

MODERN FAIRYTALE

It's famous as Hans Christian Andersen's home town. It's also stylish, uber-cool, eco-conscious and oh so easy on the eye.

Sharon Stephenson visits the wonderful Copenhagen

My husband is happy: we are in Copenhagen and he's discovered what appears to be a beauty pageant on bicycles; he spends the next four days trying not to stare at women who make local supermodel Helena Christensen look like the ugly sister. But

I'm happy too: Copenhagen is a city that keeps on giving when it come to style, where beautiful people in black polo necks and statement glasses have earnest conversations about form, function and that famous Scandinavian obsession, minimalism. And where everything - from light switches to the pickled herring breakfast banquet - is designed not only with aesthetics but also efficiency in mind.

The locals, it would seem, are also riding the happiness train: Copenhagen is regularly voted the world's happiest city. Not surprising when you consider the place often tops quality of life surveys. Or that style bible *Wallpaper* magazine recently described it as one of the coolest cities on the planet.

In fact, the only one who isn't happy is my bank manager. Although Copenhagen is supposed to be the most affordable of the Nordic capitals, it's still the kind of place where your wallet gets lighter simply by being there. And when your Danish kroner started life as NZ dollars, then the process of being parted from your cash is even more painful. It isn't like I haven't been warned: every time I mentioned I was visiting Copenhagen, friends would laugh before relating some extraordinary tale about a NZ\$20 glass of house wine, a \$7 bottle of water, or \$30 for two coffees and a sliver of cake.

But this compact and welcoming city, where bicycles rather than cars set the pace, is worth every penny. In the end, I whisper a short prayer to the goddess of Visa, and go for it. Besides, you don't necessarily need a wallet the size of Bill

Gates' to enjoy the city. The best place to start is the central boulevard named after one of Copenhagen's most famous sons, Hans Christian Andersen. The author left his native Odense for Copenhagen aged 14 to 'become famous' and duly succeeded after conjuring up some of our best-known fairytales, including one of my favourites, *The Emperor's New Clothes*.

An impressive statue of Andersen anchors one corner of the city's main square, Radhuspladsen, and after you've sat on his knee for the obligatory photo, pop across the road to the Hans Christian Andersen Museum, recently opened to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the writer's birth. Like most of his work, it's small but perfectly formed so will swallow less than an hour, but you'll discover more than you ever needed to know about Andersen's life and stories.

Probably the most visited monument to the writer's legacy, though, is Den Lille Havfrue, a statue of the Little Mermaid on the city's waterfront. She's survived paint being thrown over her, an arm being sawn off, decapitations, and even being called 'the most overrated attraction in Copenhagen'. I wouldn't know though, because when we arrive in town, she is otherwise occupied at Shanghai's Expo.

Thankfully, there's much that can be enjoyed for free. Not since King Christian IV commissioned a copy of Amsterdam to be built here has the waterfront seen such a makeover. We gawp at the Opera House, the ceiling of which is adorned with 105,000 sheets of gold leaf; and at the adjoining Royal Library with its ultra-modern extension, the Black Diamond, so called because when the sun shines on the water, the reflection turns its face into one seamless gleam. Only the Danes could plonk a hunk of glass onto a knot of medieval streets and have it work.

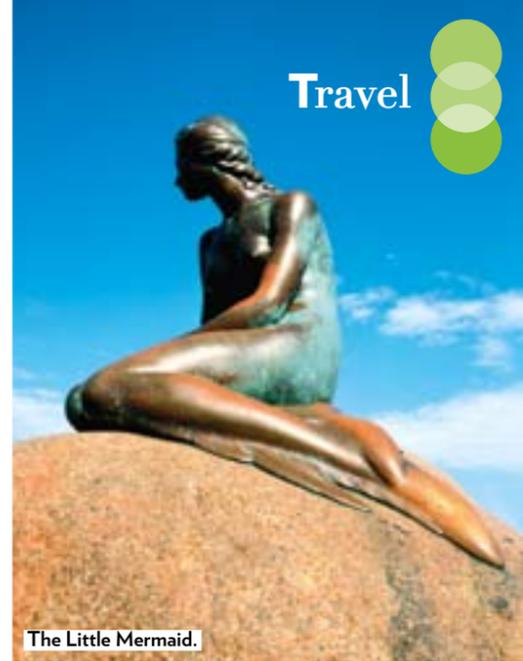
I'd rather have spent the day (window) shopping, but if you find yourself in Copenhagen on God's day, be prepared to do something else as huge swathes of the city are shut. Which is probably why every tourist in town is shoehorned into the National Museum when we visit. But for someone whose knowledge of Vikings is hazy at best, it offers a fascinating look at the often brutal history of the place. Check out the full-sized Viking corpse - gruesome and fascinating in equal measure. ▶



Staircase on Stroget.



