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# The Observer Magazine

**Sharp scratch**  
One man's search for justice through the infected blood scandal

**Bank of Mum & Dad**  
How Britain became an 'inheritocracy' - and what it means for us

**Ask Philippa**  
'My wife glazes over whenever I talk about my writing'

**'I have had a wild, chaotic, beautiful life'**

Actor and director Rebecca Hall reflects on race, regrets and how she learned to be herself



# Top marks for Denmark

Lakes, saunas, art, food – and Hamlet's castle... A family trip by road and rail takes in the best of all the country has to offer

Words GENEVIEVE FOX

**D**on't make small talk with strangers. Or talk about the weather. Or even ask people you know how they are... I read these social etiquette tips in a Denmark travel guide – four days into a 10-day trip. I'd already blown it on day one. "Look at that!" I said to the couple opposite me in the hotel's below-ground sauna. A window looked on to the deep end of the outdoor pool. "A human fish!" Neither replied.

But there is so much to talk about, starting with our hotel, the Bryggen Guldsmeden Eco Resort (guldsmedenhotels.com), a former shoe factory in Copenhagen's harbour-front



neighbourhood of Islands Brygge. In the reception area there are trees (fake, tasteful) of pink blossom, deer heads (also fake), wicker hanging chairs, funky stained glass – and that sa una. And then there are the Balinese bedrooms, chic pool loungers, the *Babette's Feast* of a breakfast, and the silver bullet Airstream serving drinks by the pool.

We're here on a family train and road trip, looking for a mix of urban culture, countryside and coast. After two days in Copenhagen on the island of Zealand, we drove up to the Danish Riviera before heading over to Jutland to explore the Danish Lake District and, finally, Aarhus, Denmark's terrific second city.

Our first morning was well spent. We strolled past snoozing rhinos in Copenhagen zoo on our way to the Cisterns, an underground art space created in a former reservoir. We were fortunate to catch *Start Again the Lament*, a sound installation by Tarya Simon exploring death, loss and grief. We walked, in the half-light, down illuminated paths floating over water, to stirring recitations by professional mourners.

Back in the light, we took a bus back to the centre and walked, via Nyhavn, the famous 17th-century harbour, to Nordre Toldbod waterfront, home to the buzzy seven-restaurant Seaside Toldboden complex. We drank margaritas and watched the yachts in the sunshine. The city has nailed the communal experience,

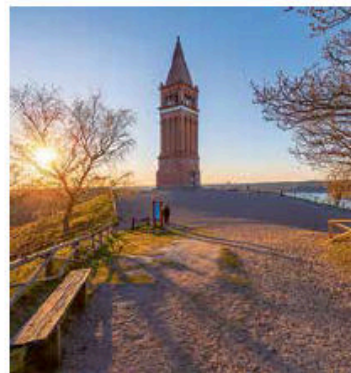
whether it's eating and drinking or swimming in the canals or harbours. The Islands Brygge Harbour Bath, near our hotel, is a local favourite.

That night we ate at Gaza Grill, a good-value Middle Eastern spot in Vesterbro's Meatpacking District. We got our indulgence fix the next night at the Nimb Hotel (*nimb.dk*), a Moorish fantasia with a wonderful rooftop bar. It backs on to Tivoli Gardens amusement park and its glam brasserie offers French cuisine and ringside seats on to the park.

What a contrast to the clean lines of the outstanding Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, a 40-minute train ride up the coast from Copenhagen. An 1870s villa and three modernist pavilions are set in a sculpture garden overlooking the sea. From there, we jumped on a 10-minute train ride up to Helsingør's Kronborg Castle, the setting for *Hamlet*. As we made for the ramparts, the ghost scene ready to recite from one of our phones (it had to be done!), a pair of newlyweds from Japan were posing for photographs in white silk and black sunglasses, a skull, Yorick's presumably, held aloft. How fabulous tourists are, I thought, and gave them a rather unDanish cheer.

