

## Tromsø Norway by David Holmen June 2013

In June of 2013, Deb and I traveled to Tromsø, Norway with my sister Betty and her husband John. While we were there, John and I did the Midnight Sun Marathon. I've been interested in this race for a few years, but this was the first year that it didn't conflict with other plans. Our trip also included a brief visit to Amsterdam.

Tromsø is a port city on Norway's northern coast. The city is located on the island of Tromsøya, which is nestled between the mainland and the larger coastal island of Kvaløya. Tromsø is at roughly the same latitude as the north shore of Alaska. That's so far north that from late May through the middle of July, the sun never sets. At noon, the sun is in the south, but it's not directly overhead. At midnight, the sun is to the north, staying just above the horizon. One of the reasons we wanted to travel there was to see the midnight sun.

The Midnight Sun Marathon is held on the weekend closest to the summer solstice. This year the solstice was on June 21, and the race was held on June 22. The marathon starts at 8:30 PM. Since I can usually finish a marathon in less than 3:30, I could expect to finish the race just before midnight.

To get to Tromsø, we had to take three flights. Delta Airlines has flights from Minneapolis to Amsterdam, which is a hub for KLM Royal Dutch Airlines. KLM, which is one of Delta's European partners, has flights from Amsterdam to a few cities in Norway, including Oslo. To get from Oslo to Tromsø, we had to fly on a regional airline. One of the airlines serving Tromsø is Scandinavian Airlines (SAS). SAS isn't a partner of Delta, but they are a partner of United Airlines.

In the past, Deb and I have traveled to Europe with tour groups or booked reservations through a travel agency. This year, we made our own arrangements. I've flown with Delta enough to reach the Platinum Medallion level of their SkyMiles program. In December, I got an offer from United to match my status with Delta for one year. That meant if I booked the Delta and KLM flights through Delta and the SAS flight through United, I could receive similar perks for all our flights.

Since we booked our reservations through two different airlines (Delta and United), neither airline would be responsible if we missed our connection in Oslo. To minimize the risk of that happening, we chose flights with long connection times. The connections worked well traveling to Europe, with the longest flight being an overnight flight. They didn't work as well coming home. There didn't seem to be any way to leave Tromsø at a reasonable hour without having an overnight connection in Amsterdam. We decided to spend that night in a hotel in downtown Amsterdam, giving us a chance to see another country, if only for one evening.

Thursday, June 20:

Our flight to Amsterdam left at 3:15 PM. Since Betty and John had a long drive, they planned to arrive at the airport three hours before the flight. That gave them some margin for error, in case they were delayed. Deb and I arrived at the same time and met them there. Our first flight was scheduled to arrive in Amsterdam around 6:30 AM. Because of the difference in time zones, that would feel more like midnight. Our hope was to get an hour or two of sleep toward the end of the flight, but it's difficult to fall asleep on an airplane. I think Betty and John nodded off briefly, but Deb and I couldn't sleep at all.

Friday, June 21:

After our arrival in Amsterdam, we had three hours until our next flight. Since our flight was on time, we were able to do some souvenir shopping in the airport. Our next flight left at 9:20 AM and arrived in Oslo around 11:00 AM. In Oslo, we had a long wait to retrieve our luggage, and still had to check

our bags with SAS and go through security. We were hoping to stop at an ATM and get Norwegian kroner, since we anticipated needing cash for a taxi when we arrived in Tromsø. The ATMs in the Oslo airport only took credit cards, so we waited to get cash in the Tromsø airport. Because our flights were all on time, we had plenty of time to make our connection. It helped that my Platinum status with United allowed us to check in at the Star Alliance Gold counter. Our last flight left Oslo at 2:00 PM and arrived in Tromsø at 3:45 PM. The Tromsø airport had an ATM that accepted bank cards, so we were able to get cash.

We stayed at Clarion Collection. I chose this hotel for a few reasons. It was a familiar brand, it had good reviews, and it was located on the waterfront in the heart of the downtown area. The room rate seemed expensive at first glance, but the hotel provided a breakfast buffet, afternoon waffles and a dinner buffet. Since dining in Tromsø is expensive, having so many meals included made this hotel a good value. After taking a cab to the hotel and checking in, John and I walked to the city hall to pick up our race packets, while Deb and Betty started shopping. A block away from city hall, there were street vendors selling jewelry, wool sweaters and other souvenirs in the town square. After shopping there, we walked down a street that had several small shops. In the evening, went to a pre-race pasta dinner at Polaria, an arctic museum with a theater and an aquarium. The price of dinner included admission to the museum. It was cloudy that evening, so instead of staying up to see the midnight sun, we called it a day.

