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## 2 RIDE THE WORLD

# CAPTURING THE

**I was only seven when I saw it for the first time. Sitting on a couch, wedged between my parents, I was bored out of my skull watching some "stupid old person's" documentary about somewhere called Alaska. That is, I was bored until the point in the program where the night sky lit up in a brilliant green with waves of light dancing across the heavens! That's when I realized that magic was real. Since then, I've been in awe of the Aurora Borealis. . . fantasizing about what it would be like to look up and experience the magic happening *live*.**

The Aurora Borealis, better known as the Northern Lights, is a celestial mystery. Or it was until the Internet explained: "The bright dancing lights of the aurora are actually collisions between electrically charged particles from the sun that enter the earth's atmosphere."

As a photographer, capturing the phenomenon is wish list material—an impossible dream. But, Lisa and I are all about doing the impossible. For years, we planned to reach Prudhoe Bay, ride to the most northerly point reachable by motorcycle in North America, and capture an Aurora Borealis event.

After photographing people, landscapes and events around the planet, I know one thing—capturing great shots at night is one of the toughest photographic challenges. Even with the right camera, the best lenses, and a collection of handheld apps and modern day wizardry, shooting the Aurora Borealis requires all the jigsaw pieces of the universe to fall into place at the right moment. And yes, there's a huge degree of *luck* involved, too.

**We finally get our first glimpse of the magical Aurora Borealis. This *Harry Potter* light show lasted into the small hours of the morning. Pure magic!**

# AURORA BOREALIS

by Simon Thomas | photos by Simon & Lisa Thomas



Months before, I scribbled the following list of "Obstacles to Overcome." We'd need:

1. Clear skies (umm... this is going to be tough as winter closes in)
2. Immediate access to the outdoors
3. To be alert and awake between 1:00 and 3:00 a.m.
4. All our camera gear ready to use with batteries fully charged
5. A rock-solid tripod within arm's reach
6. Some advance warning of any potential Aurora
7. To be in one of the very few and remote locations on earth to even be able to see the Northern Lights at the exact moment it happens
8. And finally, million-to-one odds that it'd all come together for a successful shoot.

Fast forward to the end of the year, and there we were in Fairbanks, Alaska. Yeah, yeah I know, usually these articles are all about the ride, the mountains and sharing a virtual tour of somewhere you've never been. Well, this one's different. If you want a once-in-a-lifetime moment, then think big and shoot for the sky (pun intended!).

All adventures incur some risk... some danger. For Lisa and I, reaching Alaska and riding there was a fairly big one. We'd saved every penny we could, were on relatively untested new bikes, and had chosen to ride as late in the year

up there as we dared. Realistically, at this point of our journey (we've been on the road for 14 years), we could only afford to ride in Alaska this once. A breakdown up there could be financially disastrous. We were also seriously at risk of being caught in the snow—that's all kinds of bad!

Taking advantage of three nights at Sven's Basecamp in Fairbanks, charging all our batteries and double-checking our gear, Lisa had set up her Aurora app to create an alarm if it predicted an Auroral event anywhere near our location.

With our heavily laden *R1200GSA LC* and *F800GS*, both filled to the brim with fuel, we were on our way—off to a good start with clear skies predicted. Would we be lucky on our first night out? I pondered that thought as we pushed past the city limits and caught our first glimpse of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, the four-foot wide, 800-mile long steel tube that we would rub shoulders with all the way to Deadhorse.

Today would be only the second time on our entire trip that we'd cross the Arctic Circle. The first was within the first few months of setting off, at Nordkapp, Norway, the most northerly point in the world accessible by road.

With 73 miles of twisting asphalt behind us, we slid onto the loose gravel of the Dalton Highway and sped past the "Mile-0" marker. A switch in my brain was flicked; I suddenly realized that I'd been so focused on photographing the Northern Lights that I'd not given myself the chance to get excited about the ride ahead. A road sign read "Speed limit 50 mph."

"That's optimistic," I thought as I smiled, opened the throttle, and clicked into fifth gear.

Distill all the unforgiving and severe descriptions of the Dalton Highway, and few



Bright skies light up the loneliness and isolation on Alaska's infamous Dalton Highway.



key words remain, none more appealing than “remote.” This six-letter word has become our drug of choice. For us it screams opportunity, and a chance to experience something rare. It’s easy to create great photographic images when you’re shooting something rare.

Past the Yukon River Valley heading north, we skirted vast areas scorched by fire. On the horizon, the 40-foot granite tor of Finger Mountain stood like a geographical exclamation point. At mile marker 115, under a blanket of rain, we pushed past the Arctic Circle signpost, planning to grab the compulsory photos on the way back in the hope that weather would be better.

A wide, pristine valley lay below and ahead of us. Cresting a hill, I pulled over, grabbed the camera and waved Lisa past. The GPS had confirmed we’d be in Coldfoot within the next hour, but these views were too good to pass up.

In the Coldfoot Camp parking area we slid, bounced and finally wobbled to a stop outside the main office. Inside we swallowed hard and handed over \$219 for a tiny box room.

The dinner buffet had been as good as we’d been told, and with heavy eyes we headed for our room.

A chill slapped us both awake at 2:00 a.m. Outside again, as we looked skyward, camera in hand, there was nothing but thick fog all around. Glowing in the dark, Lisa’s Aurora phone app was going ballistic, confirming that on the other side of the misty veil the magic was happening—right now! Finally, at 2:45 a.m., I conceded to the cold, wet fog and retreated to the room to snatch a few hours of sleep.

The bright morning skies instantly shook our disappointment from the previous night. The thick mud and sludge that covered the truck stop area was now almost dry. Our relief was tangible, as the idea of otherwise sliding for 240 miles on the snot-covered road to Deadhorse was a miserable one.

