

Northern Dawn

A person wearing a dark beanie and jacket is seen from behind, sitting in the driver's seat of a dark convertible car. The car's interior, including the steering wheel and dashboard, is partially visible. The car is parked in a dark, open landscape under a night sky. A vibrant aurora borealis (northern lights) is visible on the horizon, casting a yellow and orange glow across the dark clouds. The overall mood is serene and adventurous.

You don't have to leave the UK to see the northern lights – with a bit of luck, you can catch them on our shores. **Richard Webber** goes aurora-chasing in style

PHOTOGRAPHY LUC LACEY





Global aurora activity can be monitored online

In the words of Rolls-Royce's CEO, the Dawn ragtop is "the most social of super-luxury drophead motor cars for those who wish to bathe in the sunlight of the world's most exclusive social hotspots". It's an evocative notion that I'm struggling to channel from our lonely, weather-beaten, peninsular midnight perch on Orkney as the Atlantic swills either side of us.

A boulevardier meant for La Croisette, not Kirkwall, this car is alien to these latitudes. But we've brought it here with a purpose: to search for the aurora borealis, which literally – and aptly, here – translates as 'northern dawn'.

Our journey has been shaped by Dr Nathan Case, senior research associate of Space and Planetary Physics at Lancaster University and part of the team behind AuroraWatch UK. Days earlier, he'd explained that the aurora borealis begins when a charged gas (or 'plasma'), mostly comprising hydrogen and helium, escapes from the sun and travels to earth on the solar wind at around one million miles per hour, taking about four days to reach us.

"These charged particles get funnelled into our atmosphere via the magnetic poles, where they collide with oxygen and nitrogen, giving off energy in the form of light, which is what we see as the aurora," explains Dr Case. "The green aurora that we're most likely to see in the UK comes from atomic oxygen."

AuroraWatch UK monitors local magnetic fields in Lancaster, Aberdeenshire and Shetland to detect variations caused by electric currents generated by the aurora. This information is used to set alert levels, which you can monitor for yourself at aurorawatch.lancs.ac.uk.

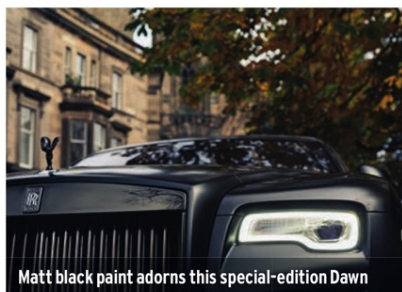
It's not just about auroral activity, of course – you also need a clear, dark night sky and an unobscured view north. Case says the aurora forms in an oval hundreds of kilometres to the north, but can be seen from parts of the UK due to its latitude. Still, the further north we go, the better.

It feels strange for photographer Luc Lacey and I to begin a road trip without a planned itinerary. But so fickle is our quarry that we find ourselves sitting in my Edinburgh kitchen on a Tuesday morning in November, bereft of a plan as the Rolls-Royce waits outside.

Case recommended we use the three-day →

17.4mpg

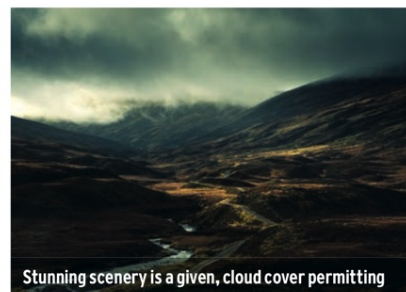
Our average economy, made more manageable by a big, 82-litre fuel tank. That's a £114 fill-up of super-unleaded.



Matt black paint adorns this special-edition Dawn



Cobbles elicit barely a whisper in the Dawn's cabin



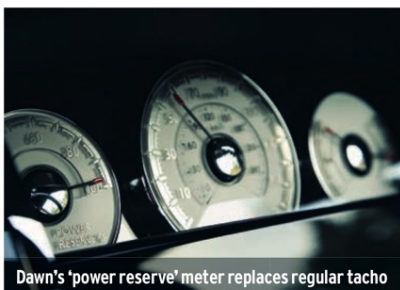
Stunning scenery is a given, cloud cover permitting

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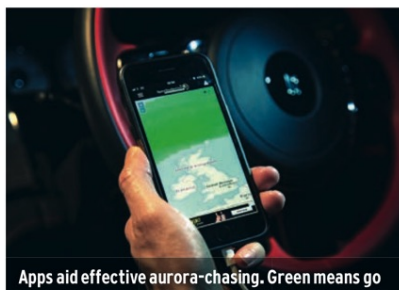
LIGHT 'EM UP



We started in Edinburgh and crossed the Firth of Forth for an hour's gentle cruise to Perth. A 194-mile stint up the A9 took in Inverness-shire, Ross and Cromarty, Sutherland and Caithness to catch a ferry to Orkney for our first night. The return leg retraced those steps to our second stop, in Aviemore.