Saturday, June 22:

Since it was race day, I tried to sleep in as late as I could. Twice I woke up and had trouble getting back to sleep. Deb wasn't wearing a sleep mask, so the constant daylight made it difficult for her to sleep that night. We eventually got up so we could have breakfast before the buffet ended. Betty and John had already eaten, but joined us while we ate. The race didn't start until the evening, so we had all afternoon for shopping and sightseeing. We started by buying four-day bus passes. Although most of the local attractions were within a few blocks of our hotel, we knew we would need to take city busses to a few others.

Next, we took a bus across the Tromsø Bridge to Tromsdalen, where we rode the cable car to Storsteinen (Big Rock) on mount Fløya. This was a high vantage point from which we could get good views of Tromsø, Tromsdalen, and some of the surrounding fjords and mountains. On our way back, we stopped to take pictures of the Arctic Cathedral before catching another bus back across the bridge to Tromsø. The bus dropped us off right in front of Peppe's Pizza, where we had lunch. I continued my practice of trying pizza in different countries by having a smoked salmon pizza.

We planned to spend the rest of the afternoon shopping in the downtown area, but rain eventually forced us indoors. As John and I prepared for the race, we expected to have light rain for most, if not all, of the race. The temperature was around 60, so it wasn't going to be a cold rain, but it still made our clothing choices tricky. John wore a long sleeve tech shirt. I was planning to wear a short sleeve tech shirt with arm warmers, but I made a last minute decision to omit the arm warmers. I was worried I'd be too hot if the rain stopped.

The race started near our hotel. I've done other races in Europe, so I'm used seeing the distance marked in kilometers. What made this race different was that the kilometers counted down. The first sign was 42 kilometers to go. After running 2K through downtown, we would cross the Tromsø Bridge, which would take us to the mainland. The bridge rises to a height of 43 meters above the water, making it the biggest hill in the race. We would do a long out-and-back along the coast before crossing the bridge again to return to Tromsø just before the halfway mark. The second half of the race was an out-and-back on the island. Except for the bridge, the course was mostly flat.

We walked to the start wearing rain ponchos, but the rain was stopping. It was amazing how quickly the weather changed. Twenty minutes before the start, the sun came out. I commented to John that if it stayed sunny, we might get hot. There was a stage near the starting line where they were playing music and leading the runners who wanted to do warm-up exercises. Many of the runners followed suit and were dancing in the street. This is one of the things I love about international races. People travel from all over the world. They speak different languages and have different customs, yet we all have running in common.

To beat 3:30, I needed to average five minutes per kilometer. A pace of 4:30 per kilometer would bring me in under 3:10. I haven't run that fast in over a year, so I expected to run a pace that was somewhere in between. Even though I lined up only 20 feet from the starting line, the start was a little congested. I reached the 42K to go sign in 1:04. I was more interested in knowing my pace for the first full kilometer. I felt like I started fast, so I wondered if it would be under 4:30. I reached the 41K sign in 5:04, so I ran that kilometer in four minutes even. I knew that was way too fast, so I eased up a bit.

In the second kilometer, we left the streets to run on sidewalks along the waterfront. We ran right past our hotel. Next we went up a ramp onto the Tromsø Bridge. The bridge is asymmetrical, with the highest point being much closer to the mainland. That meant the uphill side was long and gradual, and the downhill side was shorter but steeper. While I was still climbing, I passed the 40K sign. Even though part of it was uphill, I ran that kilometer in 4:22.

As we came off the bridge, we began a long out-and-back section that was mostly flat. I eventually settled into a consistent pace between 4:25 and 4:28. Common sense told me that was way too fast, but I was excited. I always run hard in international races. I always start at a pace that seems insanely fast, yet sometimes I surprise myself and sustain it. Today I was going for it.

After about 8K, I was getting hot. I wondered if I was way overdressed in a short-sleeve tech shirt. Then we crossed a stream carrying ice cold water down from the mountains. For several seconds, I was surrounded by a cold draft. It was refreshing. We reached the turnaround at about 32K to go. I was working hard to keep up with the strongest runners around me, even though I knew the pace was probably unsustainable. We went by the same mountain stream again, and I enjoyed the cold draft again.

I started watching the runners going the other way to look for John. Since John was walking, and almost everyone else was running, his gait was easy to distinguish. John didn't expect to have any trouble beating the 5:30 time limit, but he was a little worried that he might finish in last place. I noticed there was already at least one runner behind him. I suspected John would eventually pass other runners as they slowed down and started walking. I was worried John would be hot in his long-sleeve shirt. I told him about the stream so he could look forward to it.

