

A Perfect Day

Aurora Borealis...

Have you had a 'perfect' day recently? How did you decide that it was 'perfect'? Perhaps, when we mull over the happenings at night, we realize that if we could relive the day all over again—there is nothing we would change! It was this quest for a perfect day that took me to the top of the globe earlier this month.

February, 2019. Lapland, Finland, often referred to as the 'Home of Santa Claus', in winter, is reserved for the brave. If you throw a glass of hot water into the air, it freezes instantly. If you take off your face gear, your eye-lashes immediately turn ash white in color, thanks to the condensed ice. Yet, the extreme temperature beckons tourists in this season. Why? Because the chances of catching the spectacular polar lights (Aurora Borealis) are the highest in winter.

So, Ritu and I took our chance, and jumped on the EO bandwagon from Pune, in the hunt for the elusive northern lights. I was convinced that one of the three days in this fairyland would turn out to be my 'perfect' day!

Day 1. The morning started with both of us huddled on a sleigh pulled by a gorgeous reindeer, trotting across the frozen terrain. The slow start picked up pace, as I found myself holding the reigns of a pack of six huskies. Ritu remained fossilized on the sledge, as the eight of us zigzagged our way through the magical landscape. With snowcapped trees lined up on both sides, we felt transported into a Disney Christmas movie! We mingled with the adorable dogs after our ride, patting and nuzzling them. However, I felt they were very nervous during the interaction.

Our lunch was at an ice restaurant in Santa Claus Village, a tourist hotspot, cutting literally across the Arctic Circle. The floors, walls, bar counter, tables, stools, decorations—everything was sculpted with ice! There was an hour carved out for sightseeing and gift-shopping at the beautiful village after lunch. But we chose to stay put at the ice restaurant. Why? The frozen world inside was way warmer than the outside chill.

There was a dance party later at night. I let my hair loose. Not that I am cool. I wanted to compensate for my missed workouts. Dinner was a feast, it included

reindeer!

I took stock of the day at night. The reindeer ride was very romantic, the husky ride was exhilarating, and the local cuisine was superb! It had been a terrific day indeed! I racked my brains to assemble tiny negatives. I wished our charming chauffer had not been featured on the dinner menu. I hoped man's best friends were not scared because of any ill-treatment by their trainers. Had the ice restaurant been a bit less cozy, then maybe we would have ventured out in the picturesque Santa Village. The day had ended slightly shy of perfection. "Tomorrow is another day", I concluded.



Day 2: The snowmobile ride on the frozen river was way breezier than the husky ride. So breezy that I had to take off my spectacles as they kept fogging up. The ride culminated at a large frozen field where a surprise was waiting for us. A make-believe Winter Olympics was on the agenda. The tricolor was hoisted as the Indian national anthem resonated amidst the arctic wilderness. Our group of 80 was divided into eight teams. I gave my best, but our team didn't make it to the winning stand.

Dinner was a hurried affair. With the clear sky buzzing with solar activity, the

probability of sighting the polar lights had increased. So, we rushed and got onto our bus, dashing away from the city lights. We finally caught sight of nature's biggest act. The shades of white and grey blended in the horizon. They could easily be mistaken as the reflection of distant street lights behind the trees. Only in a few Samsung cameras could we detect the shades of green.

A late-night revelry was on the cards. A game of musical chairs that involved toggling between an indoor sauna and an outdoor pit of ice water. Finnish specialty. Who does that? I chickened out.

I went to bed blissfully. I had done things that I had never done before—driven on a frozen river, competed in the Winter Olympics, and caught a glimpse of the elusive polar lights. What was the negative part? I brooded. Only minor bumps. I wished my spectacles were on to fully enjoy the scenic drive and hoped the polar lights were as colorful as they are in pictures. If only I had pushed myself for the Sauna-Icy Dip adventure! “Tomorrow will be a perfect day”, I convinced myself.



Day 3: The day started with a lovely three-hour drive to Sweden. We onboarded an icebreaker ship at our destination. The sheer power of the ship as it cut through the frozen ocean triggered an adrenaline rush. The ship halted deep into

the sea. We were kids again, running and playing in a foot of snow that spread for miles in every direction. The ice shearing had left a pool of water in the ship trail. This time I didn't bail. We got into wet suits and floated on the icy water, faces up—gazing at the cosmos with time standing still. Our backs did not feel any colder than the wind against our faces.

The evening called for a closing gala dinner with Thank You notes, and surprise prizes. I was bestowed with the 'mover & shaker' award for my dance attempts on the first day.

We stayed at a special Igloo hotel on the last night. It was in the middle of nowhere. The room had a glass ceiling, designed to enjoy the iconic northern lights. But, it was a snowy night.

I watched the small flakes of snow whispering against the sloping roof. The sight was far more exhilarating than my grey & white northern lights experience. The icebreaker cruise had been more powerful than all the rides from the previous days. The swim in the frozen ocean was a notch higher in terms of adventure than the dip in the ice pit I had missed earlier. What's more! I had won my life's first dance competition! "I got my perfect day" - my last thought before I crashed.



Epilogue. Next morning, I woke up to hundreds of messages and pictures in our WhatsApp travel group. A section of our friends had not given up on the primary motive of our trip. They had gone hunting for the polar lights late at night, and they witnessed it. Aurora Borealis in its full dancing glory—lasting more than an hour against the Arctic Sky with all the dazzling colors one sees on National Geographic! The pictures were mesmerizing.

I was devastated. My previous day had a glaring gap. If only I had pushed myself to go out at night. Now, my perfect day will have to wait for another time. “I need to come back again to Lapland, perhaps with my kids this time”, I thought impulsively. The thought excited me. It instantly put a smile on my face. It made me realize the fallacy of my quest.

Every day comes with its ups and downs. Even top-of-the-world day will have downers that we may be unaware of. Interestingly, it is these imperfections that give us a cheerful reason to yearn for more.

Our aspiration for a perfect ‘tomorrow’ makes us alive. It makes us look forward to waking up the next morning. Strangely, in the process, our ‘today’ becomes perfect! As perfect as our picture-perfect holiday!