

## 030210 Go Towards the Lights

### The Draft

Upon returning to Denmark after the holiday, I found myself often being asked by Danes if I was worried about being drafted for the war with Iraq. At first I was caught off guard by these questions until I learned that in Denmark, all males are subject to being drafted for military service. I have found that often I have been able to amaze people from other countries by telling them that the military in the US is comprised of only people who have volunteered to serve their country in that way.

I asked my friend Thomas to explain the whole system to me. He told me that prior to their eighteenth birthday, all males must have a physical examination by a doctor and take an intelligence test. Males who do not show up for these are visited by the military police to be brought to the tests. Everyone who passes those two tests is then entered into a lottery. Thomas explained that in every town, they have big bins of numbers in a machine, sort of like the machines for bingo games. Everyone draws a number. Low numbers are those who will be drafted into military service. High numbers are excused from service. However, since the drawings take place in many places, unless you have a number which is really low or really high, you don't know where you stand until after all of the results are announced. For example, if you draw 18, you are certainly drafted, but if you draw 4810, you are not sure since you don't know what the cut off is.

For those who have drawn numbers which are low enough for them to be drafted, they must arrange with the military as to when they will report for duty. However, the military will try to be flexible. If you plan to go to university, you can wait to perform your service until after university. Or, you can arrange to start your service so that the end of your service will coincide with the start of classes so that you can attend university the next year.

The length of the military service is nine months. However, if you object to serving in the military due to moral grounds, there are other options. There is service which can be done such as working at clearing trees or other things. However, the term of these other options is twelve months, rather than nine months in the military.

At the end of the nine months, soldiers may opt to stay in the military for longer. Also, both men and women can volunteer for the military without being drafted, just as they can in the US.

Although Danes differ on their opinion of the draft, Thomas thinks the system works well. Since every male has a good chance of being asked to serve in the military, people take more of an interest in what the military is being called upon by the government to do. The Danish military currently has soldiers serving on UN peace keeping missions and in Afghanistan. You may remember that several Danish soldiers were killed in Afghanistan when one of the bombs they were diffusing unexpectedly exploded.

## A hunt for light in the dark

When writing about Northern Norway, the Rough Guide quotes Baedeker as writing that the region “possess attractions for the scientific traveler and the sportsman, but can hardly be recommended for the ordinary tourist” - a claim that the Rough Guide comments has not changed much today. The guide elaborates that the “lands are enticing; the natural environment stunning in its extremes, but traveling can be difficult, the specific sights well distanced.”

Who could resist someplace described like that? On Saturday, February 15, I am departing for Northern Norway. I will be traveling with my friend Linda who is a visiting Ph.D student from Universita di Ferrara. Linda is from Crema, Italy which is about 20 km east of Milan. You are probably asking yourself, “Self, why on earth would anyone want to go so far north during the winter?” The answer is the aurora borealis. Our whole itinerary has been based around being able to witness the northern lights. Our original plans had been to go to northern Finland. However, Tony a friend from Finland advised us that the season for the northern lights in Finland may soon be over and that we would be better off venturing further north.

Our hunt for the northern lights will take us up past the arctic circle and up to the Norwegian Sea. We plan to make the city of Tromsø our base for the week of our trip. This will be the furthest north I have ever been. Think of it this way, Philadelphia is located at 40 degrees latitude. Tromsø is located at about 70 degrees latitude.

We priced out the trip and found out that the least expensive means of getting so far north was purchasing Scanrail passes for the train. Well, actually renting a car cost less, but being engineers we sat down and figured out the cost of gasoline. The car rental itself was only \$250, but the gasoline would be about \$1000. We opted for the train. The pass takes care of most of the cost, but we must also pay additional fees for seat assignments. The train portion of journey will take about 26 hours. I don't know if you have ever looked closely at Norway, but it is a very long country that curves up and over Sweden and Finland. The train ride through Sweden and up into Norway would be the equivalent of taking a train from Boston to Savannah, Georgia.

We will start our journey by taking the X2000 from Copenhagen to Stockholm which is very exciting. I have always wanted to ride the X2000 (so named because when it premiered in the 1990's it was the “train for the year 2000”). The advertising for the train in Sweden is: “X2000 – Easier than flying. Faster than the train.” The train is sleek and fast with a maximum test speed of 275.7 km/h. When the X2000 was introduced, it cut the time of train travel between Copenhagen and Stockholm from over seven hours to less than five hours. The X2000 was one of the three trains which competed for service in the Amtrak Northeast Corridor between Boston and Washington D.C. In the end, the X2000 was not selected as insufficient quantities of the train could be built in USA to meet the “buy American” policy. A version of the TGV, known as “Acela”, with some North American construction was eventually purchased.

From Stockholm, the rail lines are run by a private company. Since the ride will be overnight, we have reserved a sleeper car complete with our own shower and

bathroom. The train has a dining car as well as one of those cars with a glass observation booth at the top. At night, the dining car is converted into a cinema, complete with stadium seating. This I have to see. I am very excited for the journey about which one traveler writes in the Lonely Planet Postcard From the Edge:

The train ride from Stockholm to Narvik in northern Norway offers breathtaking views of the landscape. All the sights that you may have been told of about the hills, the fjords, the waterfalls, the glaciers are right before you. As you approach the Norwegian border, the scenery outside your window changing rather dramatically, the large expanses of flat-land that's characteristic of much of the journey through Sweden starts to give way to hills and fjords, and snow in the distance. It had us getting up from our seats and taking notice for sure! Husain, India (Aug 01)

The train will only get us to Narvik, Norway after which we will catch a bus for another 5 hours of travel to reach Tromsø.

We have rented an apartment in Tromsø for two nights after which we will see where else we can go. One option that we are considering is to take a tour which includes a night in a cabin in the wilderness which we will reach by dogsled or snowmobile. We may also try to venture to Nordkapp which is the northernmost point in Europe. Well, that is not actually the truth, but the swarms of tourists that go there during the summer have conspired to totally ignore the fact that not more that a few kilometers away is another peninsula which just out further into the Bearing Sea. The Norwegian government is part of the conspiracy since there are not even roads going out to the true northernmost point.

Having an apartment in Tromsø will allow us to save money by cooking our meals. When I was last in Norway, \$1 = 10 NOK (Norwegian Kroner). Today, the Norwegian Kroner has gained significantly and the exchange is \$1 = 6.9 NOK and we were already going to what was already the most expensive part of Europe. We will be bringing most of our food with us from Denmark, but our salmon will of course be bought at the local fish market.

This will be my last travel adventure for some time since I wont have time for further adventures. Well actually, I am sneaking off for this week in Norway without telling my advisor. But, it is early in the semester and I am still researching my thesis topic, so no worries. I am antsy with anticipation of the gorgeous, wild countryside and the sight of the aurora borealis dancing across the night sky.

---

 [Previous](#) | [Next](#)  | [Return to Main Page](#)

---