Dawn's 'power reserve' meter replaces regular tachometer



Apps aid effective aurora-chasing. Green means go



Success, at last: the aurora borealis shows itself

DARREN JONES

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← aurora forecast provided by the US's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which produces a predicted global geomagnetic activity index called 'Kp'.

"You want that to be as high as possible," he says. "It ranges from 0 to 9. If you can get figures between 3 and 5, you're in with a good shout of getting aurora. If you're looking at 1s and 2s, it's going to be much harder."

NOAA anticipates a Kp of 3 between 3am and 6am tomorrow morning, with a 'view line' (north of which the aurora may be visible) promisingly slicing across Scotland's central belt. The Met Office's cloud forecast predicts patches of clear sky all across the country, so we set off for as far north as we can go in a day: Orkney.

Installed low in the Dawn's hull, there's lots of light-fingered tiller-twirling as I familiarise with its 5285mm bulk. This is the youth-oriented Black Badge edition: matt black with shadowy accents throughout, more power, bigger brakes, quicker steering, tauter chassis, remapped gearbox and a bassier exhaust. Still, it's almost EV-quiet as we thread through the Dean Village accompanied only by the whisper of cobbles beneath 21in carbon-alloy wheels.

We soon span Queensferry Crossing and lope up the motorway, the 'power reserve' gauge mostly kissing 100%. Of course, the 593bhp and low-down 620lb ft made by the 6.6-litre twin-turbocharged V12 helps, as does sympathetic kickdown from the eight-speed ZF transmission when you need to hustle. Indeed, through the gears, the Dawn's 2.6-tonne mass seemingly evaporates, scored by nothing more than a muted growl.

Adaptive cruise control helps manage the familiar plod up the A9, but there's ominously thick cloud skimming the snow-sieved southern Highlands. It brightens as we skirt the Sutherland coast and a sequence of swift, empty sweepers showcases the best of the Dawn's genteel handling.



MV Alfred's ride is almost as smooth as the Dawn's



Deck space is shared with decidedly less showy fare



Prodigious thirst is offset by a voluminous fuel tank

There was an occasional unseemly urban thump this morning, but the ride is now beautifully fluid, as if the hovercraft's skirts have inflated.

The sky turns pink over Brora, then it's a 90-minute charge in the dark to the north coast. A largely straight but knobbly B-road detour doesn't fetter the Rolls: most other sub-five-second-to-60mph cars would be bucking and weaving along here, but the Rolls holds its course, spearing along in assured comfort.

At Gills Bay we board Pentland Ferries' new catamaran, the £14 million MV Alfred, in service barely a week and able to whisk 98 cars across to Orkney in an hour. We're grateful for the gentle crossing it provides.

After docking at St Margaret's Hope, we push on to our overnight stop at the Smithfield Hotel in Dounby. Our host, Ann-Marie Clouston, immediately guesses why we're here and admits to being a keen aurora-hunter, whetting our appetite with some kaleidoscopic time-lapse footage she recently took. Here, they call the northern lights 'mirrie dancers' – and dance they do.

We get dinner and some shut-eye, but it's up again at 1am for the short journey to Birsay at the north-west tip of Orkney's Mainland for our oceanside stake-out. There's no urban light pollution out here and moonset was just before midnight. As if the Dawn doesn't already isolate the senses, the featureless black we cleave through en route renders our sleepy brains numb.

That all changes when we drop the roof of our mobile observatory on arrival. It's 3deg C, the foamy sea is roaring, there's an arresting bouquet of seaweed on the stiff breeze and – disappointingly – little spots of rain settle on the rear deck's black leather. We spy the odd star but, for the most part, the sky is a mass of dank cloud.

There's a chink of hope on the northern horizon, though, in a barely perceptible strip of lighter sky. From the UK, the naked eye might see only a →

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A series of swift, empty sweepers showcases the best of the Dawn's handling
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Blow of the aurora's no-show is softened by an Orkney dawn

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As snow pelts the
windscreen, there's a
light show happening
somewhere above us
”



11 years

The length of the solar cycle. The next maximum is expected in 2023-2026, bringing increased sunspot activity and therefore more aurora.

← translucent, whitish haze, but a long-exposure photograph can collate the light to reveal a colourful, glowing aurora. Lacey gets set up, his red headtorch softening the blackness as if working in an al fresco darkroom.

