

020501 May Day Riots

Happy St. Bededag, a bit late. St. Bededag was on the 26th of April and was a general holiday in Denmark. I asked a Danish friend to explain to me about the holiday. She told me that it is a day set aside for prayer. Originally, the Danish calendar was full of such days until the government realized that people were doing a bit too much praying and not enough working. So, they combined all of the days into one day, celebrated in April.

My landlord, Tove told me that the night before the holiday is celebrated with friends while eating white bread cut a certain way with butter while sipping tea. There are a lot of Danish days on which you are supposed to eat a special meal. Tove has often surprised me by asking why I am not going out to eat roast duck or some other special dish on random evenings. The food related traditions seem rather rich and complex in Denmark with little warning of their approach unless you are invited to one of these special dinners.

However, the Danes don't celebrate May Day with the riots that the people of Germany and France seem to favor. Instead, the day is a break from classes and work for a lot of people.

Touring Denmark

The arrival of my friend Monica during the holiday week gave me reason to tour a bit more of Denmark. I head to downtown Copenhagen at least once a week, but since I have spent little time this semester doing the tourist thing it was nice to set out. Monica humored me by joining me at the all you can eat pickled herring restaurant on her first day in Denmark. I caught her while the jet lag was still setting in which may have been part of the reason that she agreed to go :). She actually seemed to enjoy the meal and even went up for seconds. We also went to Rosenborg Slot which is where the Danish royal family lived until they found it too small and moved to larger accommodations. Today it is a treasury for royal heirlooms as well as the crown jewels.

Our tour also took us up to Helsingør which is home to Kronborg Slot, the setting for Shakespeare's Hamlet. This was my second visit to the castle, the first being on my second day in Denmark with my landlord, Tove. I was a bit less jet lagged this time and it was a beautiful day as we picnicked while overlooking the Øresund, the narrow straight between Denmark and Sweden. The straight is a bottleneck leading into the Baltic sea and any shipping to the Baltic states (Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Russia, and Germany to name just a few) has to go past this point. The strategic position of the straight made Kronborg Slot an important asset in the collection of "sound dues" which Denmark extracted from all passing ships from the 1420s until sometime in the 1700s.

Don't forget that Denmark is only a small remnant of a once huge country. The Danes once controlled Sweden, Norway, a large part of Germany, England, Iceland, Greenland and even made it as far as Canada. But then, the Vikings put aside their battle axes in favor of farming, gave up their pagan gods in favor of Christianity and settled down to building wind turbines and baking vienerbrød. Much of the loss of land can be attributed to the numerous wars with Sweden and the outcome of several bad alliances. In 1658, the Swedes occupied Kronborg as well as most of the

rest of Denmark until the Dutch came to the rescue. The Dutch lost a good number of ships, but broke the siege of Copenhagen. More recently, Germany occupied the castle during World War 2.

The numerous wars between Sweden and Denmark have led to a bit of bad blood between the Danes and their neighbors. When I saw Helsingør with Tove, the first thing that she told me was that I would see a lot of drunken Swedes who had come across on the ferry to buy the less expensive beer in Denmark. I had thought that this was just a stereotype, but there is a lot of truth to this matter. Liquor stores abound in Helsingør and I saw people using dollies to transport their purchases to the ferries. There is even a rumor that the back of the Volvo station wagon was designed to fit six cases of Tuborg (Danish beer), but I have not been able to substantiate this claim as of the writing of this email. (If anyone wants to give me the money to buy a Volvo wagon to continue this research, I would be happy to buy the beer on my own).

Monica and I also spent many hours riding our bicycles around the parks of Lyngby. The gorgeous weather made for beautiful rides, especially to Dyrehaven (Deer Park). Dyrehaven is an expansive 1000 hectare area of meadows and woods crisscrossed by an alluring network of walking and cycling trails. Originally established as a royal hunting ground, Dyrehaven is now a popular picnicking area. At the center of the park is an old manor house that is a great vantage point to look down the sloping turf to the Baltic and across to Sweden. Large herds of deer roam the park and you can see HUGE bucks as they roam out of the way of the bicycles.

We also took the time to check out the Georgia O'Keeffe exhibit at Louisiana (modern art museum). I am definitely fortunate that at a point in my life where I have gained a tremendous appreciation for art that I have one of the best modern art museums in my backyard. Plus the fortune of being able to run up to Oslo to check out the Munch museum, or the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam.

