

From the World of Geography

This column presents talking points and events that have taken place in the world of Geography and geographers. In the current issue we take a look at an excursion to the north.

Excursion on the edge of Europe

Marja Anttonen, Tanja Löytynoja & Katri Suorsa, Department of Geography, University of Oulu

At a few year intervals, the Geographical Society of Northern Finland organises excursions to some geographically interesting places abroad. During the past ten years the excursions have been made to Estonia, Russian Karelia and Romania. The latest trip was realised in September 2006 when a group of 18 people travelled to Finnish Lapland and northern Norway. This time the excursion was planned together with Atlas, the student guild of geographers in the University of Oulu and the subdivision of the society. In this review three of the participants write about the experiences the group had along the way.

The six-day excursion was carried out as a tour. We travelled by a chartered bus from Oulu to Kilpisjärvi, Tromsø, North Cape and Inari (Figure 1). The destinations were chosen on the grounds of general interest and diversity – the city of Tromsø acted as a counterbalance to northern nature, and we took hiking into our program to make our limbs supple after a long time of sitting on the bus. Accommodation varied from a

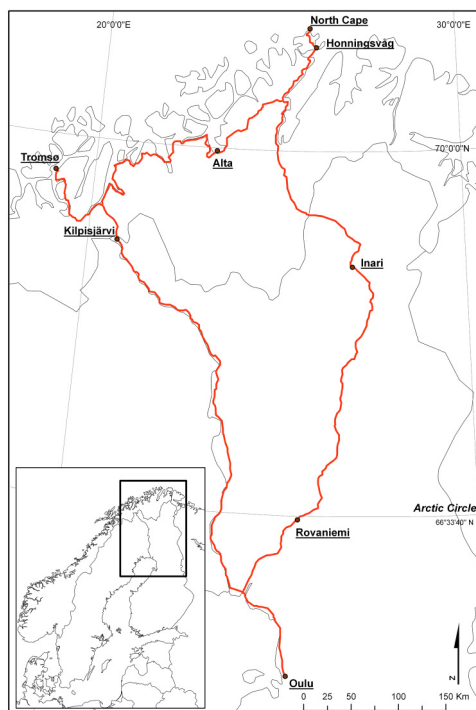


Figure 1. The travel route of the excursion.

bed and breakfast to cottages and the research station.

Bon voyage!

We left the University of Oulu on Friday, the 15th of September at 2 pm. Everybody was in time and there was excitement in the air. The bus seemed nice, and the same can

be said about the participants and the driver. The outward journey to Kilpisjärvi felt surprisingly short – maybe good company, the excitement, a couple of coffee breaks and Matti (the movie) – fooled us to feel that it was only a couple of hours instead of nine. It was dark when we arrived in Kilpisjärvi, so we did not see that much. However, at that time all we needed was a sauna and a bed, and that we got at the Kilpisjärvi Biological Station.

Saturday morning dawned beautiful. The first thing we saw when opening the curtains was Saana – the fjeld we all had heard of but most of us had not seen except in pictures. After the generous breakfast we packed our things and started our climb to Saana. There were 744 steps in the beginning, after that, just rocks and a path that was luckily clearly marked. While walking we had to stop often to take a breath and of course, admiring the view. Other fjelds, like Pikku-Malla, seemed like little hills beside the Saana, whose top is 1,029 metres above the sea level. The whole trip to the top of the Saana and back was eight kilometres. And the trip down was actually more difficult than the way to the top. The reasons were strong headwind, rolling stones and the steps that haunted us (or actually our calves) days after the trip.

After the trip we went back to the Kilpisjärvi Biological Station, had a shower and a good dinner and continued our trip to Norway. Rain started almost in the minute we drove to the Norwegian side of the border, but it did not prevent us from seeing the beauty of the landscapes, which were totally different from the Finnish ones. Flashlights flared in the bus and we stopped quickly to take pictures on the shore of the Arctic Ocean, just as every tourist does.

Tromsø, the Gateway to the Arctic

On the evening we arrived in Tromsø, which seemed like a really beautiful town. The city centre is situated on an island between the continent and another bigger island, Kvaløya, and is surrounded by mountains and sea. Houses are built partly on the mountain slopes, and they seem almost like seabird nest colonies on a cliff. The town has a population of about 63 000 and it is growing in size as people from the surrounding areas move in. Also about 300 Finnish citizens live in Tromsø, mostly working there as nurses or construction workers. Tromsø has the nickname “Gateway to the Arctic” because many arctic expeditions have started there. Also nowadays a route to the Arctic Ocean passes through Tromsø and the sea is strongly present in the city. For example, you can see great ocean liners going under the big bridge right beside the city centre.

During our two-day visit in Tromsø, we, for example, got acquainted with the nightlife of the city which really did not differ from Finnish one, except that smoking is not allowed inside the bars and beer is bit more expensive. On Sunday we walked in the town, drove around the island and visited the polar information centre of Polaria. In Polaria we watched panorama films of Spitsbergen and Antarctic and admired the playful bearded seals, various fish and other creatures (e.g. starfish and sea anemone) in the arctic aquarium.

Next morning we visited the University of Tromsø, the world’s northernmost university, established in 1968. Karen Marie Christensen, the Head of the Information department, gave us an introduction about the University and a tour around the

campus, which architecture and art give an impressive atmosphere. With about 6 650 students the University is a bit smaller than the University of Oulu. There is no geography department at Tromsø, but other related subjects, like geology, biology and social sciences. It is also possible to study Finnish at the University of Tromsø and we happened to run into one of the teachers along the tour. Among other things she told us about northern Norway's ethnic group of Kvens, who have originally emigrated from northern Finland, and whose language nowadays resembles a mixture of Finnish and Norwegian.

