

030305 Tromsø

We awoke the next morning (February 17) and after some breakfast set about the task of buying transportation tickets and booking accommodations for the rest of our stay. Since that part is not very exciting, let me describe to you a bit about Northern Norway and Tromsø.

Despite its remote location, Finmark (northern Norway) suffered greatly during World War 2. The land is blessed with abundant raw materials such as iron, wood and oil which made the region alluring to both the Allies and the Germans. At the onset, the Allies seeded the port of Narvik with mines to prevent the shipment of high grade Swedish iron ore to Germany. The Norwegians had declared neutrality in the war and protested the action. However, it soon mattered little what the Norwegians wanted since the Germans quickly occupied the country and set up a fascist government while the king fled to London where a government-in-exile was established. However, unknown to the Germans, the British had also dispatched large fleets to Norway at the same time as the German invasion with the intention of securing the strategic ports. The fighting for port cities such as Narvik was voracious. The Germans took the city, but the British counterattacked in an ongoing tug of war for the city until the British and French forces abandoned the city once France was invaded. No less than 55 surface ships were sunk in the harbor of Narvik including several destroyers. As the tide of the war turned, the Germans retreated from Northern Norway, practicing a scorched earth policy as they went. The advance of the Russian soldiers did little to help what remained of the towns. The immense devastation that was inflicted on the country is the reason that there are few buildings over fifty years old in Finmark (northern Norway). Tromsø did have some older churches and buildings, but for the most part the city appeared to have been built within the past half century.

The city of Tromsø is located on a large island in the middle of a fjord. On each side of the surrounding waterway are mountains which ring the city. The city center is located on one side of the island and connected to the mainland by a tall bridge over the water. Despite having a population of 60,000 and an airport, the city center reminded me of a frontier town. I think that whoever called Tromsø the “Paris of the North” was being a bit too generous with the northern capital. The city does have one or two attractive buildings. There is the Tromsø Cathedral which built in 1861 is one of Norway’s oldest churches. Another church, the Arctic Cathedral was designed to reflect North Norwegian culture and faith. There are also some intriguing modern buildings such as the Polaria museum which is a series of large, white rectangular structures which appear as if they were dominos which have fallen on each other. Some of the homes are pretty wooden homes which could have been taken right out of a small town in the midwestern United States. But otherwise, the hodgepodge of buildings that line the randomly winding streets will certainly not rival the beauty of other cities.

However, in all fairness, we were in Tromsø during some dreary weather. The German woman who we met on the bus told us how she just loved the city. However, she had friends come to visit her one summer and during the week of the visit it rained continuously. The friends hated Tromsø and could not understand how she loved it. Taking this into account, perhaps my impressions of Tromsø would be better if it were

not so dreary during our visit. It is a nice city to spend a day or two and the surrounding countryside is gorgeous.

Due to its northern location, many establishments in Tromsø can claim to be the northernmost this or northernmost that. For example, the Catholic church is the northernmost Catholic see with the world's northernmost bishop. The botanical gardens are the world's northernmost and the Mack Brewery claims to be the world's northernmost brewery. The northern location of the city also means that the sun slides beneath the horizon for the last time in late November and does not appear again until January 21st. For this reason, the city streets are well lit and people place lamps in the windows of their houses. Part of the comparison to Paris actually originated in the abundance of lights during the winter.

After making our plans for the week, we bought some groceries, ate some lunch and headed on over to the Polar Museum. The museum is billed as having interesting and informative exhibitions about polar explorers and hunters. The first floor exhibits were dedicated to the whaling which occurred around Tromsø as well as the trapping of animals in Finmark for their pelts. The whaling exhibit showed dozens of photographs of sperm whales being butchered on the docks of Tromsø in the not so distant past. One of the displays about the fur trade showed a life-sized mannequin in the process of clubbing a seal and another an arctic fox in a bear trap. What a stark difference to a more politically sensitive museum elsewhere. But, whaling and the fur trade were intricate parts of life in the north and so the pictures and pelts show a honest and unabashed representation of what life was like for the arctic hunters. Whaling still continues in Norway and Denmark and friends who lived in Norway in the early 90's reported seeing whale meat in the grocery store. In addition, Norway lifted a self-imposed ban on exporting whale meat in 2001, most of it bound for Japan where prices are higher than in Norway.

The second floor of the museum was devoted to the exploration of the north pole. The tales of several explorers are told through pictures. One amazing explorer was Fridtjof Nansen who proposed to purposefully allow his ship, the Fram to be captured in the ice flows somewhere above Siberia. Nansen was convinced that the currents would then take his ship across the pole. In 1893, he and his crew departed from Norway with enough provisions to last them for five years. The ship did get caught in the ice and it did take the ship towards the pole, but never over the pole. Seeing that the ship would never get any further north than 89 degrees latitude, Nansen and another crew member set out on skis in hope of reaching the pole while the Otto Sverdrup was given control of the boat. However, the ski attempt failed and they wound up trekking to the northernmost of the islands of Franz Josefs Land where they would spend the winter. Miraculously, they met up with a British expedition which was able to get them back to Norway. On the same day that Nansen arrived in Norway, the Fram broke free of the ice and was sailing free from the ice for the first time in three years as she made her way back to Norway.

The first explorers to actually reach the North Pole were a Norwegian, an Italian and an American on a dirigible, the Norge in 1927. The airship left Norway, passed over the pole where flags from each country were planted in the ice and then went on to Alaska where a steel tower had been erected for it to moor. However, technically,

they did not stand on the pole and so the honor of the first to reach the pole goes to four Russian explorers in 1948.

Since the day outside was dreary, we also went to a museum called Polaria which has displays about the polar regions. The exhibition starts with a panoramic film about Svalbard (the islands north of Norway) and then continues with lots of displays of arctic creatures including a neat seal tank which you can walk under. There were also presentations on the use and preservation of the arctic. Apparently, the arctic offers some of the purist and some of the most polluted air in the world. There are an abundance of smelters, mostly in Russia, which have choked the land around them. For example, there were pictures of the huge nickel smelter in Nickel, Russia (about 10 km from the Norwegian border). There was nothing but the decaying stumps of trees for miles around the plant which spews poison into the air. Anyone for drilling for oil in the arctic wildlife preserves of Alaska? The tour of Polaria ended with the gift shop. There were handicrafts from the Sami (the indigenous people of Lapland) as well as shoes, purses and coats made of sealskin.

We wrapped up our tour of the city by walking across the bridge (tall enough for ships to pass under it) over the Tromsøysundet to visit the Arctic Cathedral. Since Linda and I are both interested in architectural acoustics, we would constantly be drawn to churches during our trip. The church was designed by Jan Inge Hovig and built in 1964. The design is a series of triangular sections which grow larger and smaller as one progresses down the length of the church. The space between the triangular sections are filled in with glass which is lit with white lights. Behind the altar is one of the largest stained glass windows in Europe. I have heard rumors that the architect failed to take into account the position of the sun during the morning and as a result, the sunlight pours through the stained glass, blinding the congregation during the services. We had to pay a scandalous 20 Kroner to look inside the church and what made it worse was that the inside was disappointing. The walls are cracking and showing signs of wear. Hopefully they put our entrance fee to good use soon! The church is best viewed from the outside, especially from the back where the huge stained glass window is backlit by the lights inside the church.

We wandered back across the bridge in a drizzling rain that told us that any hope of seeing the lights that night were very slim.

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