TRAVEL SECTION OF THE YEAR — The Daily Telegraph

Walk this way: the beginner's guide to hiking holidays p.22

TRAVEL

England's best county? There's no contest

We've run the numbers, sorted the stats and totted up all the beauty, history, culture and charm on offer – and now, at last, we can reveal the winner...

What are the ingredients for a perfect English holiday? The ideal 24 hours might begin with eggs and bacon or buttery kippers from the local farm shop, before a morning spent admiring Chippendales and Gainsborough at a sumptuous stately home, or delphiniums and dahlias at an RHS garden.

For lunch, how about fish and chips wrapped in newspaper, overlooking a pristine Blue Flag beach? Burn off the calories with a walk beside a lake, through ancient bluebell woods, up a fell or across a Wuthering Heights moor – with a pint of proper beer in a village pub at the end.

To finish, how about a Michelin-starred dinner, accompanied by a glass or two of English sparkling wine, before a restful night in a king-sized bed at a welcoming country house hotel?

There would be fellow walkers on the footpaths and drinkers in the pub, but no hustle, crowds or queues. The rumble of motorways and high-speed trains would be absent, and at night the stars would be clearly visible.

With these elements in mind, *Telegraph Travel* sought to identify the greatest English county of them all – the corner of our green and pleasant land that offers what holiday makers treasure most. We compared the 40 contenders across 20 criteria in four main categories: Natural Wonders (lakes, forests, mountains, beaches, wildlife); History and Culture (museums, castles, cathedrals); Luxuries (hotels, spas, restaurants); and Peace and Quiet (low population density, dark skies), awarding points for each.

We also let readers have their say by pitting the 40 counties against one another in a series of Twitter polls – which produced a surprise.

It was a closely fought contest, but after crunching the data (see "How we made our choice" on Page 2), one county emerged – by a comfortable margin – as the finest. Few will be too shocked by its identity. With its rolling hills, thatched villages and dune-backed beaches, nowhere is quite so quintessentially English.

Oliver Smith

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Safe, sociable Copenhagen is perfect for solo travellers

Sarah Baxter never feels alone in a city of communal dining, group river cruises and a library where the 'books' are people

PERNILLE KLEMP/ALAMY; GIUSEPPE LIVERINO

'Ideally, food should be shared and savoured': enjoy communal dining – and lots of talking and listening – at Folkehuset Absalon in the Vesterbro district

The woman sitting opposite me was trying to divide a pineapple cake into eight equalish chunks, but paused mid-slice when I told her I was in Copenhagen on my own. "Travelling by yourself?" She looked at me as if I were doing something brave and strange indeed. "Wow. Many people wouldn't do that."

Or maybe they would. According to Google data, in the first half of 2021, searches for solo travel were up by more than 760 per cent, and interest in exploring alone shows no sign of declining. There is a growing thirst for seeing the world, even if you don't have anyone to see it with.

Personally, I think going solo is a liberation, particularly if you pick the right place. And Copenhagen is just that. Not only did the Danish capital top *The Economist*'s 2021 Safe Cities Index – peace of mind for those travelling alone – but it also has a number of diversions well-suited to solos… especially those of, er, a certain age who no longer fancy dossing in dorms and socialising over a six-pack of Tuborg.

So, first, I had carefully selected my digs. Opened just before the pandemic in the hip Vesterbro neighbourhood, the Coco hotel has already garnered awards for its effortless Parisian-style cool and strong sustainability credentials. But what appealed most to me were the hotel's daily happy hour, where guests are given free wine in the courtyard bar and encouraged to mingle, and the calibre of its single rooms.

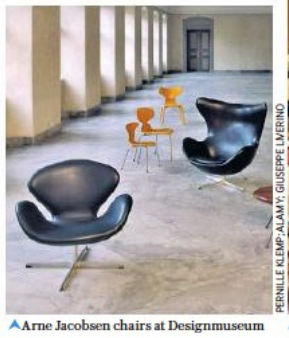
Mine was a delight. Rather than a poky afterthought hidden by the bins, it was a large, bright space on the top floor, filled with city views and sunshine, thanks to a whole series of skylights. If Copenhagen hadn't been waiting on the doorstep, I would have just stayed up there, writing a novel or two. But the city beckoned, and I had a dinner date I didn't want to miss.

Anyone who has travelled solo knows that one of the most awkward times is dinner. Ideally, food should be shared and savoured; when you are eating alone, feeling sore-thumbish in a sea of couples, the temptation is to eat fast and leave. Fortunately, the Danes have an on-trend solution for this very scenario, with its own unpronounceable name, of course.

Faellesspisning means "communal eating", an old-school concept now enjoying a resurgence. Which is how I found myself crammed onto a table for eight at Folkehuset Absalon in Vesterbro, awaiting my share of pineapple cake. The 1930s red-brick building was originally a church; threatened with closure 10 years ago, it was saved by the founder of the Tiger chain, who has turned it into a community hub where anyone can come for a range of activities and big old dinners.

It is not only sociable, but also good value. A one-course meal costs just £5.70. You have to collect your own cutlery and serve yourself, but that is part of the ice-breaking fun. You are soon ladling moussaka onto each other's plates and apportioning the sponge.

It is pot luck who you sit with, but I saw people of all ages. And, this being Denmark, everyone spoke excellent English. I was soon deep in conversation with Lisabell and Hanne, two middle-aged friends enjoying a night out. My other tablemates – a couple and a threesome – hadn't known each other before this evening, but you wouldn't have known it from the way they nattered. "That's what happens here," said the woman next to me, "you just start chatting, sharing ideas."