But the AuroraWatch UK magnetometers aren't picking much up, and nor are the sophisticated sensors in Lacey's digital SLR. It seems both the space forecast and the earth forecast have let us down. He perseveres through rain showers, the electric roof doing its 20-second origami act several times over, but by 6.40am we've had no luck so call it quits and head east to capture the sunrise. At a blessedly benign Finstown slipway, we're glad of both the dawn's gently warming rays and the Dawn's intensely warming seats.

We return to the hotel for a reviving breakfast, over which we discuss our next move. We have one more night at our disposal, and though the Kp forecast is a lowly 2, some clear sky is predicted over the Cairngorm Mountain ski area, where amateur photographer Kath Pigdon captured a lovely green auroral bar a fortnight ago.

To get there in time we need to catch the MV Alfred's late-morning sailing, so there's no time for sleep: we pack up and bound back across the Churchill Barriers to St Margaret's Hope where the incongruously showy Rolls takes its place on deck among the regular weekday cars and freight.

Another painless crossing later and we refuel in John O'Groats. It's hammering down with rain so I relieve the front nearside wing of its umbrella, which is, of course, black and red to match our car's bespoke palette. (The brolly has a predictably lubricious opening action.)

Soon a dazzling clifftop rainbow and subsequent expanses of blue sky raise our hopes, but then we plunge into a pea soup at Inverness. This sets Lacey's snapper senses tingling, however, and he asks if we can push on to Cairngorm Mountain in time for sunset.

A week before, from Twitter: Kath Pigdon snapped the aurora at the same spot as above



On the final hairpins leading to the skier's car park, the Dawn's active anti-roll bars can't prevent some hefty wallowing, but once the body settles either to port or starboard, a reassuring cornering poise emerges. Slow is best, though, so we gently trace the mountainside until Lacey's hopes are confirmed as we pop out above the fog and are treated to a spectacular temperature inversion. We're sandwiched between two layers of cloud, the lights of Aviemore glowing through from below and the sun's last rays from above. It's a delightfully still evening, with only the tinkle of an unseen stream breaking the silence, and I drop the roof for the full IMAX experience from the reclined and toasty driver's seat.

We circle back to a hotel in Aviemore for sustenance and a much-needed catnap, then return to the mountain after 11pm. The smooth, empty B-road to the ski area gently meanders through thick forest, and the Rolls is flowing so fluently that it feels surreal, as if in a simulator – even more so when a yellow, stag-shaped icon alerts us to a hidden, doe-eyed form somewhere in the roadside trees.

Upon our arrival, it begins to snow. Hard. It's that horizontal, driving snow native to these parts that I can still feel stinging my cheeks as a reluctant teen learning to ski. Waiting for a reprieve, I check in on happenings in the upper atmosphere. Just our luck: the Kp has jumped to 3, all of AuroraWatch UK's magnetometers have spiked and the 'Glendale' aurora app reports that a geomagnetic substorm is happening: 'There should be an aurora on camera in northern Scotland,' it reports.

As snow pelts the windscreen, there's a light show happening somewhere above us. It's →



£88,680

The cost of options over and above the Black Badge's £282,000 list price. Massage seats and night vision are among them.

←incredibly frustrating. Ever committed, Lacey suits up like a trawlerman and disappears into the night with his camera. I'm glad of another interior indulgence: a flex of my forefinger and his door closes electrically, sealing me inside the plushiest bothy in the Highlands.

I recall Case's advice about sitting on the right-hand side of westbound transatlantic flights for the best chance of seeing an aurora, and idly check the Plane Finder app. Right enough, seven miles directly up, the fortunate occupants of a Bombardier Global 6000 business jet hurtling from Hanover to Newark are in for a treat.

Lacey returns, as if from a traumatic spacewalk. His black-on-black portrait of the Rolls-Royce against the night sky is peppered with a million white pinpricks that could easily be mistaken for stars, but his sodden clothes and frozen face confirm it as snow.

The Dawn can quell many earthly inconveniences but, sadly, weather is not among them, so this is where our quest ends. For now, at least. Clouston later sends me a photo taken by Orkney resident Alan Flett in the exact spot we spent our first night. It's a jaw-dropping, star-



