

Alaska Science Forum

Northern lights

By NEIL DAVIS

The aurora is another reason, besides cheaper fares and good ongoing connections, to take those late night flights between Anchorage or Fairbanks and Seattle. A person sitting in a window seat on the proper side of the airplane can have a grandstand seat on one of Nature's finer spectacles.

At altitude 30,000 feet (10 km), most of the earth's atmosphere is below the airplane where it cannot shield out the auroral light. Consequently, any auroras seen will be roughly twice as bright as they would be observed at ground level.

On a night of average auroral activity, the aurora will be to the east-northeast or north of an aircraft flying between Seattle and Alaska's major cities. Therefore, the best auroral watching is from a left-hand seat flying south to Seattle or a right-hand seat when flying north. Cabin lights reflecting off the aircraft windows can prevent one from seeing the northern lights well, but a blanket held up as a shield eliminates this problem.

Do not be mislead by the sight of aurora below the wing. This aurora is probably 60 miles (100 km or more) above the earth's surface, but far distant from the aircraft — as Columbus proved in 1492, the world is round. Earth curvature allows one flying at 30 000 feet to see auroras more than a 1000 miles away. Sometimes on the Seattle-Alaska flights, one can see with one sweep of the eye approximately one-fourth of all the aurora occurring in the Northern Hemisphere.

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