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Beaufort Gyre Exploration Project: Dispatch 11: Saturday Night Lights

Jeffrey Charters
September 25, 2010

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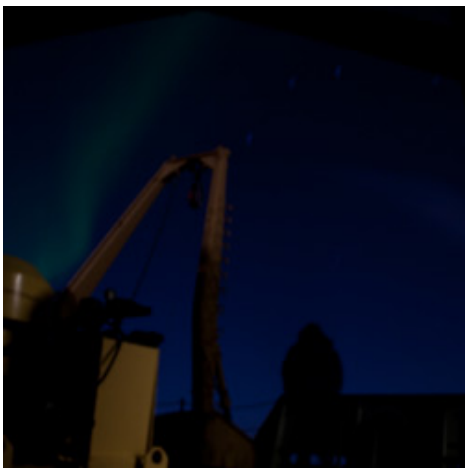

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I grew up in southern Ontario (Go Petes!) and am currently attending classes at UBC in Vancouver, British Columbia (Go Leafs!), where very few interesting atmospheric effects take place. So when I have these opportunities to travel north, I maximize my opportunities to observe the northern lights, known in the astronomy world as aurora borealis. How does one do this? They ask their friend Kelly who works on the night watch to wake them up when the sky is clear and active.

Last night somewhere around 2am I awoke to see a head silhouetted in my doorway, with Kelly telling me that there's northern lights, and "they're really good this time". I had the good sense to throw on my parka as I grabbed my camera and headed out the door onto the deck at the bow of the ship. And boy, she wasn't kidding.

Aurora borealis, according to wikipedia, occurs in circles around the pole as a result of radiation from the sun exciting the gas molecules in the atmosphere. As these molecules "relax" once again, light is emitted which we see as the northern lights. Green comes from oxygen, whereas nitrogen causes blue or red emissions. But when you walk out on deck and a strip of sky from one horizon, arcing straight overhead to the other is covered in a constantly changing, moving strip of light.. ..it doesn't matter how it happens. You just stand there in awe. Then you grab the camera.

A number of scientists and crew came out for the show. A cadet on board, Julie, was very enthusiastic, never having seen these displays before. Although she was a bit more vocal about it, I think all of us southerners were pretty awed by the whole thing. With any luck, I'll lose a bunch more sleep before the cruise is over, standing outside in the wind and cold, enjoying the free show nature sends our way. Although the discovery channel coined the phrase, it's one of things that makes you realize - "the world is just awesome".

On a side note - I finally processed several photos I took during the fueling process. When you read "we're refuelling at Tuk" it probably doesn't mean much, but this is what a mobile gas station capable of carrying more than two million litres of fuel looks like. So we're underway once again, should be into the heavy ice within a week!

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