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Statue of Hans Christian Andersen in the centre of Copenhagen

# Once Upon a Time in Copenhagen

A walk in the city where Hans Christian Andersen wrote most of his fairy tales makes one realise why his work can still delight the young and the old alike



The colourful façades of the Nyhavn neighbourhood

PHOTOS: WONDERFUL COPENHAGEN

**A** walk tracing the life and times of Hans Christian Andersen in Copenhagen is fascinating for many reasons. Among them is the fact that many places still look the way they did over 150 years ago, when the writer of some of the world's most loved fairy tales lived there.

We meet for the walk one pleasant summer afternoon in front of the town hall – with the statue of Hans Christian Andersen right by its side. I can barely see the statue, which is photographed endlessly by the hordes of Chinese tourists, who cannot seem to get enough of it. After all, Andersen is one of Denmark's most famous sons, and Copenhagen's key attractions even today.

One of the first stops on the walk is a glimpse of the guest house – our guide claims that the space was then so crowded that people were forced to sleep standing up – where Andersen spent his first few nights in the city. The most interesting halt is in front of a tiny window at the basement of the courthouse, once housing the town prison. Andersen was perhaps inspired to write one of his rare happy stories *The Tinderbox*, by the idea of a prisoner gazing out on to a free world.

## A Writer by Chance

Born in Odense in Denmark in 1805, Andersen made his way to Copenhagen seeking a better life when he was 14, armed with just 12 kroner and big dreams. His ambition was to shine in the performing arts: the theatre, the ballet or the opera. He trained his eyes on the Royal Danish Theatre, trying his hand at singing and dancing. With his squeaky voice and gangly looks, he was rather unsuccessful in all his attempts.

Following those youthful pursuits, he became a fairy tale writer purely by chance. It was only in 1835 that he pub-

Statue of The Little Mermaid, based on one of Andersen's popular tales



The Royal Danish Theatre, where Andersen tried his luck with the performing arts

**Over the walk, we learn that Andersen was a man of great contradictions:** that this teller of tales for children was never married and had no kids of his own

lished his first collection of fairy tales, which was received warmly. Over the years, he wrote 168 fairy tales, including *The Little Mermaid*, *The Ugly Duckling*, *The Emperor's New Clothes* and *The Princess and The Pea*.

Over the walk, we learn that he was a man of great contradictions. He was a bit of a grouch yet he managed to find benevolent patrons for his work. He was known to be stingy but was always clad in expensive clothes. And this teller of tales for children never married and had no children of his own. Perhaps due to the mild underlining of sorrow in his life, his fairy tales were never really the cheerful sort, unlike those of the Brothers Grimm from the neighbouring country of Germany, who contrary to their name, wrote the "happily ever after" kind of stories.

The city is littered with monuments to

Andersen's work. For instance, one his most popular tales *The Little Mermaid* is commemorated in Copenhagen in the form of a statue at the city harbour. Much like the Manneken Pis in Brussels, this small, unassuming statue – blink and you miss it – is much adored. The Little Mermaid who sits sad, just like the mermaid from the story, was a gift to the city from brewer Carl Jacobsen, and created by sculptor Edvard Eriksen in 1913. Legend has it that Jacobsen was enchanted by a ballet on the mermaid and wanted to immortalise the character.

## Roaming the Roads

Another of Andersen's haunts that we visit later is the bustling Nyhavn area by the canal, lined with hotels and restaurants with colourful façades. During his time, these buildings were all houses and he lived for over 20 years in this area, moving from one to the other.

It is believed that Andersen was shaped by his keen observations of everyday life in Copenhagen and his extensive travels within Europe. His passion for travel shines through, in these lines in his autobiography: "To roam the roads of lands remote, to travel is to live."

Fittingly, my day ends with a spin through his world, with a joy ride called the Flying Trunk at Tivoli Gardens, one of the world's first entertainment parks. The seven-minute jaunt recreates some of his well-known stories, making me aware that his stories are still capable of delighting not just children, but also adults. ■



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