



## 030307 First Light

We awoke on Tuesday, February 18 and moved from our apartment to a new hotel in Tromsø. The new hotel, called the Ami offered breakfast, dinner and a great room at the very top of the house-like building it occupied. The new day met us with clearing skies and even sunshine in the afternoon! We debated seriously about taking one of the tours offered by the Destination Tromsø, tourist information office. One option was to take a several hour bus ride to the town of Skjervøy and then return to Tromsø on a ferry. The round trip excursion would take six hours. The other option was to be driven to a farm in the countryside where the sky would be dark and we could eat coffee and cake while we waited for the lights to appear. However, both options were expensive at 400 NOK (\$50 US). We had already booked a cabin in Svensby (a small hamlet about 50 km east of Tromsø) for Wednesday night and so we opted to wait on the other trips. If we did not see the lights on Wednesday, then we would shell out the cash for Thursday night. During our visit to the information office, lots of other foreigners came in to inquire about the weather or the packages. I think the poor people who work in the office must hear the phrase “we came all of this way just to see the northern lights” several hundred times a day when the skies are cloudy. The advice that they give is to go on the visit to the farm or on the boat with the sole intention of having a good time at the farm or on the boat. If you get to see the lights, great, but otherwise your disappointment if you don’t see the lights will ruin the rest of the excursion.

We spent the afternoon by wandering across the island to the Tromsø Museum run by the University of Tromsø. The museum offers several exhibits on the Sami culture (indigenous people of Lapland) from the Iron age to the present. The exhibits showed the struggle of the Sami people to maintain their identity and culture. Especially as a people spread across four countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia), maintaining an identity has been a struggle. For example, in the past Norwegian schools would not teach in the Sami language, but instead the students were forced to learn Norwegian. The struggle was made worse by the scorched earth policy of the Germans during World War 2. As with the people all over Lapland, the Sami were left with little after the war was over. During the reconstruction of the nations, the Sami further lost their uniqueness as their destroyed traditional homes and clothes were replaced by the new buildings and clothing which were being built or provided for everyone. The decision in 1979 to build a dam near Alta which would flood a Sami town as well as reindeer pasture brought the Sami problem to the forefront of Norwegian politics. Civil disobedience and lawsuits by the Sami failed to stop the dam project, but the actions were the start of a cohesive action within the Sami community. In 1980 a committee was formed to discuss and report on Sami cultural matters and look into Sami rights issues. The Sami Culture Committee published reports in 1985 and 1987, providing a comprehensive study of Sami school and cultural issues, including a proposal for a Sami Language Act. In 1989, King Olav V opened the Sami Parliament. A number of questions regarding the Sami Parliament's position in the Norwegian political system have yet to be resolved, but at least now they have a voice in political matters. It is very surprising that the whole Sami question has taken place in the Scandinavian countries where equality is so highly regarded.

During a later visit to the Art Museum of Northern Norway, I was looking at a painting by the French artist, François-Auguste Biard entitled, "Læstadius preker for sammene" showing a minister preaching to a group of Sami crouching outside their Lavvo (tents) pitched in the snow. One of the guards from the museum was making his rounds and he asked if I like the painting. I said that I did like it, but that some things struck me as a bit out of place. The guard then explained a bit of the history of the painting for me to give me a better background. François-Auguste Biard had been to Lapland, but had created the painting later based on his memories of the region. It is for that reason, that the snow appears more like glaciers and the Sami are portrayed savage like in their traditional clothes. The minister is shown standing king like while the Sami squat below him and grimace at what is being said. The guard went on to talk about the Sami and he compared them to the Aborigines in Australia. The Sami used to be nomads and lived on all of the land in Lapland. Even up until the 1980's the Sami were looked down upon by most people as being uncivilized or a lower class. However, much has changed in the last 20 years. The guard said that there are still some Sami who want ownership of the forests or the lakes and rivers which upsets Norwegians who want the nature to belong to everyone. However for the most part, the Sami have gained a lot of the respect which they have been searching to get for a long time.

The Tromsø museum also had a small exhibit about the northern lights. What I had not realized was that there are also aurora on the south pole. These are called the aurora australis or southern lights and most of the activity is exclusively over Antarctica. The brightness of the aurora depends on the activity of the sun and therefore depends on the 11-year sunspot cycle. I do not know where we are currently in the cycle, but I remember that last year there were reports that the lights could be seen as far south as Denmark due to heightened solar activity.