The sky was partly cloudy, but I even when I couldn't see the sun directly, I could see where it was by a bright patch in the clouds. At one point, the sun was behind a cloud, but I saw its reflection off the water. On our way back, we went under the bridge and continued north for about two more kilometers. After we turn around, we started climbing as we left the waterfront. There was one block that was a steep enough hill to force me to slow down briefly. I wondered how I would fare running up the bridge. As we ran past the Arctic Cathedral, we passed an aid station, and I drank two cups of energy drink. Aid stations were every 5K, so I worried about getting enough liquid to stay hydrated.

The first time we crossed the bridge, we ran in the roadway. Now, the bridge was once again open to traffic, and we ran on a sidewalk on the north side. I focused on slow steady progress and reminded myself that in this direction it wouldn't be as far to the main span. I held up OK and was rewarded

with a long gradual downhill. I also saw a bright patch where the sun was almost visible through the clouds. After running down the ramp, I turned a corner and saw the 21K sign. Since it was 21K to go, that meant I was already past the halfway point. My time was 1:34:30, so I must have reached halfway in just over 1:34. At that pace, I would finish in 3:08.

As I returned to the downtown area, I saw Deb and Betty in the crowd. Then I returned to the sidewalks leading along the harbor and past our hotel. In the next few kilometers, I found it difficult to maintain the pace. My kilometer times were now in the low 4:30s. With about 15K to go, it started to rain lightly. Realizing I would probably be cold for the rest of the race, I was no longer fighting to maintain the pace. Fatigue caught up to me, and I just wanted to finish. I was now running kilometer times in the low 4:50s. If I could keep all my remaining kilometers under five minutes, I would still break 3:15, and I was happy with that.

As we reached the airport, we ran under a tunnel. At first, it looked like a bridge, but it was about a block long. I didn't realize it at the time, but we were running underneath the end of a runway. We did a big loop next to the airport and eventually ran under the same tunnel to begin the final 8K. It was on the return trip that I could no longer keep my kilometer times under five minutes. With 5K to go, one of my shoes came untied, and I had to stop to retie it. After that I knew I wouldn't break 3:15. A few runners passed me, but I just focused on getting to the finish. With 3K to go, I saw John still going out. There were now at least 20 runners behind him.

In the last kilometer of the race, something unexpected happened. I was passed by a policeman on a motorcycle, who was going just a bit faster than me. It was almost as though he was leading me in. The motorcycle sped ahead, and then I was passed by a pace car. That was followed by a bicycle that was leading a runner who was clearly going much faster than me. There was a half marathon that started two hours after the marathon, and the leaders were catching up to me. The first three runners in the half marathon passed me before I finished.

I crossed the line in 3:16:29, and Deb and Betty met me as I reached the town square. I had some food and beverages, but left quickly to get back to the hotel so I could shower and change into warm clothes. Deb went to bed, but Betty and I eventually went back out to watch for John.

Sunday, June 23:

When we went back out to watch for John, it was about 1 AM. The rain was letting up, but it was still overcast, so we couldn't see the sun. John's previous PR for walking a marathon was 5:11:37. Based on when I last saw John during the race, it seemed like he had a good chance of beating that. After watching for a while, we got a bit nervous, but when we could see John coming, it was obvious he would set a new PR. He finished in 5:09:47. I got to bed a little after 2 AM. I imagine John was up later, because he had to shower.

We tried to get as much sleep as we could without missing breakfast. Official results were posted in the town hall. On our way to check the results, we did a little bit of shopping. Then we caught a bus to the Troms Folkmuseum, which is located in a large city park. The museum is only open on Sundays, and on the Sunday closest to the solstice, they have a traditional midsummer celebration, including Maypole dancing. We didn't know exactly where in the park it was, so it took us a while to find it. When we got there, they were still attaching wildflowers to the Maypole. While we waited, we toured the museum and had lunch. They were serving hot dogs, but John noticed that someone else got theirs in lefse instead of a bun. Lefse is Norwegian potato bread that we used to eat when we visited our grandparents. We stayed long enough to see the beginning of the dancing, but had to leave to make sure we caught the next bus. We wanted to get back downtown before the shops closed. In addition to shopping, we had time to make brief visits to two museums.

For the second straight day, it started raining in the late afternoon, and it didn't seem likely that we would see the midnight sun that evening. We went to bed earlier and got some much needed sleep.

