

TRAVEL

THURSDAY, JANUARY 15, 2009

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Where the sun don't shine

Deep inside the Arctic Circle, the city of Tromsø barely sees the sun in winter. How do the hardy locals cope with the endless nights?

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The vast highlands north of the Arctic Circle in Norway and Sweden are sometimes called Europe's last remaining wilderness. The area is known for displays of the northern lights, months of darkness and subzero temperatures.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

It was the last week of December and the city was shrouded in a blanket of fresh snow. The clock claimed 10am and yet the sky was gunmetal gray and the skyline was beaded in a luminous necklace of electric lights. The sun should have risen and the sky ought to have been bright but this was the Norwegian city of Tromsø, the land of the polar nights. For two months between November and January the sun remains below the horizon and daylight is as elusive as an Ibsen comedy.

The locals call it *morketiden*: the murky time. As someone who loves sunshine and hates darkness this was probably the most disagreeable place I could imagine; subzero temperatures and unremitting darkness not being my idea of fun. Yet there was also something compelling about a place where the sun never rises, something otherworldly — and that is why I came to Tromsø: in search of the magic and madness of this murky time.

In the days before coming to Tromsø I had seen *30 Days of Night*, a film set in a town in the Arctic Circle beset by vampires as it enters a month without sunshine. If 30 days of darkness could summon vampires, what creatures from hell would be unleashed during two months without light?

In Solid, a coffee bar on Storgata, the main street that threads through Tromsø, I met Knut, who was organizing my itinerary for the week. It was lunchtime but the sky was tarry black, darkness at noon as the streetlights glowed orange. "How do people cope with the polar nights," I asked Knut. "Don't they become suicidal or insane?"

"Not at all," he said. "Most people here don't believe in seasonal affective disorder — we just prefer to keep busy." He told me that Tromsø is twinned with Anchorage in Alaska, which made sense, and the English fishing port of Grimsby, which I advised him to keep quiet about. Most visitors come to see the northern lights. Since it is 350km inside the Arctic Circle and one of the most northerly cities on Earth, Tromsø is among the best places to see them. But I was warned not to get my hopes too high. "You have to think of the aurora [borealis] as a diva," explained Knut. "She is a high-maintenance lady with a tendency to sulk and when she turns up it is when it suits her."

As well as northern lights spotting, the other popular tourist activity in Tromsø is dog sledding, which I tried one cold and inevitably dark evening. As I understood it, dog sledding involved clambering on to the runners of the sledge and praying that the five Alaskan huskies pulling me did not have a death wish. The instruction was somewhat cursory — it amounted to pointing at the wooden brake pedal and a remark about not letting go of the sledge as the dogs were liable to bound off without me.

Once I had mastered the finer points of balance and avoiding overhead branches, I discovered the magical sensation of hurtling across the snow in the wintry darkness, snowflakes flickering towards my face in the beam of torchlight and the huskies yelping happily.

I felt like the star of a Nordic remake of *Ben-Hur*, perhaps entitled *Sven Hur*. It was enormous fun, but dog sledding is strictly for the tourists and I wanted to know how locals in Tromsø occupied themselves during the murky time.

"So, this is your first time cross-country skiing?" It was early the next morning, a time when the sky was its lightest shade of dark and Tom the photographer was finding my attempts at walking in skis unaccountably entertaining. Tromsø locals think of cross-country skiing as their version of jogging, strapping on their skis and heading for an hour or two along the floodlit ski track that follows the ridge of Tromsø island.

Cross-country skiing is straightforward, except when going up or downhill. I came to a gentle slope and began to slide relentlessly forwards. Despite frantically stabbing my poles into the ground I was unable to stop myself keeling over, eventually falling flat in the snow, though, thankfully, by the time Tom had stopped laughing I was back on my feet.

"The polar night has a tendency," wrote one Norwegian psychologist, "to bring out the least desirable elements in human behavior — envy, jealousy, suspicion, egotism, irritability." That evening I learned to my horror that the polar night also has a tendency to bring out something even more terrifying: the desire to perform jazz.

"Jazz has been part of the scene in Tromsø since early in the last century," said Oystein Blix, one of the founders of the Tromsø International Jazz Festival. Blix, who has a goatee but, disconcertingly, no moustache, said that the Tromsø jazz club organizes 40 concerts a year. "How did jazz get so big here?" I asked.

"It isn't only jazz, this city just loves festivals," he said. "There are film festivals, rock festivals, a Latin American festival and an international festival where the 125 different nationalities living in Tromsø celebrate their diverse cultures. I am also involved in organizing the trombone festival." For Blix, Tromsø's festival fervor has something to do with the extreme nature of the seasons: when the sun doesn't set in the summer you have to do something with the day and when the sun doesn't rise in the winter you have to do something with all those long evenings.

That night I attended the jazz festival, inside a former margarine factory. It takes more than some Norwegians playing slap bass to get me into jazz but the evening was a reminder of why they call Tromsø the Paris of the north. For such a small city — with a population of about 65,000 — it bustles with culture and activity. I suspect it's the fact that Tromsø is a university city with 10,000 students that makes it so receptive to culture. Whether it was the high-school students rehearsing for the New Year's Day Cabaret, a tradition almost 80 years old, or the frankly loopy group I met preparing for their weekly swim in the bone-chilling sea, no one seemed to let the darkness stop their lives. In fact it was the, er, polar opposite: the darkness is a form of liberation.

In yet another coffee bar I met Leanna, who moved from Australia to Tromsø to live with her Norwegian husband. "The great thing about the darkness is that it helps you appreciate light," she said. "During the summer we learn to harvest and store up the sun's goodness in preparation for the darkness arriving."

"So you don't find it spooky it being so dark all the time?" I asked. "Well I do suffer from insomnia," she admitted, "but the weather forces you to get active, you have to tire yourself out to get to sleep, and when finally the sun does return in mid-January it's a wonderful feeling, as if the entire city is waking up."

During my first days in Tromsø the sky had appeared an unrevealing black, as if the cyan and white of sky and cloud had been painted over by a melancholy, Rothko-inspired god. The longer I spent there the more I recognized the subtle shades of deep purples, inky indigos, and livid plums above me. A strange thing began to happen: I began to enjoy the darkness. I found that I slept better and deeper, and walking in the dark held fewer fears when darkness was all there was.

Everyone in Tromsø admitted they felt more tired during the winter but hardly anyone complained. They described the sunless winter as not "depressing" or "miserable" but "cosy." As I prepared to leave, I finally understood what they meant. How else to describe the gorgeous, white-paneled wooden houses with their sloping roofs and candles burning brightly in every window? Or the locals' enthusiasm for picking berries, making jam, baking bread and knitting their own clothes?

I had come to Tromsø out of masochistic curiosity and yet I had warmed to its strange charm. The Norwegian psychologist was wrong. The polar night does not bring out the least desirable elements in human behavior but some of the best: warmth, friendliness and a desire to stimulate body and mind. I never did see the northern lights, but I now realize that those who know Tromsø only for the lights don't know Tromsø at all. It had taken a week in the unremitting darkness, but at last I had seen the light.

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