Arne Jacobsen chairs at Designmuseum

It was lovely to have company on my first night in a new city, and I collected plenty of tips; by the end of dinner, my map was scrawled with recommendations. But, despite being the tourist, I had given the locals some tips, too. For instance, none of them had heard of the Human Library, where I was heading the following day.

This literary concept is a movement for social change and prejudice-smashing, founded in Copenhagen in 2000 by the author and activist Ronni Abergel. The Human Library hosts pop-up events around the world now, but its only permanent hub is in the city's Norrebro district. On selected days, you can go along and borrow a "book" – that is, a person – for a truly enlightening 30 minutes.

When I arrived, a list of the day's available "titles" was chalked on a board in the reading garden. Light holiday fare this was not: every topic on offer – Transgender, Recovered Drug Addict, Incest – was a toughie. But that is the point. "It's about un-judging someone and testing our subconscious biases," Ronni explained as I fretted about which to pick. "We want to really challenge people."

Why, I wondered, do the "books" sign up to be borrowed? "Imagine if you have been held back your whole life by something you can't change," Ronni answered. "It's empowering to be able to turn that stigma into something else; to be understood; even to help others learn from your journey."

I chose Depression and Sexual Abuse, and sat under a tree, waiting a little nervously for my book to appear. Usually, striking up a conversation with a stranger while you are travelling alone will start with the weather, perhaps moving on to home towns and pets. But there was no small talk with Meike. As soon as she joined me – "Can you take off your sunglasses?" she asked. "I like to see people's eyes" – we were deep in her traumatic childhood. She told me about being abused, about feeling worthless, about the decades of depression. But it wasn't a lecture, it was a conversation – you are allowed to ask any questions, as long as they are asked respectfully.

"I wanted to be a book as I had always been told I was nothing, that I wasn't interesting, that no one would want to listen." An inner fire, fuelled by years of therapy and hard self-work, blazed in Meike's eyes: "Now I know that's not true." It was an astonishing way to spend a morning, but I was ready for some actual solo time after that. So I made my way across Copenhagen's lakes and into the old town, via the terraced yellow houses of Nyboder, to the Designmuseum.

Housed in an 18th-century pile that was once the country's first public hospital, the museum reopened in June following a two-year refurbishment. The current exhibition (running until June 2023) is a thinker, looking at how designers are working radically and creatively on solving global challenges: what if you could order your own death by app? Or if a gel could make you less lonely? Fortunately, I didn't feel a gel was required at that moment, and happily lingered alone in the museum's permanent collection, a trove of lustworthy classics by Danish designers – Poul Henningsen lamps, Arne Jacobsen chairs – before grabbing a coffee in the leafy courtyard café.

From the museum, it wasn't far to the heaving cobbled streets of Nyhavn, the gaily-painted 18th-century harbourfront that graces every Copenhagen fridge magnet. I was glad I wasn't navigating the place as part of an umbrella-following horde. I was also happy not to be boarding one of the big boat tours leaving from the wharf here. Instead, I headed to the dock at nearby Ofelia Plads for a more intimate option.

Hey Captain's fleet of small vessels offers Social Sailings, where the idea is to see the sights while chatting with your boatmates. With skipper Sindre at the wheel and only a couple of other passengers, it felt more like a conversation than a cruise. As we floated down the Inner Harbour and historic canals, we chatted about Copenhagen's town planning, its enviable cycling infrastructure and the pros of solo travel. Peter, another middle-aged Brit, was also travelling alone and we swapped city tips, mainly about good places to eat *smorrebrod* – Denmark's ubiquitous open sandwiches.

However, I already knew where I was going for my final dinner: I was *fælless-pisning* again, this time at the more upmarket Kanalhuset, a super-cool hotel in Christianshavn that serves a set meal to diners gathered together at long tables every evening.

The menu that night was to be platters of veal cuvette, couscous and baked aubergine, which I shared with three Americans, also all travelling solo. Elliott was food blogging; Aurin was on a workcation; Alicia was researching a relative who had been a refugee here during the Second World War. We all had different agendas, but we had come together, albeit briefly, with a mutual desire for good food and interesting company.

As my trip came to an end, I realised maybe I hadn't done all the typical Copenhagen things. I hadn't ridden a bicycle or visited a single castle; I had completely ignored the statue of the Little Mermaid. But I had joined locals for free yoga on the harbourside, taken a free dip in the Islands Brygge baths (people-watching at its most refreshing), spent an evening watching a movie in the park (also free), and had some fascinating conversations. I had done my trip my way.

Essentials

Getting there
Use a "4 Days Within 1 Month" Interrail pass (from £156) to travel to Copenhagen by train. The simplest route is via Brussels, Cologne and Hamburg; the pass also covers rail travel between UK stations and London (interrail.eu/en). SAS flies to Copenhagen from Heathrow, Birmingham and Manchester, from £55 one way (flysas.com)

Where to stay
The stylish Coco hotel has bright, spacious singles from £90 a night, room only (00 45 3321 2166; coco-hotel.com)

What to do
Dinners at Folkehuset Absalon cost from £5.70 (absaloncph.dk/en); Kanalhuset's cost from £17 (kanalhusetcph.com/en). Hey Captain boat trips start at £23 (heycaptain.dk). The Human Library hosts free events (humanlibrary.org). For more information, see visitcopenhagen.com

Golden age: head to the old town via Nyboder's distinctive yellow terraced houses

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