Aesthetic appeal.



The Little Mermaid.



Tivoli.



Central Station.



The Town Hall.



Sharon up close with Hans.



Cycling is big in Copenhagen.



The Oresund Bridge.



Christiania district.



Smorrebrod.



Amalienborg Palaces.

CITY WITHIN A CITY

It's not free but the view from the top of the Vor Frelsers Kirke (Church of our Saviour) in nearby Christianshavn is well worth it. Except if you've got vertigo or an aversion to dodgy, narrow steps. Apparently there's no truth to the rumour the architect fell and died during construction, but it's entirely plausible.

Descending the 400 or so steps is just as fraught with danger, so it's no surprise that many visitors immediately pop next door to the infamous Christiania, a former Victorian military barracks that was set up by hippies and drop-outs in the 60s and 70s as a 'free city' operating autonomously from Copenhagen's laws. It's probably better known for its liberal attitude to drugs than it is for its idealism: venture down the non-ironically named Pusher Street and you'll see an array of blokes in need of a shower hawking blocks of hash. It's a world away from the rest of the relentlessly trendy capital and, despite providing one of the best vegetarian meals ever to pass my lips, the place was a bit depressing.

I cheer up when we stumble upon Nyhavn, a cobbled area astride the main canal that has somehow ended up with more than its fair share of pretty. A former sailors' haunt that's now firmly in the grasp of gentrification, the brightly painted 18th century townhouses are occupied by bars, restaurants and cafés. Legend has it that Hans Christian Andersen lived in several of these houses (nos 18, 20 and 67, since you asked).

However, we're not here to sightsee but to exchange a week's mortgage payment for lunch. I try, but fail, to like the four varieties of herring on offer, but the beetroot cream that seems to appear on every menu is strangely addictive. As is the glogg (think mulled wine on steroids) and the aquavit (Danish schnapps) that goes a long way to ward off the freezing temperatures that threaten to turn us into human popsicles.

FAIRGROUND ATTRACTION

I'm not really a theme park kind of girl – or one who prefers to spend my precious holiday hours with hordes of over-sugared kids. The 4.5 million who visited Tivoli Gardens, Denmark's largest family attraction, last year would disagree with me. Fortunately, Tivoli is innocently pleasurable rather

than a shrine to slick marketing. We forgo the fountains and stomach-churning rides to wander amongst the fairy lights and eat more candyfloss than is good for us.

You don't have to look far to see the truth in the rumour that Danes are genetically incapable of producing anything ugly. From the Dansk Design Museum to Stroget, Europe's longest pedestrianised shopping street, there's the white-on-white minimalist style I covet. Even our bottom-of-the-range hotel in the red-light-cum-hipster district of

Vesterbro features more Kartell lamps and chairs from local designer Arne Jacobsen than there probably are in the whole of Wellington. I let my marbles completely roll away at Illums Bolighus, a department store filled with floors of things I really, really want. Luckily my husband is able to distract himself from admiring the natives long enough to wrench the credit card from my hand before I do too much damage.

Hamlet really did get it wrong – there's nothing at all rotten in the state of Denmark...



WHAT THE LOCALS KNOW

TAKE A HARBOUR TOUR For the best view of many city sights, especially the stunning Opera House with its floating roof, take to the water. A harbour cruise will also save you the disappointment – and shoe leather – of schlepping out to see the Little Mermaid which (whisper it) isn't really worth the walk.

EAT A SMORREBROD These ginormous open sandwiches start with a base of dark Danish rye bread and are layered with fish, meats, salads and pickles. Twin it with a cold 'hoker' beer – a generic term for any beer bought in a shop and drunk outside.

GET HIP Want a side-order of urban grit with your holiday? Head to Vesterbro, the former red-light district, which is now the hippest suburb in town, with cool bars, fashion boutiques and oodles of beautiful people.

CROSS THE BRIDGE As you're so close, it makes sense to pop over to Sweden (Malmo) on the awesome Oresund fixed-link bridge which was opened in 2000 and spans 17km across the Baltic sea to connect the two countries. It takes about 45 minutes and costs 128 Danish Kroner (\$31) each way.

HANG WITH THE ROYALS Check out where the Danish royals live at the 18th century Amalienborg Palaces. Four identical palaces face each other across a courtyard where every day at noon there's a changing of the guard. So laid-back are the royals that Queen Margrethe II is often spotted having a cigarette at the window – apparently one of her nicknames is 'The Ashtray'!