Monica left Copenhagen well fed (we went to the bakery once, or a dozen times) and I had to start the school work once more.

Miniature Danes

However, this past weekend, Micah and I set out to fulfill our childhood dreams by journeying to Legoland. Lego was invented by a Dane and they have created a whole amusement park dedicated to the little, plastic blocks. We were accompanied by Marie-Astrid, a Danish friend of Micah's who was able to borrow her parents car. What a new experience it was to roll effortlessly along the highways without having to pedal!

Legoland is located in the town of Billund on the peninsula of Jutland which connects Denmark with Germany. Like most countries, the Danes who live on the different islands see each other differently. Similar to the perceived cultural differences between the northern and southern US or Shanghai and the rest of China, the Danes of the west look down on the Danes of the east. The best joke that I have heard so far is that once they graduate from university, the best and the brightest people from Jutland move to Copenhagen and the average IQ of both places goes down. Oh, ya. You can use that one all over.

Believe it or not, it does take a few hours to drive across Denmark. Bridges were built between the island of Sjælland where I live and Funen which lies between Sjælland and Jutland. The Storebæltes forbindelsen (The Great Belt Fixed Link) was the largest engineering feat undertaken in Denmark. The bridge is over 16km long and is actually two bridges (the Østbro and the Vestbro) which connect at an island in the middle. The Østbro bridge is 6790m long and at the time of its conception was set to be the worlds longest suspension bridge. However, prior to the opening of the bridge in June 1998, the Japanese completed the Akashi Kaikyo bridge in April, bringing them into the same league as the Swedes in the eyes of the Danes. The two towers of the Østbro are 254m high and are the tallest structures ever built in Scandinavia. Beneath the Østbro, trains travel through a tunnel which is 80m below sea level at its deepest point. Not to be outdone, the Vestbro is currently Europe's longest combined road and railroad bridge.

All of these records do come at a cost. The toll for just one way of travel is DKK 240, or \$30. Combine the toll with the cost of petrol (filling the tank costs around \$75) and I don't know how people in Denmark afford to drive those things. But, it was less expensive for the three of us to drive than to take the train and much more convenient.

Legoland did not disappoint. The park has numerous kiddie rides and a few roller coasters for the bigger folks, but the best part of the park is Miniature Land. There teams of Lego experts have spent countless hours and Lego bricks to build miniature versions of cities. We saw a miniature Copenhagen and a whole area set aside for the Netherlands. There was the city of Amsterdam with its canals and even coffee shops with fields and canals behind with windmills and ships. The windmills turned, the ships sailed along the canals and Lego cars and trucks drove along the roads. There was an extensive airport and even working locks. Bergen, Norway was there along with LA and Japanese cities. There was a replica of US Congress and other famous sites from the US. It was amazing.

We spent several hours in the park which grew into several more when Micah and I discovered bins of Lego in one of the rooms. Hours flew past as we built Lego race cars as we fought off the kids for parts. OK, that didn't really happen, but one kid did stray dangerously close to our bin. . . Finally, we noticed that Marie-Astrid was not as amused as we were and so we decided that it was time to go after hitting the gift shop.

We spent the night in a hostel in Kolding, a nearby town. Kolding is a cute little town suffering from a shortage of seating in its pizza restaurants. There simply can not be that many take out pizza places in one small city. However, the best part of Kolding is the Koldinghus which is a fortress in the center of the city. Originally built in 1268, the fortress was accidentally burned by the Spanish during the Napoleonic Wars. Today, the fortress has been rebuilt into one of the best museums that I have ever seen. The space is warm with amazing architecture and the exhibits of silverwork was extraordinary. Plus, the fortress has a tower and dungeons which can be toured.

Is Europe Right?

I am sure that you have probably heard of the recent elections in France. I spoke with my friend Isabelle about the elections and she said that right now she is embarrassed to be French. An amazingly high 30% of people did not vote (can you imagine that figure in the US). Plus there was a large field of candidates from numerous parties who divided the vote. The winner got 20% of the vote which is hardly a mandate. Now, Isabelle said that she is faced with the dilemma of voting for Chirac who she hates, but she has no other choice.

Everyone knows of Haider in Austria and the new government in Denmark was voted based on an anti-immigrant platform. Is Europe swinging to the right, or is this just a passing phase?

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