AM or PM? Aurora-spotting is a hobby for night owls



Built-in brolly exudes a hewn-from-solid classiness

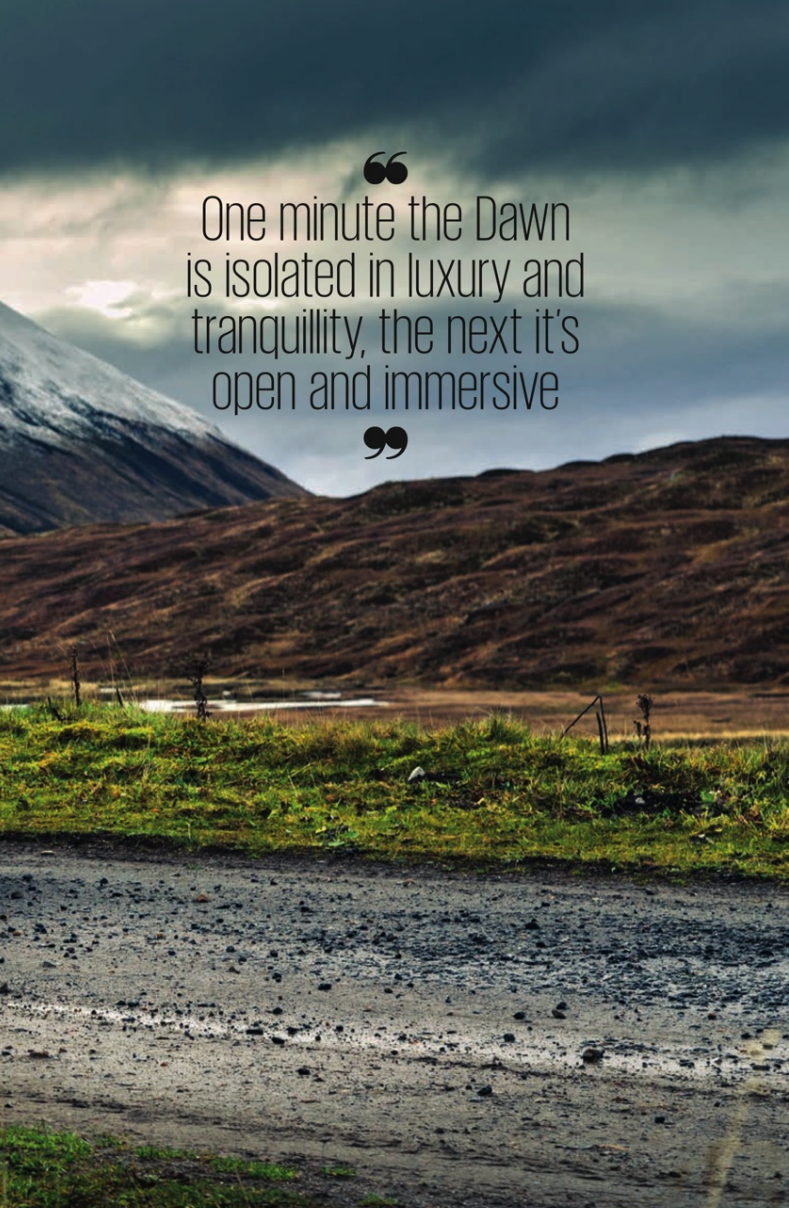
spangled array of indigo, lilac, yellow and lime, streaked with bright, vertical shards. It's easily enough to make me want to try again. A bit more time, a bit more luck...

As for the Dawn, I have enjoyed its dual personality. One minute isolated in luxury and tranquillity – an observation car from which to drink in the passing vista as if it were a movie – and the next, open and immersive.

I've also appreciated the 'need to know' ethos that permeates the car, starting with that power reserve gauge, which sits in place of a tach. "Don't concern yourself with the details, sir, just relax," it suggests. It's the same with the air-sprung chassis, the steering, brakes, engine and transmission: save for low-speed ride-height adjustments and a momentum-curbing engine braking setting, there are no modes to play with, and you can't even choose your own gear. But behind the glossy control weights, each system does what's needed to achieve swift yet comfortable conveyance.

That said, you definitely don't need a £371,000 Rolls-Royce to chase the aurora borealis. Just an app or two, a car and a bit of patience. Oh, and a flask of very hot tea. **A**

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One minute the Dawn
is isolated in luxury and
tranquillity, the next it's
open and immersive
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Not quite the
aurora borealis,
but pretty enough



Dawn remains
sure-footed and
secure at all times

INTERNATIONAL AURORA-HUNTING ROAD TRIPS



ICELAND

Iceland is ideally located under the auroral oval and offers excellent overhead viewing. The Hotel Rangá in Hella provides aurora wake-up calls; it's 90 minutes from Reykjavík on the island's anti-clockwise ring road - or 15 hours clockwise.

FINLAND

It's an eight-hour drive from Helsinki to Tornio in Lapland, from where the 384-mile

'Northern Lights Route' runs to Tromsø on the Norwegian coast. A favourite among connoisseurs.

CANADA

Five hours from Calgary is Jasper National Park, the world's second-largest dark sky preserve. Take the Trans-Canada Highway to Lake Louise, then the glacier-studded Icefields Parkway to the favoured viewing spot at Medicine Lake.