



030303 Northward to Tromsø

Our journey to the Arctic Circle began when Linda and I met on the morning of Saturday, February 15 at the Lyngby train station. We caught a S-Tog to Hellerup from where we caught another train which would take us across the Øresund to Malmö, Sweden. During the crossing of the bridge, we were surprised by a check by Swedish customs. I have made the journey across the bridge a few times, but have never before been questioned by customs. In Malmö we caught the X2000 which would carry us to Stockholm. Although the X2000 was not as sleek inside as I had envisioned, the ride through the Swedish countryside was gorgeous. The sun shone brightly on the snow covered landscape and brought with it great expectations of the journey before us. As the train leaned its way into the curves, Linda and I feasted on smoked salmon sandwiches. We had thought that we would be eating a lot of salmon in the upcoming days, but we would find salmon too expensive to buy in Norway.

We arrived in Stockholm and after some confusion, found our way to the booking office for the private train to Narvik, Norway. However, we arrived at the office about a minute later than the deadline to pickup the tickets and discovered that our reservations for a sleeper car had been canceled! The woman at the agency was very nice and we would later learn that she faxed the train crew so that our cabin was reserved for us to pay for on the train. We supplemented our foodstuffs at a convenience store and then made our way to our platform. Our train pulled into the station about a half hour before our 17:30 departure and we made our way to our cabin.

The train offers several different options for bookings. The least expensive option is the seats in the cars adjoining the café car. Here several people opted to spend the night. The next expensive option is the six person sleeping compartments. There is one car of these compartments on the train. Men and women are separated into different compartments and so Linda and I would have been separated for the whole trip. We opted for the next level cabin which was a private cabin which allows for a mix of men and women. Since we would be on the train for twenty hours, this worked out very well. We had a place to hang out as well as to make and to eat our meals. Although the cabin can hold up to three people, groups of two or even one person can book the whole cabin. The cabins are narrow at maybe one and a half meters across. On one wall are three beds with the bottom bed being used as a seat during the day and the middle bed folding up to offer more room. Sheets, blankets and towels were provided. There was a sink and fold away table in the cabin as well as shelving and hooks on which to store provisions. There were two bathrooms in the sleeper car as well as a shower. A hallway ran down one side of the car and the cabins occupied the other. The window in the cabin could be opened a little to let in fresh air and the heater and air conditioning controls were located in each cabin. It was small, but cozy.

We anxiously waited the ticket collector to come around out of fear that we were in someone else's cabin. However, she arrived in good time and I could even pay by credit card for our cabin. We paid in Swedish Kroner and would later find out that we got a phenomenal deal for the cabin. Once the business of paying was concluded, we kicked back with thoughts of dinner and of later wandering up to the movie cinema. We wound up walking up to the café car a mere fifteen minutes too late for the first

showing of the evening so I can't write about the stadium seating on the train. We also discovered that the train lacked an observation car, which mattered little at the time since it was dark out, but would have been nice the next morning. But, it was just as well that we missed the movie since we both crashed shortly after returning to our cabin. It was nice to fall asleep to the sound of the train although the journey northward would eventually lead to an area of lots of turns which would rock the train back and forth.

I awoke the next morning to be greeted by a bright, snow swept landscape of plains speckled with pine trees. It was quite beautiful with the sun rising. We washed up and headed to the café car in search of coffee. Much to our delight, the old café car had been exchanged during the night for a new one complete with an observation deck. We sat in the observation deck and the view of the landscape as we rolled past made up for the horrendous coffee. Later in the morning, we would pull into the town of Gällivare and Kiruna which are two of the largest iron mines in Europe. The copper mine in Gällivare is the largest in Europe and they also recover gold from the slag produced during the excavation of the copper. If I had known at the time that you can take tours of the working mines, we may have been tempted to spend the day in Gällivare and the night at the legendary Ice Hotel near Kiruna (the hotel is constructed each winter from ice and then melts each spring to be built anew the next year).

