — is rapidly taking hold.

From Arkhangelsk it's an easy 45-minute flight to the Solovetsky Islands, or Solovki, as they're colloquially called. Here nature is pristine, and the isolation profound. Huge granite boulders rise starkly out of the sea, trees are stooped from the wind, and mysterious stone labyrinths dot the shores. The majestic 15th-century Solovetsky Monastery, now a World Heritage site, became Russia's second wealthiest religious community thanks to its lucrative salt-works. Today, young artisans are reviving the art of salt production, and sometimes flavoring the mineral-rich White Sea salt with seaweed, tansy, or reindeer lichen. Solovki is most famous for its fat herrings, which were sent to the czar's tables. You can enjoy them either fried or poached, with cloudberry-infused vodka to wash them down, at the modest Kaiut-Kompaniya Café run by Svetlana Mashkova, who makes sure the island is provisioned year-round — no small feat given that the sea freezes for a long eight months.

The islands' beauty and isolation, coupled with the monastery's holiness, have made it a mythical place. Yet Solovki is also a place of deep sorrow. Ivan the Terrible exiled misbehaving priests to these islands, and Peter the Great imprisoned criminals in its damp dungeons. After the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks used the once-sacred site to perfect the system of labor camps that grew into the Gulag. The great scholar Dmitri Likhachev, imprisoned there in the 1920s, considered Solovki an otherworldly place, one that lies between heaven and earth, with its endless summer horizons yielding to winter's oppressive fog, relieved only by the majesty of the northern lights. Today, the monastery once again houses monks and welcomes thousands of austere pilgrims. My own pilgrimage was to the memorial museum to the victims of the Gulag, which stands not inside



Clockwise: Oksana Arzhanova enjoys the season's first cloudberry in the tundra of the Kola Peninsula. Mackerel smoked with alderwood at a market in Murmansk. Traditional wooden houses have ornately decorated window frames and symbolic carvings.



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but beyond the monastery walls, its exile a symbol of ongoing political struggles with the Russian Orthodox Church.

With or without a stop in Solovki, Murmansk is not to be missed. Founded in 1916 to receive Allied supplies

during World War I (the Gulf Stream keeps its water from freezing), the city is new by any standard. Murmansk has more than one reason to be in the Guinness Book of World Records: it's the last city established under the Russian Empire, the largest city above the

Arctic Circle, and home to the largest nuclear icebreaker fleet in the world. The world's northernmost trolley system runs through the city, powered by rattling Soviet-era buses equipped with faster Wi-Fi than we have in much of New England. Murmansk is also an epicenter of New Russian cuisine, boasting two of the country's most talented chefs. Sergei Balakshin at Tundra and Svetlana Kozeiko at Tsarskaya Okhota transform local produce into spectacular dishes like scallops presented in their shells on a bed of seaweed, or shaved frozen reindeer with lingonberry sauce.

From Murmansk, it's worth driving a couple of hours to Teriberka, on the Barents Sea. This derelict fishing village was the setting for Andrey Zvyagintsev's Golden Globe-winning film "Leviathan," its natural beauty offering a counterpoint to the film's depiction of brutal corruption in post-Soviet life. Three years ago a group of young entrepreneurs responded by launching an annual festival called "Teriberka: New Life" that focuses on ecotourism and food, especially the sweet sea urchins and enormous mussels harvested from the Barents Sea. The village is now experiencing a revival, with an eco-hotel in the works.

Speaking of festivals, if you're intrepid enough to visit Murmansk in winter, consider hopping on a bus to attend the Barents Spectacle, held every February in Kirkenes, Norway, just four hours away. Intended to bridge national divides, the festival celebrates the arts, culture, and food of this extreme region, where summer days never end and winter skies are naturally adorned with swirls of lavender and green.

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# Amid the alpine ridges of the Canadian Rockies

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There's an adage in mountain climbing. There are old climbers and bold climbers, but there are no old, bold climbers. I have to confess that some of my favorite climbs stopped short of the true summit, sometimes because of conditions, the weather, or illness. I certainly relish standing on the very apex of a peak, but what I relish more is the act of climbing, camaraderie, and perhaps most of all, coming home alive. On a recent trip to the Canadian Rockies, that's exactly what I experienced.

For six months, my long-time climbing partner and I planned a trip to the Bugaboo Provincial Park in British Columbia. It's a land of winding glaciers and nunataks (granite spires that thrust skyward from the glacial ice), we'd hoped to climb the storied, quality granite. For weeks, we packed ice axes and ropes, freeze-dried shepherd's pie, and fuzzy gloves. We arrived in Canmore, Alberta, only to find out that ever-spreading wildfires led to the closure of the park. So, we scrambled to reorient and find other places to climb.