By mid-morning we’d picked up the pace and sped past both Wiseman and the Arctic National Park, an adventurers’

**Taking time to really absorb any location once you’ve arrived is part of the journey. Alaska’s Salmon Glacier is one of the most beautiful glaciers we’ve seen anywhere in the world. The size and power of it are overwhelming.**



playground with eight million acres of uninhabited mountains and tundra and over 27,000 square miles of wilderness. We'd have to come back!

Our anxiety over the Atigun Pass evaporated as quickly as the previous night's fog as we reached mile 242. Lisa had researched the pass and read multiple accounts of the steep, narrow, treacherous and technical trek. At 4,739 feet, the Atigun is the highest "year-round pass" in Alaska.

Up on the pegs the riding was easier as we worked to find a route around the larger potholes. The views as we climbed were spectacular and from the highest point simply jaw-dropping. We rode above the cloud line and stopped to take photos to document the experience. The peaks of the Brooks Mountain Range created a dramatic backdrop.

The twisting, plummeting ride into the valley below was grin-inducing and it was late afternoon as we hit the outskirts of Deadhorse, following the roadworks' pilot car at a snail's pace into town. The clear bright light of the hour didn't do much to diffuse the Stalinesque features of Deadhorse. The bleak, ultra-utilitarian out-buildings created an austere first impression.

After we snagged the last room at the Aurora Hotel, we headed back out on the bikes to find fuel for our ride south. At 9:00 p.m., there was ample light to snap one last photo. For countless years, riders have been posing in front of the now-famous Prudhoe Bay General Store sign. At long, long last it was our turn. We savored the moment and lingered for far too long as we arranged the bikes and set up the tripod to capture the shot. Brilliant... silly, but brilliant!

Alaska's weather deserves its formidable reputation. In the 10 minutes it took to ride back to the hotel, a freezing wind and thick fog bank had replaced the clear day—change as ominous as it was instant. We knew there was little chance of photographing the Aurora Borealis this far north in August; the night just doesn't get dark enough. With the change in the weather, we had to accept that there was zero chance of success.

The ride south from Deadhorse was more visually dramatic than the ride north. Rolling thunderclouds erupted around us, drowning the landscape but by some miracle leaving us dry.

A week after waving adios to Deadhorse we were riding back to Tok, Alaska, which at that time of year more resembled a ghost town than the small vibrant gateway we'd experienced on the way north. We cleaned ourselves up, recharged our batteries and planned our northwest route.

It had been a stunning ride so far, but there was no denying the aching disappointment that the Aurora experience had eluded us. The Denali Highway and National Park were the highlights of our northern excursions but dark and brooding weather had hidden the night skies.

On September first, we were on the Top of the World Highway, a band of easy, fast asphalt which took us back into Canada's Yukon Territory. In Chicken, we had wolfed down a chicken pie (well, you have to, don't you?) and grabbed the mandatory photos. It was all too easy to think about lingering. Chicken has a distinct and alluring charm that whispers, "Stay, chill out, camp for a month and take a breath."

Back on the bikes we pushed upward in an easterly direction, swapping the Top of the World Highway for the less dramatic Taylor Highway. As the day closed, we made our way down to the George Black ferry, rode onto the worn metal deck and were delivered to the legendary banks of Dawson City. Lisa had booked us



**Irrespective of the season, Alaska's Haul Road (Dalton Highway) offers any rider a dramatic experience. Remote, stunning and challenging, it will take your breath away.**

a one-night stay at the aptly named Bunk House, a three-story wooden building with rooms of miniature Japanese proportions.

In a small bar next door, we sipped on two large rum and cokes and replayed the incredible ride of the last four weeks. With a sigh and sip, we conceded that the Aurora Borealis would have to be relegated to a future experience. But outside the bar, we were suddenly caught off guard by how dark it had become. We had become so blasé about midnight sunsets that we'd taken the daylight for granted.

Somewhere deep in Lisa's pocket her phone was beeping. "Who's calling you?" I asked her, a little irritated by the interruption. As she dug out the phone, my eyes rolled skyward as a shimmering green wave of light danced briefly

across the sky. I grabbed Lisa, spinning her around, yelled and pointed. Her Aurora alarm was still beeping.

It was 2:00 a.m. as we sat on the dark banks of the Yukon River. Behind us, the dim lights of Dawson City sent a blush into the night sky. I clicked the shutter of my camera as another curtain of rippling magic light painted the sky in shades of fluorescent green. The entire sky was a swirling light show of biblical proportions. Lisa hadn't stopped smiling for the last three hours in spite of the bitter drop in temperature.

For the first 30 minutes of the shoot, I'd experimented with the exposure settings before feeling happy about the results. After an hour, the first Nikon battery was exhausted. With exposures of 8–20 seconds, the sub-zero temps gave my





trustworthy camera a workout. With the second battery showing signs of fatigue, Lisa and I turned off the camera and held hands—saying nothing while we just stared at the sky until daybreak.

Parts of our journey will always be so special, rare and unique. That night's unexpected experience will always be ours, and I'll always have the images to remember it by. It's good to believe in magic again—the world is a better place for it.

Now, go and chase *your* dream.... **ADV**



**Lisa and Simon Thomas** are best known as the “ultimate adventure duo,” with more real-world experience than anyone on the road today. They’ve been on the road for 14-years and have ridden an incredible 450,000 miles, through 78 countries on six continents. It’s easy to say that Lisa and Simon helped define what we now call “Adventure Riding.” As explorers, writers, photographers and public speakers this pair inspire adventure. **2RidetheWorld.com**