

Copenhagen really is wonderful, for so many reasons

Denmark has just come top in the UN's survey of global happiness – far ahead of 18th-placed Britain. One former Londoner who moved to the Danish capital three years ago can see why

- Cathy Strongman, guardian.co.uk, Saturday 7 April 2012
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We were not surprised to read last week that the Danes topped the UN's first World Happiness Report, whereas the Brits managed a less than impressive 18th place. Since moving from Finsbury Park in London to Copenhagen three years ago with my husband Duncan, our quality of life has skyrocketed and our once staunch London loyalism has been replaced by an almost embarrassing enthusiasm for everything "Dansk".

The greatest change has been the shift in work-life balance. Whereas previously we might snatch dinner once Duncan escaped from work at around nine, he now leaves his desk at five. Work later than 5.30 and the office is a morgue. Work at the weekend and the Danes think you are mad. The idea is that families have time to play and eat together at the end of the day, every day. And it works. Duncan baths and puts our 14-month-old daughter Liv to bed most nights. They are best buddies as opposed to strangers who try to reacquaint at the weekend.

In fact, starting a family in Copenhagen is the best decision we ever made. Not only are children a highly respected and incredibly well-catered-for facet of Danish society, the process of having a child was remarkably easy. Fifteen minutes after Liv arrived, midwives singing Happy Birthday presented us with a trolley decorated with Danish flags and loaded with snacks. Shortly after that we were whisked off to the Maternity Hotel, a blissful retreat where families with a first child are provided with private rooms, food, drink and 24-hour access to midwives for three days, all free of charge. (This is just one aspect of a super-efficient healthcare system, in which if you call the doctor you get a prompt appointment the same day.)

A Danish woman recently said to me matter-of-factly that it takes two people to create a baby, so it should be the equal responsibility of both to bring up that child. This is a universally accepted attitude in [Denmark](#) and one facilitated by the state. Paternity packages are amazing: Duncan got three months fully paid leave that he can take at any time in the next seven years – while I am yet to meet a stay-at-home Danish mother, thanks to the fantastic childcare opportunities.

Register your child within four months of their birth and you're guaranteed a heavily subsidised place at a local nursery at the date of your choosing. Incredibly, £300 a month allows Liv to attend a lovely full-time nursery five minutes from our home where 10 staff care for 24 children and a chef bakes bread and whips up organic meals. In the summer it's common for older children (aged three to six) to decamp to the countryside and spend days climbing trees and making dens. So far, health and safety regulations have escaped British extremes.

Of course, that Denmark can provide such great healthcare and childcare is mainly due to astronomically high taxes and the size of its population compared with Britain's. There are a mere 5,580,516 people in Denmark, 549,050 of whom live in the capital. This makes for a very compact city where it's common to bump into friends. It's also a doddle to negotiate on two wheels. We can

cycle to any district within 20 minutes and a dedicated network of cycle paths stretches deep into the countryside, linking Denmark's numerous small villages and towns. Whether it is commuters, children cycling to school or revellers swaying slightly through the dawn, the bicycle is a ubiquitous feature of the Copenhagen street. And for those unable to hop on a bike, the metro, which seems impervious to delays, has lifts at every stop.

It's a gloriously attractive city too, with its rickety historic centre, maze of cobbled streets (including the longest pedestrianised shopping street in [Europe](#)) and ancient churches, palaces and government buildings, alongside brave and striking modern interjections such as the ferociously angled extension to the Royal Library, nicknamed the Black Diamond, and Henning Larsen's Royal Opera House.

And then there's the fabulous design, which saturates most elements of Danish life. Everywhere you look, from metro stations to schools, friends' homes and even hairdressers, there are functional and elegant objects. The dining room of our local college is packed with Eames Eiffel chairs while children at the airport get to spill their meals on high chairs designed by Danish design maestro Arne Jacobsen.

It's not all rosy: sometimes the cost of living leaves you speechless. A takeaway bagel, soft drink and bag of crisps, for example, sets you back £10. The winter months can also be bloody freezing and the hours of darkness long. Most Danes seem to escape to Thailand in November, but when they are at home they embrace the winter by lighting candles at every conceivable opportunity and endeavouring to create a *hygge*, or cosy atmosphere. They entertain at home a lot, take frequent trips to the cinema and invest in heavy-duty snow boots.

The upside is that once the minute spring has sprung, Danes spend as much time as possible outdoors. There are beautiful parks, where in the summer families grill sausages (the nation's fast food of choice) on communal barbecues, plus more than 100 public playgrounds and numerous swan-filled lakes.

Over the past 15 years the harbour that bisects the city has been transformed from an industrial zone into a cultural and residential hub with water so clean that we take Liv swimming in the harbour baths – lifeguarded floating swimming-pool structures that are accessible for free. Either that or we cycle to the man-made beach at Amager Strandpark or to one of the numerous sandy beaches that line the coast to the north and south.

It may be a small nation but the Danes definitely have an entrepreneurial spirit. In Copenhagen they have clung on to their independent shops and cafes, with chains such as Starbucks hemmed within the confines of the airport. Instead, small boutiques and kooky little cafes are the norm, with reasonable rents allowing young start-up companies to flourish. Streets such as Jægersborggade are lined with fashion, art, furniture and artisan stores, while one shop that I particularly love allows you to exchange children's clothes and toys.

Both the coffee and restaurant scenes are booming, with Noma spearheading the recent reinvention of Nordic cuisine, and 14 restaurants now boast Michelin stars. There's plenty of culture too, with the Royal Danish Ballet and the Royal Opera staging an impressively varied programme of events that people like us, who have failed miserably to grasp the fiendishly complicated language, can still enjoy.

I do miss the buzz of London and the adrenaline rush you sometimes get when striding along one of the capital's people-packed streets. You can party all night in Copenhagen's meat-packing district or Latin quarter, but on the whole it is a more sedate life.

Most shops shut at 3pm on Saturday. On Sunday the city centre is dead. Instead this is a day for brunch, exercise (Copenhagen is teeming with Lycra-clad runners) and free entry to museums. There's also a greater willingness to conform: cycle paths have strict codes of conduct, jaywalking is seriously frowned upon and the impeccably turned-out Danes have a fairly narrow dress code in which black and grey dominate and even a neon sock would be considered risqué.

It feels incredibly safe. I run in the dark with my iPod in full view and, like most Danish mothers, I would leave Liv sleeping in a pram outside a cafe. Yet occasionally I miss the edginess of Shoreditch high street late on a Friday night.

It's very white too – markedly so for us former inhabitants of Finsbury Park – and with this comes a lack of the cultural diversity and understanding that is such an important component in making London the great city it is. The Danes are gradually opening up their borders, but there's an unspoken fear among many that this perfect society, which functions so efficiently because of universal high taxes, might shatter under the strain of an influx of immigrants.

In many ways the city feels like London might have 60 years ago and for us, at this point in our lives, it truly is a case of wonderful, wonderful Copenhagen. Whether it can retain its spot at the top of the World Happiness Report will be fascinating to see.

FIVE BEST THINGS ABOUT DENMARK

Childcare

Heavily subsidised, the childcare system allows all parents to work, while short working hours ensure family time.

Health service

Knowing I can call the doctor for a same-day appointment gives incredible peace of mind.

A compact capital

Forget spending hours on a crowded tube: Danes can cycle to most parts of Copenhagen in 20 minutes.

Architecture and design

Bold, brave and sustainable; the Danes have truly embraced contemporary architecture while functional, elegant, gorgeous design is everywhere.

Public spaces

Picturesque parks, city beaches, strings of lakes and glistening clean harbours – plus there's always a playground within walking distance.