We wandered about Tromsø for a while after we walked back from the museum. Unfortunately, Tromsø itself is short on sights and we had already seen most of them. I think that I even got more studying in that evening. Since the day had been so promising, with patches of blue between the clouds we decided that we were going to try to find a darker part of the island from which we might have a better chance of catching a glimpse of the northern lights.

We had a great dinner at the hotel and then set about putting our plan into action. We caught a local bus bound for Tromsø University and paid the hefty fare of 21 Kroner. We intended to get off of the bus once we saw some dark areas behind some of the houses. The houses were mostly located close to the edge of the water, but sparse in the center of the island. We knew the dark patches in the middle of the island existed because we had seen them the night before when we had gone to visit the Polar Cathedral across the fjord. We saw some dark patches appear after about fifteen minutes on the bus and hopped off after the bus began to go in the opposite direction of where we wanted to go. We set out up a road that climbed towards the top of the hill that lay at the center of the island. We passed a few buildings and then came upon a sports area surrounded by woods. Ordinarily a large area of athletic fields would be a great spot. However, the frozen football fields were for some reason lit by floodlights. We walked deeper into the woods to get away from all of the lights. As we were walking I mentioned how odd it was that we were tromping through these woods somewhere up in the arctic circle. Then I think the next thought came to us

both at about the same time. Here we are hiking through the dark woods somewhere up in the arctic circle. Don't they have some BIG wild animals up here? But, instead of coming upon the tracks of wild animals, we came across some sort of trail. It turned out to be a cross-country ski course, part of which was lit by lights so that people could ski at night. In fact, I could hear someone skiing somewhere in the woods.

We got away from the lights of the course by walking into a little grove of pine trees which also blocked the light from the full moon which rose behind us. A small hill and trees in front of us blocked the light from the ski course. However, big clouds kept rolling over the hill and kept us from seeing much of anything. After a while, we decided to go back to the ski course and from there to proceed deeper into the woods. We climbed the little hill that separated our grove from the ski course. We had a good view of the sky before us since the ground sloped down in front of us to the water on the opposite side of the island. Up in the sky, I saw what appeared to be a very straight line of clouds running from the earth up to the sky. I just stopped and looked, not wanting to say anything, but rather just waiting to see if Linda saw it as well. She asked me something like whether or not I saw something odd up in the sky. What we were seeing could be nothing other than the northern lights. The line of light was a greenish color, made pale due to all of the lights about us, but it was definitely there. I ran up a nearby hill through snow up to my knees in hopes of catching a better view, turning my bad ankle in the process, but somehow I never noticed it due to all of the excitement. It was our first view of the lights that we had come all of this way to see and we wanted more!

The band of light soon faded into the light pollution from the city. We stood on the hill for a while afterwards in hopes of seeing the phenomena again, but without luck. But, in the meanwhile I was playing with the camera and figured out how to keep the shutter open for long periods of time. Practice which would pay off later.

Eventually, we gave up our perch and tromping through the snow, sometimes up to my thighs we climbed through someone's back yard to get back to the street which would lead us to our hotel. The walk back took about forty minutes, each of us still excited about what we had seen and what we might see the next night from the cabin. We were about 100 meters from our hotel when Linda pointed up to the sky and cried out. Standing here in downtown Tromsø we could see the northern lights once more! I quickly pulled out the camera and held it as steady as I could as the camera took the long exposure picture. It actually came out.

The next morning, we wandered about Tromsø for a while, purchasing supplies for our cabin in the woods. The tourist information office had warned us that we would not have facilities to cook, but we would have blankets for the beds. The tourist office also offered a package tour to the cabins which included snowmobiling or dog sledding, a dinner of reindeer stew and breakfast. However, the package was over 1700 NOK per person (\$250 US). By visiting the cabin on our own, we only spent about 400 NOK each including transport and food. We also spent some time visiting the Art Museum of Northern Norway which I have already mentioned.

Our bus departed from Tromsø at 14:15 for the hour ride to the ferry which would take us across a fjord to Svensby. The views of the mountains and fjords from the bus

were amazing. The sun was resting low in the sky and beams of bright sunlight were caught by the tops of the mountains like fingers run through still water. Small pieces of ice floated in the fjords as we drew up to the waiting ferry. The sun had gone behind the mountains, setting the horizon afire in hues of red. The bus drove onto the ferry and we went upstairs into an immaculate lounge on the third floor of the ferry. The views got better and better as we approached the little hamlet of Svensby where we would be spending the night.

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