A few hours later, we arrived in the town of Riksgården which is the last station before entering Norway. However, prior to our arrival there had been an announcement over the train intercom that the train would not be going on to Narvik. Swedish and especially Norwegian are close enough to Danish that I understood that there was something wrong with the rails in Norway and that we would have to take a bus to Narvik. A Swedish woman in the next cabin explained the details to us as we waited on the train for our bus to arrive. The problem apparently was the weather. She had been coming up to this town for the past eighteen years to ski and this was the first time that there had not been at least two meters of snow on the ground. Lapland was apparently experiencing a strange, warm winter. Looking out the window, we could see light rain falling over icy streets and snow covered fields. In fact, despite being within the arctic circle, the temperature outside was only 3 degrees Celsius and would remain above freezing for most of our trip. The warm weather was a bad omen for spotting the northern lights since the warm air and cold ground were producing overcast skies.

My guess is that the rails in Norway were closed due to the rain. The constant rain of the past week had most likely softened the ground of the steep hills along the rail bed and they had closed the tracks in fear of mud slides. A similar thing had happened during my last visit to Norway the year before.

Looking outside we could see that the little road to the station was a sheet of ice. The Saabs and Volvos which were picking up passengers and ski laden youngsters had big, round lights mounted on the front of the car hood. The additional lights looked like those you might see on rally cars.

After a wait, the bus to take us to Narvik arrived and we slid over to it from the train. As we placed our bags under the bus, I asked one of the drivers if it were possible to catch a bus in town to Tromsø. However, there were not any and the next bus from

Narvik to Tromsø was due to leave in forty minutes. It looked like we were going to have to catch the late bus to Tromsø which was disheartening because the five hour bus ride would put us in town around midnight. However, after stopping at a ski resort to drop off some of the passengers, one of the train people sitting at the front of the bus told me that they had managed to call the driver of the Tromsø bound bus on his mobile and that he would wait for us at one of the stops. It turns out that there were six of us who wanted to go to Tromsø or one of the towns nearby and so they had tried to make the connection for us. However, we arrived at the meeting point too late and there was no Tromsø bus in sight.

The train people dropped us off anyway and told us that they were calling us a taxi. How expensive would that be? But the amazing views from the side of the road where we stood sort of put that question to the back of my mind for the moment. Before us the ground dropped down to a wide fjord with mountains standing majestically on each side. Wow.

A few minutes later, a van pulled up and the six of us piled in with our bags. One of our fellow passengers to Tromsø was a German woman who was currently attending university in Oslo for her Ph.D, but often traveled up to Tromsø University where she had spent time as an undergraduate. Since she spoke Norwegian, she could explain that the bus was not too far ahead and that the taxi was chasing the bus so that we could catch the bus at one of its stops. The ride across the icy roads was nice, but my mind was more occupied with the meter which was showing a skyrocketing price. We did eventually catch the bus, but only after ringing up a bill of about 600 NOK (\$86 US). To my surprise, we just boarded the bus without paying the taxi. The German woman explained that the bus and train companies would pay the taxi fare because it was their fault that we had missed the connection. We would just have to pay the bus fare as if we had caught the bus in Narvik. She explained it as if it happened a lot and so we settled down in our bus seats where we would spend the next few hours as the bus wound its way around the fjords. Due to the fjords and mountains, getting from point A to point B in Northern Norway is not as simple as driving in a straight line. The roads must wind around the fjords and double back which means that getting anywhere takes some time.

The buses in northern Norway serve as the main source of public transportation since trains do not run that far north. People would catch the bus on the side of the road at designated bus stops and some people would only get on for one stop. At one point we arrived in a parking lot where five other busses sat. People would get out of one bus and run to the next, all of which were heading for a distant major city such as Alta or Narvik.

After a few hours, the bus stopped so that the passengers could take a break. I stepped off of the bus and my boot had nothing to keep it in place. The pavement was sheer ice. To counter the problem, people throw down small, sharp stones over the ice. The stones work well at offering traction in what would otherwise be an impossible situation.

After several hours on the bus we arrived in downtown Tromsø. After orienting ourselves, we set out in search of the apartment which we had reserved for the next two nights. The apartment turned out to be quite nice and complete with a kitchen so

that we could cook our dinner. We wandered around the town for a while after we ate in hopes of seeing some activity in the sky, but the clouds were firmly standing their ground. After having traveled for about 35 hours, we retired for the night in hopes that the sun would be out the next morning.

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

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