Tromsø seemed like a very lively small town. Maybe it was because of the differences in the altitude, nice-looking colourful old and new houses peacefully side by side, but the town made us, girls from the flat city of Oulu, really excited. Some of us are even dreaming about going back as an exchange students or researchers, but this time we continued our journey towards the north.

Destination 71° 10' 21" N

The trip from Tromsø to North Cape was unbelievable. The landscape was amazing, like in a movie scenery. The roads were mountainous and curving and the slates surrounded the roads. There was not much traffic because the tourism season was over. We stopped for a quick dinner in Alta and continued our trip to the island of Magerøya where North Cape is situated. A route to Magerøya goes through a tunnel that is 6.8 kilometres long and lies 212 metres below the sea level. The road maintenance charge in the tunnel is quite expensive but it is used to cover the cost of building the tunnel.

It was again dark when we arrived in our overnight accommodation in Skipsfjorden, about 20 kilometres from North Cape. The four cottages seemed cosy and warm: there was no electricity, only gas lamps gave light. On Thursday morning, in daylight, we saw a beautiful fiord around us and it was a shame that we did not have time to admire the view longer.

Our next stops were two fishing villages, Kamøyvær and Skarsvåg where we took a short walk. In Skarsvåg we visited Jul og vinterhus and Kirkeporten, which was a geographer's dream – a gate shaped stone formation of slates (Figure 2). In the summertime the midnight sun shines through the "gate", and from Kirkeporten you can also see the Horn of North Cape.

After leaving Kirkeporten we drove towards North Cape, the northernmost point of Europe. On the way we got some foretaste of the extreme weather conditions of this latitude because suddenly it started to snow. In no time, the ground became white and visibility weakened. For a while we were not sure if we can reach North Cape at all, but luckily our bus driver managed to drive us safely there. Besides snowing, it rained, hailed, and even the sun shone during our three-hour visit to North Cape.

The road ended on the cliff which has come to be known as the top of Europe. However, this impressive cliff 307 metres above the sea level is not really the northernmost point of Europe because the nearby cape, Knivskjelodden, extends even farther north (Jacobsen 2000). It is possible to reach this point by hiking, but unfortunately we did not have enough time for it. So, we had to be satisfied with "the touristic extreme point" and visited North Cape Hall, a big stone building partly



Figure 2. Joyful travellers in Kirkeporten. Photo: Tanja Löytynoja 19.9.2006.

constructed inside the cliff. This attraction includes for example a supervideograph, a small historical exhibition, a souvenir shop, a post office, a restaurant and an atmospheric ecumenical chapel. Outside the building is situated the Globe, the famous monument, in front of which millions of tourists have posed for a photograph. We acted equally like all the tourists: we admired the panoramic view over the Arctic Ocean and took a lot of photographs by the monument in spite of the windy weather. At the hall we enjoyed the film about North Cape's nature and bought some souvenirs. There is definitely a chance to get rid of your money at North Cape Hall because of an expensive entrance fee and a great amount of different North Cape products.

Every year over 200 000 tourists visit North Cape. According to Nordkapp booklet (2004), there can be even 60 buses parked in front of North Cape Hall every day during summer time. No wonder that the hall is so big. Within our visit there were five busloads of tourists coming from a cruise ship which was anchored in Honningsvåg, one of the largest cruise ship harbours in Norway.

Back to Finland

The fifth day of our excursion continued with a long drive to Finland. We stopped shortly at Honningsvåg, the main town near North Cape, and again at Trollholmsund



Figure 3. The official group photo in the Arctic Circle. Photo: Mika Kärkkäinen 20.9.2006.

where we had a short walk to “the trolls”. According to a Sámi legend, these white dolomite deposits are originally trolls that were transformed into stone because they could not find shelter from the sunrise (Nordgård 2004). Despite our good imaginations, we did not manage to see the columns as trolls but with a geological mind, and in the sunset, they were quite impressive. We crossed the Norwegian-Finnish border at nightfall and arrived at our next accommodation, Youth Holiday Centre Vasatokka in Inari just before midnight. Most of us still took a sauna before falling asleep in the nice cottages.

Just like northern Norway, northern Finland is the home of Sámi people. We familiarised ourselves with Sámi culture

next morning when we visited in SIIDA, Sámi Museum and Northern Lapland Nature Centre in Inari. There we had a look at the joint exhibition of the museum and nature centre, and watched the multimedia show about northern lights.

The snowfall of the previous day had followed us, and our homeward journey began in the middle of wet snowfall. That is why we had to change our plans and pass sightseeing on the top of Kaunispää, the fjeld near Saariselkä village and skiing centre. Instead, we had a couple of stopovers farther south. For example, travelling from north to south was memorialised by taking some group photographs on the Arctic Circle in Rovaniemi (Figure 3). On Wednesday night the 20th of September, we

had come full circle and returned to Oulu. Now it was time to unload the photos and begin to reminisce about our excursion with many experiences (some of the photos can be found on the web-site of our society <http://terra oulu.fi/psms.htm>).

References

- Jacobsen, J.K.S. (2000). Tourist Perceptions of the Ultimate European Periphery. In Brown, F. & D. Hall (eds.): *Tourism in Peripheral Areas: Case Studies*, 74–90. Channel View Publications, Clevedon.
- Nordgård, I. P. (2004). Trollholmsund 14.2.2006. <http://www.visitarcticnorway.no/>
- Nordkapp – Honningsvåg, the town by the North Cape* (2004). To-Foto AS, Harstad.