



030310 Svensby

As our ferry neared Svensby on the afternoon of February 19th, we left the ferry lounge to go downstairs and to climb back aboard our bus. The bus driver waited until the cars ahead of the bus were driven off of the ferry before driving off himself and quickly pulling over to drop us off. We got our bags out of the luggage compartment and as the bus departed, a small building on the other side of the pier was revealed. The building was home to the Svensby tourist center, run by a really jovial, older woman who checked us into our cabin and provided us with sheets and towels. She even asked a man to drive us the kilometer to the cabins so that we would not have to walk with our packs. As we drove, the man commented on the crazy weather this winter since there was so little snow on the ground.

Our cabin was part of a cluster of four cabins and a Lavvo (Sami tent), set back a distance from the road. We had been told by the information office in Tromsø office to bring our own food and so we were expecting to spend the night braving the cold in a small hut. Therefore, we were unprepared for the size or coziness of the cabin that was ours for the night. The cabin was quite large with two bedrooms of bunk beds, a living area that included the living room, dining area and kitchen and an immense bathroom. There was even a deck off of the living area. The walls and ceiling and floor were all of finished wood and we even had a wood burning stove. Not only did we have a full kitchen, but we had lots of hot water and several radiators to keep ourselves warm. The other cabins were unoccupied and so we had the whole area to ourselves for the evening. We would actually regret not having spent most of the week in the cabin since it was so nice and the surrounding countryside so absolutely gorgeous.

Our cabin was at the edge of a woods that stretched back behind us up a hill. Before us, the land sloped down to the road and then the fjord beyond. Across the fjord were mountains, black and frosted with snow that blazed in the reflection of the sun setting behind the mountains. It was if the top of the mountain itself was ablaze with a burning heat. There were a few houses located close to the road near our cabin. Looking southward, we could see the road stretch past the ferry dock and then follow the coast as curved away from the fjord. Beyond the fjord lay another group of gorgeous mountains.

Despite the early hour of 15:00, the sun was already setting behind the mountains and so we decided to climb a trail that led up a hill behind our cabin to scope out a good spot from where we could get an unobstructed view of the northern lights that evening. After a short climb, we came to a large flat area, littered with short, stubby trees. The trail kept going to another, more wooded hill ahead of us. To our left was a small gorge in which we could hear a stream flowing. The large clearing gave us great views of the mountains around us and we decided it would be a good place to watch the lights once it got dark. The only unnerving part was the way that the snow was crisscrossed all over by the trails of some really large animal. The foot prints were huge. Even though it was most likely a moose or elk like creature, the question of large animals strayed into my mind once more.

We climbed down the hill and decided to follow the road back towards the pier to see if we could get some better views from the water. We stopped by to visit the jovial

woman in the office again to restock our chocolate supplies. During our trip we found a chocolate bar that was 70% cocoa. To put that figure into perspective, I tried to find out how much cocoa is in a Hershey's bar but the best number that I could find was a 10% requirement for milk chocolate in the US. My favorite milk chocolate bar in Denmark is 30% cocoa (chocolate bars in the EU must have the percent cocoa listed on the label). Therefore, a bar with 70% cocoa is like pure Willy Wonka magic wrapped in foil. We continued our walk a bit further and then returned to the cabin to put together some dinner of cold sandwiches and coffee. Around 19:00 we decided to mosey outside to see if we could see anything yet.

Have you ever been in a place far from the lights of a city and seen the bright band of stars that is the Milky Way stretching across the sky? That is what we saw as we peered into the cool, night's sky, only it was not the stars. It was pale, luminous, green paintbrush stroke across the entire heavens. The feast for our eyes had already started. I dropped my tripod into the snow, set my shutter speed to 15 seconds and started snapping away at the miracle unfolding before us as Linda cried out "over here! No over there!" over and over.

It would be in vain to try to describe to you each and every sighting of the lights we had during the next hour. What we were most seeing during the first hour were lines of green that stretched across the sky. The formation of the lines of light was not bright or sudden like lighting would be. Rather, you would just suddenly become aware of the pale green bands of light as they grew brighter against the night sky. The formation of a new light would be announced by a brightness behind the clouds that were rolling across the sky, similar to what you see with a moon behind the clouds. In fact, at first I always supposed the light to be just moonlight. But then, we would see the pale green lines of light, mostly limited to the horizon due to the clouds. But if a clearing in the clouds presented itself, the lights would stretch themselves across the sky.

The lines of light always seemed to be oriented in the same direction of east to west. At first, we would only see one at a time, but after a while we would be able to see two or three lines next to each other. The first light that we saw appeared to the right of our cabin and then slowly faded away, just as they had first appeared. We would stand in the darkness, scanning the sky and then we would see something new on the other side of our cabin and so we would run over there. During that first hour outside, we saw mostly green hues, but towards the end of the hour we also began to see reds on the edges of the green.

I must have shots dozens of pictures in that short span of time. Once the picture starts, the camera would hold the shutter open for the fifteen seconds and then would process the picture for another twenty seconds to try to filter out all of the noise caused by the long exposure time. The pictures that we took were amazing, but you never really capture everything that you are really seeing. Attempts to make movies of the lights in the sky had proven to be impossible because the camera simply was not picking up enough light, but I kept trying to make it work. Memory was not an issue as I had about 1 GB of compact flash cards, but I was going through power quickly after an hour we decided to go back inside to get warm and plug in the spent battery to recharge it while I used the spare battery. Plus a large patch of clouds had moved across the sky, blocking the show.

We went back outside again maybe forty five minutes later and again scanned the nights sky. This time what we saw far surpassed the earlier show. We were again in the clearing to the right of the cabin and looking eastward. This time, the lights were moving, no, rather they were dancing. What we would see was a batch of brightness in the sky in green or brilliant red which would suddenly start to move. In don't mean that it moved slowly as a cloud would drift across the sky. The motion was much more random and beautiful than that. The lights within the patch of brightness were moving in small patches. Imagine that you are watching the reflection of sunlight off of a stream as it dances and sparkles on a wall and you begin to get the idea. But, the movement was not just sparkling as the reflection of the water would be. Rather the small patches would move randomly as if they were flowing.

I have been trying to think what it looked like so that I could describe it to you. The motion of these patches was like the flowing of water on a car windshield when the car is driving on the highway. You get these "streams" of water that travel up the windshield rather than down. The wind ruffles the droplets of water and drives them forward. The motion of the lights was like the ruffles in the streams: random, quick motions. Or like the flowing of shallow streams of water below a thin, clear layer of ice. The way the water moves one way and then the other under the layer of ice is like the erratic behavior in the skies above us. I don't know if you follow these images at all. The reason why words are failing me is because the motion alone was remarkable. I know I was left staring, wide eyed at the sky, exclaiming out loud at the majesty of it all.

The sky above us faded to darkness as the clouds once more won out, but we stood our ground, desperate for more. A glow was forming on the other side of our cabin and again we saw the lights begin their dance in the heavens, but the trees were in the way. So, large, wild animals or no, we scurried up the hill behind our cabin and turned our eyes upward. Again we were rewarded with brilliant reds and greens dancing low on the horizon. We would stay on the hill for quite a while after the lights had faded out, but the clouds reclaimed the entire sky.

We eventually returned to the cabin and I would go back outside every hour or so, but the clouds firmly held their ground for the rest of the night.

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