

Post



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A controversial, but dam good day - July 23, 2024

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SUMMARY

Today we've started winding our way back down the coast to the south. We're in Alta, Norway and are taking a trip to the Alta Canyon and Power Station. We learn about how controversial the building of this dam was and about the protests run by the indigenous Sami people and outside activists. They succeeded in getting the project downsized but not stopped. Because the dam provides a large amount of hydroelectricity it is a very secure site with access highly regulated and controlled. We don hard hats and reflective vest before starting down a long, damp tunnel before emerging onto the top of the dam where we're allowed

to walk all the way across. The views at the dam, and on the drive are, beautiful! -
Karen

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DETAIL

We're now headed south and our first stop is Alta at the end of the Alta Fjord. No complaining about gray skies, rain or cold temperatures. It's now 65 degrees and should get up to 79 degrees today. This is 21 degrees F above the average for today here. The sky is very blue and we're projected to have sunshine all day.

After breakfast on the back deck we head out for our excursion. The plan is get a tour of a hydroelectric dam. We try to figure out how we picked this one. All we can guess is that Karen gave me my choice and this is what I selected. We'll see, maybe it'll be amazing.

The drive there is one hour, and so is the drive back. Thankfully it's fairly pretty. By definition there's water going into the dam from above and out of the dam below, so we're driving along pretty rivers and lakes. Our guide is "not tall" and is female. Her name is Natalia and I find out later she's from Russia. Guides from that country, of late, always say their country name cautiously, like you'll then proceed to bite their head off.

Before the bus departs, someone in a position of authority gets on to make the rules clear to us. 1) no one will take any pictures inside the tunnels leading to the dam, and 2) all bags will be left on the bus. Is everybody clear about that? We gather that it's OK if we're not OK with that, we just can't go on the tour.

That out of the way, we drive off. Our guide comments on the weather, about how unusually hot it is. We're told that people up here can not concentrate when it's this hot (79 degrees Fahrenheit) and so they don't go to work.

We learn that the city has about 16,000 people and more reindeer than that (though we didn't see any all day). The dam we're going to see provides all the electricity to the entire county we're in (Finnmark). It would be a shame if anything were to happen to the dam. As such, the precautions.

We learn that the people here fall into one of three groups: Norwegian, Sami, and Finnish. As such, some of traffic signs we'll see will be in all three languages. In school, depending on which group you're from, the state provide special language classes in your people's tongue. You're important, your people are important (even if not Norwegian) and your language is important. What a nice way to treat people.

We learn it was not always thus. From the 1850s to the 1950s the Norwegian government tried to "help out" the native Sami population by requiring that they only learn Norwegian and stop any of their native cultural practices. The authorities felt that there is no future in being Sami and as such the sooner everyone forgot the culture, traditions and languages, the better. You're welcome. (Yikes!) Norway was partially concerned about the Sami not recognizing national borders. In their annual tending to the reindeer they regularly cross back and forth between Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia.

As we drive along we hear that there are two security "gates" we'll be going through that protect the power generation station at the dam. Only certain people have the keys and today our guide is one of those people. We learn of the dam's history and it becomes clear why they have all these precautions.

Prior to the dam being built there wasn't a lot of electricity to be had in the area. Factories had to locate near a river to get power for their work. When the government explained what was going to be done, with the building of the dam, there was lots of protests. What they had planned was going to affect the salmon spawning grounds there and would impact the Sami population and the area they could access. They've been living here a very long time, and using these lands. They didn't feel they should be precluded from using and crossing this land.

There were lots of protests, hunger strikes, non-violent civil disobedience by the Sami. There was one attempt to blow things up which did injure a perpetrator significantly. With all this, regular Norwegians were thinking "We have Sami here? Who knew?" Well, it's wasn't that bad, but the Sami people, and their traditions, customs, and annual travels, weren't so much in the average Norwegian's consciousness.

These protests were a big wake up call for many. The Sami asked the King to intervene, which was something beyond his power, but he said he'd talk to the government. After two big alternations to the plans the government went ahead with their construction plans, despite lingering opposition by the Sami. The government does now have a separate parliament for the Sami to have some voice in Norwegian affairs, and there's a national Sami day, which (we're told) Norwegians do seriously observe (though it's not a holiday).