Monday, June 24:

We got lucky on the weather. It was mostly sunny all afternoon, which was important because this was the day of our guided tour. A local photographer picked us up at our hotel and drove us to Kvaløya (Whale Island). He took us to several vantage points where there are good views of the fjords and mountainsides. At one point, we left the car to hike about a mile to get to a point where we had a great view of the islands where Ersfjord meets the ocean. After five hours of sightseeing and taking pictures, we got back to our hotel in time for afternoon waffles, which is something we rarely missed. As usual, it rained later in the day. Betty and John were going for a walk to take pictures from the bridge, so I went with them just far enough to see Skansen House, the oldest house in Tromsø.

Weather for the evening didn't look promising for seeing the sun. Deb and I went to bed early, since we needed to get up early on Tuesday. Betty and John went to the Arctic Cathedral, in hopes that the weather would improve enough to get pictures of the sun. They were rewarded for their patience. The rain stopped and the sky became less cloudy. While they couldn't get a direct view of the sun, they got nice photos of thin clouds lit up by the sun.

Although I'm a little disappointed that I never got to see the sun at midnight, we were up at enough different hours of the day to experience 24-hour daylight.

Tuesday, June 25:

We had to get up early to eat breakfast and get to the airport in time to catch a 10:15 flight to Oslo. After we reached our gate, we discovered that our flight was delayed by roughly an hour. We allowed two hours for our connection in Oslo, which was our tightest connection of the trip. We were switching airlines again, so it was a bit nerve-wracking. When we got to Oslo, we had to wait for luggage, go upstairs to get boarding passes and check bags, and then go through security. The security line was much longer than it had been on Friday, so we had to rush to get to our gate. We caught our flight to Amsterdam, but we were among the last to board.

We booked our Delta and KLM flights as a multi-city trip, so we were supposed to get our luggage in Amsterdam. In our rush to check in, we didn't notice that the KLM ticket agent made a mistake tagging our bags. When we got to Amsterdam, our bags didn't come to the carousel. When we inquired at the KLM service counter, the agent could tell from our claim tags that our baggage was tagged to go straight to Minneapolis. They were at the Amsterdam airport, but they were in storage and to get them delivered to a carousel would take an hour. We had already arranged for a taxi and had only one evening to see Amsterdam, so we couldn't afford to wait any longer. KLM refused to deliver the bags to our hotel, so none of us had a change of clothes.

We stayed downtown at Nadia Hotel. I highly recommend this hotel. It's charming, well-located, and the manager was friendly and helpful. They also have a free breakfast. After checking in, we walked to Pancakes Amsterdam for an early dinner. We were a little rushed for time, so we had to order as soon as we were seated. We were in a hurry because we had tickets to tour the Anne Frank house at 7:00. Service was quick, and we actually had time to take pictures and stop at a few shops along the way.

When we got to the Anne Frank house, there was a long line to buy tickets. Because we bought ours online, we were able to bypass the line and go right in. We allowed an hour for the self-guided tour, and we needed every minute of it.

John and I had planned to go for a short run in the evening. Neither of us had our running clothes, but John had clothes that would dry quickly if he got sweaty. I only had jeans. John wanted to run so he could say he ran in another country. Since he was content to run one mile, he felt he could do that without getting too sweaty. Like John, I wanted to run in a new country, but I was also hoping to run far enough to get a quality training run. That wasn't a realistic option with the clothes I had. I waited at the hotel while John ran a little over a mile, and Deb and Betty took photos in the neighborhood around our hotel. When John got back, we all walked to Dam Square to take pictures. On the way back, we stopped at Sara's Pancakes to have another light dinner, which was more like dessert. We wanted to sample Dutch pancakes as much as we could in an overnight stay. I didn't feel the need to have pizza in Amsterdam, because I've had pizza there before during a long airport stopover.

Wednesday, June 26:

We got up early and had breakfast as soon as it started. Between staying up late and getting up early, we didn't get nearly as much sleep as we wanted. We got by surprisingly well. After breakfast, Betty and John went to the train station to take pictures. Deb and I visited a few shops and took more photos of the neighborhood near our hotel. We were in the middle of the canals that ring the heart of the city. It reminded me of Venice, but with traffic.

We only had one flight that day, but it was a nine hour overseas flight. When we got home, we were happy to finally be reunited with our luggage. Since I hadn't gone for a run since the race, I was hoping to run ten miles when we got home. The reality of running after being awake for 21 hours hit me in the face even harder than the late afternoon heat and humidity. I settled for a little over five miles.