

## **NAT GEO - 500 WORDS - INSPIRING TRAVEL EXPERIENCE - NORWAY - SOFIA JIN**

“Watch out!” A disembodied voice quips. “The sand is like jelly here - wrong step and *poof* - tripod gone, sucked up!”

I take a moment to process all the unpleasant implications of this warning and tread the trail of footsteps before me with extra care. They belong to Even: indefatigably cheerful local photographer with a penchant for Swedish snus and megawatt-orange mountain-wear.

Just a few hours ago we had occupied a wooden table at Anita’s Sjømat on Sakrisøy, eating fish burgers underneath a pungent chandelier of what I had at first thought were bats but were later revealed to be dozens of dried fish. The winter sun, by contrast, melded to the horizon like a pearl to an oyster, draping the world in a soft, silky glow. It was a pastel dreamscape of blue-hued pinks and purples interrupted only by my accompanying human traffic cone.

Now, he only exists in the glare of his flashlight, and the rest of him is darkness.

Even’s jolting silhouette is guiding me down one of the surf-swept beaches that fringe Lofoten’s coastline. We’re hunting the northern lights off the beaten track in a land that looks like something out of a fairytale. An Arctic archipelago chiselled by glaciers and the sea, where deep fjords and knife-edge mountains form a photographers dream; the kind of place that seems more to me like one of Tolkien’s designs, with all the grandeur of a kingdom mapped out on Middle Earth. Mountains meet water everywhere you look, towering between picturesque fishing villages and sheltered harbours where red cabins perch on stilts.

The beach is deserted and the sky is clouded with stars. In the distance, a string of mountains rise to meet them like the jagged spine of some great sea monster. A lick of green here and there tantalises our minds with wonder - to witness the aurora dance around those mountain turrets is a sight few have seen.

“Look! There!”

I’m crouching, trying to find a square foot of land that won’t devour my camera gear, when Even interjects. His flashlight is off but I can make out his craned neck and wagging finger in the moonlight.

I lift my gaze to meet a single band of emerald green. It emerges brighter by the second, as though slowly dialled up by invisible hand. The sea, as flat and still as a sheet of clingfilm stretched over the earth, holds the image of the rippling aurora on its surface. We’re sandwiched between the blazing trail above and its ghostly reflection on the shore, no longer earthbound but suspended in the middle of the cosmos itself. Here, under this ancient magic, I suddenly gain a profound sense of the transience of human glory, of human lives. I hoist my tripod out of the sand and take the shot.