Our tour was interesting. We had to leave our bags, and put on hard hats and safety vests. The opening and closing of the entrances at either end, and signing in and out of the guests, were quite a production. Walking in the tunnel was through the granite mountain, seventy meters below ground level.

The dam itself is very attractive. We watched a propaganda video about the power station and it does seem that they tried to minimize impact on the salmon, fishing, and the Sami people. I'm guessing most around there are happy to have electricity.

On the drive back we see lots of tailings from slate operations (for making roof tiles) and hear about that industry. We also hear about an annual mountain bike race to again be held in Alta in a few days time. It's 700km and, because we're in the land of the midnight sun, in summer, the riders do not stop until they're done. Sleeping? We don't need no stinking' sleeping! They drink and eat on their bikes and keep going til they're done. It's considered to be one of the hardest mountain bike races in the world.

We do a quick tour of the town, and see their famous church designed to make you think of the Norther Lights.

Apparently there's a very large crucifix with Jesus inside, four meters long (12'). Apparently when this was being shipped from the manufacturing location in Italy, when it got to Norway it was winter and the authorities said "you can't proceed, your truck doesn't have approved snow tires for Norway". The papers the next day ran the headline "Jesus stopped at the Norway border".

We drive past Alta's pine trees, the northern-most pine forests in Europe, and finally we're back to our ship. A fun but long, and emotionally taxing, day.

Photos



On the drive to our excursion we note that we're not seeing forests, like earlier in the trip, or tundra, like where we were yesterday. What's this? In between. These are dwarf birch trees.



We also see traditional Sami dwellings.



One of the two locked security gates. It's essentially a rail crossing gate with a lock.



We stop at one point to see the water downstream from the dam. It's beautiful. We can see how people might be worried if this went away.



And... everyone has to have their picture taken in front of it.



And ditto once we have our construction hard hats and bright yellow safety vests. It's hilarious seeing kindergartners here headed somewhere. They all have on these same yellow safety vests and they're swimming in them, they're so oversized.



The dam itself is quite attractive. I think. They pull the water from different levels, and mix it, to ensure the downstream water is the temperature local wildlife expects for the time of year. Very thoughtful.



On the far side of the dam are a couple of (dressable) Sami dwellings, for meetings and entertaining, we gather.



There's a floating platform down on the reservoir side of the dam, tossing and turning. We hiked down to it and were careful not to fall into the cold water.



A view back from where we came. Huge doors open and close to let us out and back in, just like in a 007 movie.



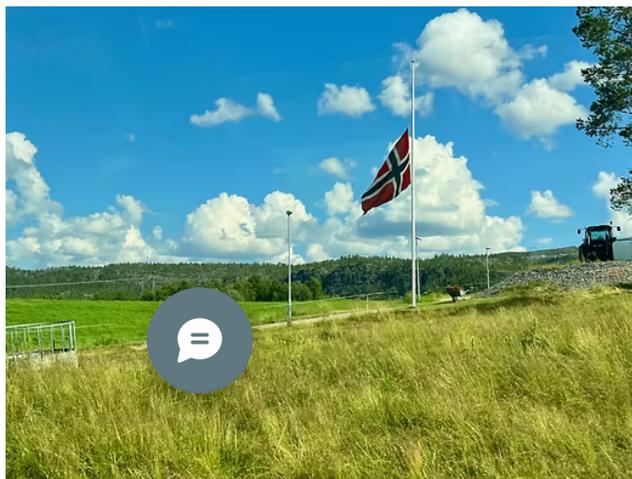
Where some of the Sami live now. In trailers with buildings attached, for entertaining, we're told.



FARNSNIENTE



So many slate roofs here, and this (among other places) is where it comes from. The skill to properly chip off just the right thickness, and then shape it, is amazing. According to those who do it, you have to get it in your mother's milk. Hm.



Norwegian flags can only be flown on approved dates. Otherwise it's the red, blue and white streamer. Why at 1/2 mast? Sadly this is the anniversary of the 70 youths killed at summer camp on the island off Oslo. A day of not so uplifting stories.



The new church in Alta. Among other requirements it was to reflect the nature of the area. This is modeled after some of the swirling of the Northern Lights.

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