Straddling the border of Banff and Jasper National parks, just a few hours west of Calgary, rests a massive mountain, Mount Athabasca. This hulking peak reaches 11,453 feet and its glaciers pour from the adjacent Columbia Icefield. Rather than scale the summit, we identified a sharp rock ridge on its flank, known as A2. This became our first objective.

Athabasca is situated in an area spared by the many wildfires that have plagued the region. With a forecast of no wind, a full moon, and azure skies, we headed out from the parking lot at 4 a.m. after driving in from our lodging at the Mount Edith Cavell hostel, a rustic bungalow that exists in the shadow of its namesake mountain. Our approach hike would need to be done in the dark so we could be on that glacier in the cold morning hours, when the tenuous snowbridges that cross seemingly-bottomless crevasses were most stable.

After a three-hour hike, we arrived at the toe of the Little Athabasca Glacier. We donned crampons, spiked platforms that strap to your feet, and razor-sharp ice axes. Within a few hours we'd crossed the glacier, however doing so required intense route finding among gaping, hungry crevasses. Once across the glacier we climbed a 500-foot-high slope of loose rock, referred to as scree, and descended the other side to gain a second glacier, the Boundary Glacier. This glacier was



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Conrad Yager (above) negotiates the slots on the Boundary Glacier, high on Mount Athabasca. Yager (left) racks up his technical climbing gear at the base of A2.

## If you go . . .

Seasons-Alpine rock and snow climbing in the Canadian Rockies is best June through September. By mid-fall, waterfall ice begins to form on the Icefields Parkway, making a world-class venue for ice climbing.

Guides-Yamnuska Mountain Adventures, located in Canmore, Alberta, guides almost any type of objective. [www.yamnuska.com](http://www.yamnuska.com).

Maps and lodging-HI Hostels operate a variety of hostels throughout the Canadian Rockies. [www.hihostels.ca](http://www.hihostels.ca). Likewise, the Alpine Club of Canada operates backcountry huts in key locations, and sells guidebooks and maps. [www.alpineclubofcanada.ca](http://www.alpineclubofcanada.ca). Hut lodging from \$25.

would be frozen into stability.

Given the smoky conditions in other parts of the range, we headed to Lake Louise to attempt a separate peak, Mount Niblock, 9,763 feet in elevation. This quartz and granite peak boasts an ardent, character-building approach, despite being only three miles, which departs directly from the opulent Chateau Lake Louise. Again, we headed out at 4 a.m. and hiked for a few darkened hours,

the thud of our pulses throbbing in our temples. There was a certain degree of trepidation, as these valleys are home to a healthy population of grizzly bears. However, we confidently hoisted a giant can of bear spray, a mace-like product that's been shown to be a lifesaver in the event of a bear charge.

We rounded Lake Louise and headed uphill into a valley with a stunning hanging lake, Lake Agnes. Like Lake Louise, Agnes beamed with an electric blue hue, a result of suspended glacial silt in the water that yields a Caribbean-like color of water. At the foot of Lake Agnes we stopped to peer into the idyllic Lake Agnes Tea House, a backcountry chalet that has served soup and sandwiches and tea to hikers and climbers since 1905. The tea house was not yet open in the early morning light, so we headed uphill toward Niblock's giant scree cone. An hour of navigation on slippery talus later and we cast off on our first pitch (a ropelength) of technical rock climbing.

The stone was loose and four pitches later we were delivered to the col between Niblock and Mount Whyte, the adjacent summit. There at the col, we assessed the rock stability and made the difficult decision to turn back, again just a few hundred feet from the summit.

A series of steep rappels brought us back to the scree cone, which we swiftly descended back into the valley. As we worked our way down, a family of three stark-white mountain goats clambered down a cliffband affront Lake Agnes. Their tenacity and precise movement was fascinating to watch, as these creatures are built for navigating steep rock faces and crumbling stripes of rock.

By now the sun was high and we were feeling satisfied with our decision, as well as content with the climbing we did, despite not standing on the penultimate summit. We ambled into the now-bustling tea house. Within 10 minutes, deep in the wilderness, we sipped on vegetable and lentil soup and chai tea. As we rested to prepare for the descent back to the car, we sat in awe of the mountains and buttresses, like the harrowing face of the Big Beehive, a round-topped, cylindrical heap of quartz that guards the outlet of the lake.

As we finished our meal and talked about the good decisions we believe we'd made, the wind shifted. Gray smoke pushed into the valley, up and over the Big Beehive, swallowing it in the high alpine air.

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