

# IN A HAPPY PLACE

A hop, skip and a jump across one of the happiest cities in the world.

Text Charukesi Ramadurai

Canals, brightly coloured homes and cafes and a warm feeling inside. That's what Copenhagen's made of.

Queen Margrethe II, Denmark's monarch for over four decades, also has an unusual hobby. She designs costumes and stage sets for the theatre, and has been doing so since the late 1980s. Her recent passion is Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale, 'The Nutcracker', presented as a ballet around Christmas time at Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen.

The queen's interest in design perhaps comes from her accomplishment as an artist, who regularly exhibits her paintings at local galleries (sometimes under a pseudonym). An interview in Britain's *Telegraph* newspaper a few years ago describes her at work on the sets of the Tivoli concert hall thus, "In her tweed skirt suit, brown polo neck and bright red lipstick, she resembles an authoritative librarian rather than a palace-dwelling queen."





However, it is a bit of trivia a contact at the Copenhagen tourism board shares that makes a deep impression on me. At the end of each show, he says, the queen comes out on stage and bows to the audience with the rest of the crew.

For several years, Denmark has been emerging at the top in the United Nations' World Happiness Report (and in other such surveys). And Copenhagen itself is commonly held to be among the world's

happiest places. Perhaps it has something to do with living under a queen like that. Or perhaps it has something to do with the enigmatic concept of hygge—pronounced hooguh—that is wired into every Dane's system.

If you stop any Dane on the street and ask them to define hygge, chances are they will say "coziness." That is the easy answer. However, hygge is much more than that, and at the core of it, all about enjoying the good things in life.



◀ Clockwise from above left: Her Royal Highness Queen Margrethe II; A sunny day in Copenhagen is best spent by the water; Tivoli Gardens.



### Smiling Streets

My first day in Copenhagen also happens to be the year's first real summer day and it seems like every Dane worth his name is out on the streets, basking in the mellow sunshine. Early in the evening, we head to Nyhavn (literally, New Harbour) for a boat ride on the canals. The waterfront is lined with 17th-century buildings—once homes, now converted to hotels and restaurants—with their colourful facades cheery and welcoming. While the tourists are tucking into an early dinner at the alfresco cafés, locals are swinging their legs by the waterside, watching the boats go by, chilled beer in hand: this is hygge of one kind.

The next afternoon, walking on Stroget, the city's longest shopping street with an associate from the tourism board, we run into two of his colleagues. They seem to be taking a postprandial stroll, but that is not the case. The weather is just so pleasant that they decided to have their scheduled meeting as they stroll on the cobblestoned streets—more hygge.

And hygge is not just about warm summer days when it is easy to be cheerful and optimistic. In fact, the classical definition of hygge comes from those dark and dreary winter nights when the only thing that provides comfort (and coziness) is being with loved ones, warmed by the light of candles and a glass of wine.

It is one of the world's oldest amusement parks and supposedly, the inspiration behind Disneyland.



▲ Left: Biking around Copenhagen is a must. If you don't have one, you can always rent one  
Below: Musicians at Stroget.

Another local describes this very scenario when I ask about how Danes cope with the long cold months. Her face lights up when she talks about her personal hygge moments: going back home early from work to cuddle up with her little daughter, especially in inclement weather.

But enough about hygge. Coming back to happiness, I find several instances of my own during my time in Copenhagen.

I am not in the city during Christmas time to catch *The Nutcracker* (or the Queen in her set designer avatar) but I feel a childish excitement as I walk around Tivoli Gardens. It is one of the world's oldest amusement parks and supposedly, the inspiration behind Disneyland. Some might call it tacky, but I quite like the juxtaposition of unexpected elements, cheerful colours and stomach-churning rides. When I leave the park hours later, after dinner at one of the many restaurants there, it is with a happy (there's that word again) grin on my face.

#### Serious Fun

A bicycle tour on the contemporary side of the city is equally delightful, giving me a chance to pedal on smooth roads. I am on a bike after several years but it takes





▲ Clockwise from above:  
Nothing beats a hearty meal  
overlooking the canals at  
Nyhavn; My little Hoptimist  
reminding me of happy times  
at Copenhagen;  
Peppered with  
cheery imagery like this smiling  
traffic light, it's hard not to be  
happy at Copenhagen.



Denmark—both the government and the people—takes its happiness very seriously.

The Friday night before I fly back home, we do the rounds of Copenhagen's famous pubs. We start with the meatpacking district, with a shot of Fisk, a vodka liqueur with a generous flavour of licorice. Fisk is certainly an acquired taste, but it clears my palate for the next few hours. It is only at the end of that long, beery night with Copenhagen's young and restless that the profound meaning of hygge finally dawns on me.

Denmark—both the government and the people—takes its happiness very seriously. Work-life balance, including five weeks of paid holiday every year, is one of the ways in which this Scandinavian country makes sure the barometer rarely fluctuates. Add to it diverse factors like an egalitarian outlook, plentiful green spaces, eco-friendly practices, excellent food, strong family ties and a keen sense of design, and you have a society with more contentment and less stress.

I get an unexpected gift before I leave Copenhagen: the Hoptimist, a plastic toy that doubles up as the unofficial mascot of the city. The Hoptimist is just an ever-smiling face that bobs up and down on a spring. It now sits on my worktable, reminding me to smile and believe that all is well with the world.

#### Fact File

##### Getting there

Jet Airways operates daily flights to Paris from Mumbai, from where our codeshare partner Air France will connect you to Copenhagen.

##### Accommodation

Some of Copenhagen's best hotels can be found in Indre By. It's in close proximity to several popular landmarks, including Nyhavn, Copenhagen Central Station and several other attractions, including museums.

##### For more information

Log on to [visitcopenhagen.com](http://visitcopenhagen.com)

me just a few minutes to get back on the saddle (or in this case, the seat). As I take in Copenhagen from that seat and take in that fresh air in large gulps, it is easy to understand why nearly half of the city's population pedals to work, for leisure and pretty much everywhere else. And really, it is difficult to experience road rage when you are on two narrow wheels, and the only horn you can lean on is a bell that gives out a mellifluous tinkle.

Chandresi Ramadurai