

# Aurora Australis: How to see the Southern Lights in New Zealand

This guide focuses specifically on the Aurora Australis (Southern Lights). Other natural phenomena in New Zealand, including bioluminescence, native New Zealand plants and New Zealand wildlife, are covered in separate guides.



*Photo: Aurora Australis, Rakiura Stewart Island, Southland, New Zealand; Credit: Rebecca Wilson Jennings*

## Southern Lights in New Zealand: at a glance

- Phenomenon: Aurora Australis (Southern Lights)
- Best months: March – September (peak in June – July)
- Best locations: Rakiura / Stewart Island, Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park (Aoraki Mackenzie)
- Why New Zealand: Dark sky reserves, accessibility, cultural context

## What are the Southern Lights (Aurora Australis)?

The Southern Lights—known as Aurora Australis—are one of nature’s most breathtaking spectacles, painting the night sky with shifting veils of green, pink, purple, and gold. While auroras are often associated with the Arctic, New Zealand is one of the best and most accessible places in the world to witness this rare and ethereal phenomenon.

Solar activity is currently increasing, making aurora sightings more frequent and more vibrant. Now is one of the best times in decades to witness them.

In the deep south of Aotearoa, away from city lights, the sky comes alive. Curtains of colour ripple above lakes, mountains, and rugged coastlines, creating a surreal blend of earth and sky that feels almost otherworldly. No two displays are the same—each is a fleeting, silent performance shaped by solar energy and the Earth’s magnetic field.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Southern Lights also carry cultural significance, known in the Māori language (Te Reo Māori) as Tahu-nui-a-Rangi—“the great burning in the sky.” Seeing them in Aotearoa adds cultural meaning and a sense of connection to the land and its stories.

## Why New Zealand is one of the best places to see the Southern Lights

New Zealand offers some of the world’s best locations to witness the Southern Lights, with Rakiura / Stewart Island standing out as the premier destination. As the world’s southernmost Dark Sky Sanctuary, it provides near zero light pollution and uninterrupted views to the south. The South Island is also home to internationally recognised Dark Sky Reserves—most notably the Aoraki Mackenzie region, including Lake Tekapo and Aoraki/Mt Cook—which boast some of the darkest, clearest skies on the planet. Other exceptional viewing areas such as the Catlins Coast, Ōtepoti Dunedin, and the Otago Peninsula offer similarly stunning and accessible vantage points, delivering worldclass aurora experiences without the extreme conditions often associated with polar regions.

### Best places to see the Southern Lights in New Zealand

- Rakiura / Stewart Island, Southland
- Aoraki Mackenzie Dark Sky Reserve, Aoraki Mackenzie, Canterbury
- Catlins Coast, Dunedin & Otago Peninsula, Otago

### Best time to see the Southern Lights in New Zealand (March – September)

The best time to see the Southern Lights in New Zealand is during the long, dark nights of March to September, when auroral activity is most visible, with the strongest chances in June and July thanks to deeper winter darkness. Activity also often intensifies around the March and September equinoxes, when Earth’s magnetic alignment boosts aurora displays. Clear skies, minimal moonlight, and viewing from dark-sky locations further improve your chances.

### Expert commentary

Royal Astronomical Society of New Zealand expert, Nalayini Brito, provides scientific context on aurora activity and visibility.

1. Why aren't the Southern Lights as well known as the Northern Lights? Are they harder to see?
  - Northern Lights are an established travel phenomena over a long period of time hence better known. The main reason is it is much more accessible and can be viewed from many countries in the Arctic - Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and parts of Canada and Alaska in the US - which are either within or near the auroral zone. Over the years, suitable tourism infrastructure has also been developed. Although the phenomenon is the same, the Southern Lights are much less accessible to visitors with much less landmass in the auroral zone with much of it seen mainly from the ocean area. Antarctica is the best for Southern Lights but that is also not easily accessible for many. Southern New Zealand is easily accessible while Tasmania and southern parts of Chile and Argentina are also accessible locations. Being more remote and challenging makes it a rarer phenomenon to view and hence more unique and adventurous.
2. Where is the best place in New Zealand to see the Southern Lights, and what tips would you give to people hoping to view them?
  - The displays are linked to solar activity and in recent years being solar maximum has helped. Although a lot of places in Southern New Zealand offer opportunities, tourism operators in Stewart Island/Rakiura appears to focus on providing this experience and believed to have forecasting tools and locations for viewing. Given that it is an internationally certified dark sky place, it is likely to offer a rounded experience. Aoraki Mackenzie would be another choice if travel to Stewart Island/Rakiura is seen as an extra step by visitors.
3. How can people best time their trip to maximise their chances of seeing the Southern Lights?
  - Darkest winter months in the March to September period.

## Enjoy local food and beverage offerings

The most common way to get to Rakiura Stewart Island is via Southland, which provides plenty of opportunities to enjoy some delicious local cuisine on your way.

- [Aparima Restaurant](#), Riverton is a coastal dining experience celebrating local southland seafood and seasonal produce.
- [Hayz at the Anchorage](#) in Bluff is a Māori-owned, dining experience showcasing local seafood in a relaxed Bluff harbour setting.
- [Bluff Oyster Festival](#), taking place on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2026 is a flagship Southland event that attracts seafood enthusiasts and chefs from around the world, linking food with storytelling, tradition and local pride while anchoring Southland's coastal identity.