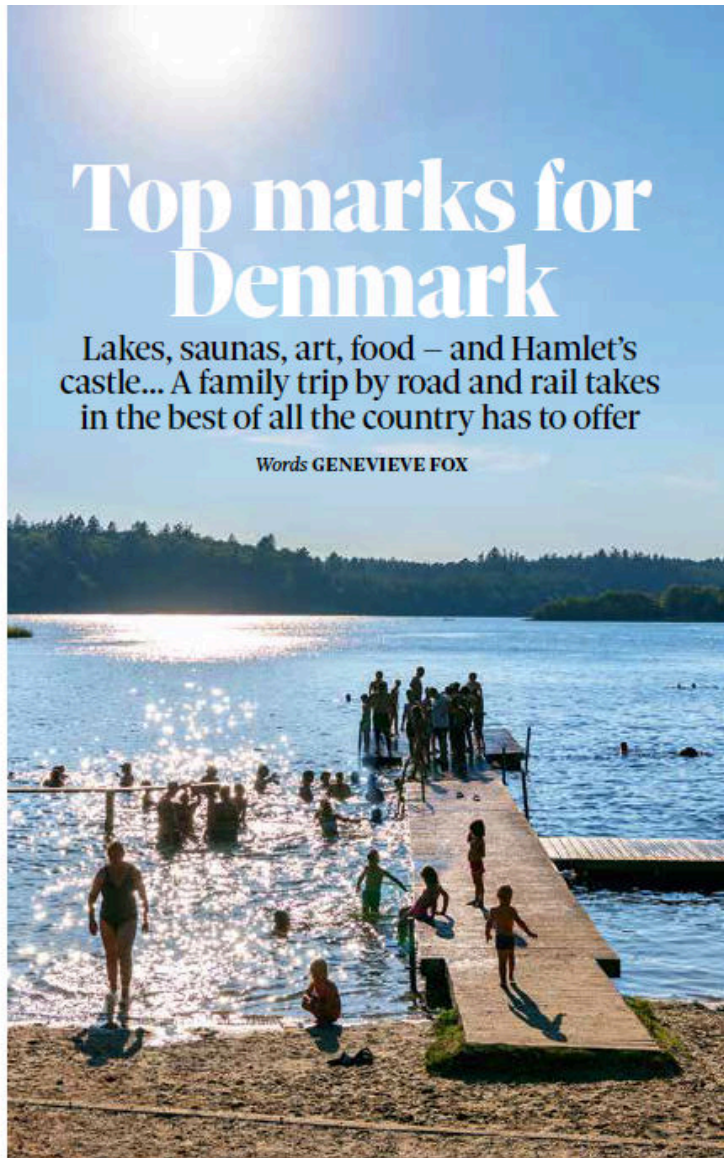
It was an easy 60km drive through flat, open farmland up to the Danish Riviera on the north Zealand coast, our destination the old fishing village of Tisvilde and the rarified Helenkilde Badehotel (*helenkilde.com*). With its smart

**Great Danes: (clockwise from left) Bryggen Guldsmeden Eco Resort in a former shoe factory; bathers on the shore of Lake Almind; the Old Town at Aarhus; and the Himmelbjerget tower in Silkeborg**



lunch terrace, porch with rattan furniture, comfy-chic living rooms and a panoramic sauna with sea views, this cliff-top hotel whispers restraint.

"You haven't got the vibe to be Danish," my younger son said over our candle-lit dinner that night in the hotel's lovely restaurant. I was stifling a giggle at the time. The naked, cuddling couple we'd spotted earlier on the naturist beach from a raised walkway, had just walked in. I don't know why I found it funny to see



them here, fully clothed, I just did. Not very Danish of me, I can see that now.

The next day, after a rainy walk in Tisvilde Hegn pine forest, we warmed up with cinnamon buns and hot chocolate in Brod & Vin café in the village. Fortified for the Lake District leg of our trip, we took the ferry from Odden to Aarhus on Jutland's east coast, and from there drove southwest for a night of fine dining at the Gastronomisk Institut in Ry's Knudshule Badehotel (*knudshule.dk*). Set on Knudsø Lake, the hotel looks like a hiker's motel, so our room with four-poster waterbed – it gave massages! – took us by surprise. So did our exceptional dinner, the highlight crab pottage with sour milk and herbal oil, served with a Mosel Riesling.

Knudshule's manager, Anders Kalstrup, encouraged us to hike up to Himmelbjerget tower in the nearby town of Silkeborg, the region's riverside hub. Danish democracy was born at Himmelbjerget: people gathered here to discuss the nation's future in the 19th century. At 147m, the hill is Denmark's second highest – diddy compared to the UK's Lake District, though not in this pancake landscape – but the lake views are stunning. We stayed at the comfortable, clean Scandic Silkeborg (*skandichotels.dk*) – a great base for walkers. Here you'll find the Tollund Man bog body in the Silkeborg Museum, and Denmark's oldest paddle steamer, the Hjejlen.

We scaled different heights with a visit to the circular rooftop installation by Olafur Eliasson at the ARoS Museum in Aarhus the next day, enjoying 360-degree views of this unsung port city. More circles spun their magic down at Aarhus Bay where the Infinite Bridge, a wooden circular fixture straddles beach and sea. We spent our last night in the gloriously eccentric Hotel Royal (*hotelroyal.dk*) beside Aarhus cathedral. The Royal has an old-world lobby, dark and full of frescoes, and Scandinavia's oldest working elevator with a scissor gate and even a chair to sit on. Just don't try to strike up conversation. ■

More information at [visitdenmark.com](http://visitdenmark.com)