

021011 Danish Oddities

There are a few things about the Danes that I have noticed during the course of my stay here and I thought that I would share a few of them with you.

All Danes seem to share an intense fondness of candles in the home. Often as I walk into the complex where I live, I can see dozens of candles lit in the windows of people's homes. No dinner party or get together would be complete without lots of candles. The Danes even have a name for when people gather with drinks in a cozy corner of the home that has been lit by candles. It is called *hygge* and it loosely is translated as coziness, but even the Danes can not put an exact English definition on the word. Coziness is a very important facet of Danish interior design and candles are seen as a key ingredient. Coziness is made so important by the search for relief from the long, dark winters which drive people inside.

One guide book for Copenhagen which I have read offered a top ten list of phrases to say to Danes if you wished to make friends with them. One was to say, "I don't know about you, but I think that a few candles in a room make it a lot cozier." I once tried this out on a Danish friend and then afterwards explained that I had gotten it from the list. She told me that the sentence had made quite an impression on her, until of course I told her where I had gotten the idea. So, the sentence appears to be quite a useful tool in breaking down Fortress Denmark.

Another key aspect of Danish interior design seems to be small, potted plants pruned into the shape of wreaths with holes in the middle (so basically donut shaped). These round plants are immensely popular and you can count dozens of them in the windows every building as you walk through the town where I live. I can see several from the window of my flat from where I am writing. I don't know the story behind the plants, but I have been getting this overwhelming urge to go out and purchase one.

What have successfully made their way into my room are the Danish flags which you find everywhere. The Danes are quite fond of their flag and you see the pendent version of the flag flying from the flagpoles of yards all over. The pendent version of the flag looks as if someone took hold of one end of a normal size flag and stretched it as if the flag were made of taffy. The end result is a long, skinny flag of maybe two meters in length.

Smaller, paper flags about 13 cm long and glued onto wooden rods are used to announce important dinners such as birthdays and often I will see little flags planted around the walkway of the dinner hall of the complex where I live. I have had flags at all of my dinner parties and you find them in use all over. When a new professor had his first class in my department last semester, a flag was brought in to celebrate the occasion. Yesterday, I saw small, plastic flags adorning various cakes at a luncheon. Basically, the Danes need little excuse to display their flag.

Danish students all carry their pens, pencils and other school supplies in small, cylindrically shaped bags. The bags are about 5 cm in diameter and 20 cm long with a zipper running along the length. The bags are mostly leather, but can be made of various other materials and come in lots of colors. This is not just a Danish thing because students from all over Europe come to DTU toting these along with them.

What I have been told by my Danish friends is that they are required to have these in grade school and they just keep using them from then on.

Apparently, a popular pet here in Denmark is the Australian budgerigar, or budge for short. These are little birds which are only about 30 grams in weight. They are popular due to their sociable nature and their ability to mimic speech.

Speaking of speech, I was reading one of my lecture notes for my Speech and Audiology class when I came across the following passage which describes how people breathe while speaking. "Speech may also be produced during inhalation. This is the situation when one is breathless or when one cries. It is also common practice to say 'yes' during inhalation when you are listening to another person in order to indicate that you are still listening." If this last sentence confuses you, it is because you are not Danish. Last semester I began to realize that several of my male, Danish friends would say 'ya' while taking a breath. Once you become aware of the process, it is quite odd for a while, but one eventually get used to it and even adopts the practice.

Kartoffelferie (Potato Holiday)

Now I know that a question which has probably been keeping you awake at night has been where I will be going for the potato harvest holiday. Last year I went north to Norway and then down to Germany. This year, I am going to be heading south. I will be flying down to Brussels tomorrow from where I will be setting out towards Luxembourg and Germany. The plan is to pick up a bike and spend the week pedaling my way through the Ardennes. I look forward to seeing these two small countries and I am hoping for some good weather! I have a list of places that I would like bike towards, but no set plans. I am hoping to get advice from fellow travelers who I will meet at the youth hostels that I will stay in along the way. Each morning, I will choose a destination, make a booking for the night at the youth hostel at my destination and pedal on. The final leg from Luxembourg City to Frankfurt will be via train. In Frankfurt, I will meet up with my friend Michele for further biking trips around the German countryside.

I have several friends who are taking their bikes down to the Netherlands for the week. It would appear that Micah, Thomas and I started a trend last spring! I also have a friend who was debating about heading home to Israel for the holiday. It is a long way to go for just a week, but he is worried that he will be unable to go back over the Christmas holiday due to the war scheduled in Iraq. As always, it is a bit sobering when the news you see in the headlines actually affects someone you know.

A lot of my friends who are heading to warmer climates such as Spain think that I am a bit crazy for heading to Brussels and Luxembourg. I have chosen the two countries because they are a bit off the beaten path. Plus the wonderful descriptions of Luxembourg and the Ardennes in the guidebooks is luring me on.

I am so looking forward to this holiday. This semester has been just so very busy with little free time. I am only taking two classes, but I am also working as a teaching assistant for another class. It has been interesting work, but the only problem is that

outside of the class, the students from the class ambush me with questions every time I wander past the rooms where they are busy typing up their projects. I am also taking a Danish class for several hours a week in a new drive to learn this language. Lastly, I am working on my research for my company, so I have a full plate at the moment.

Enjoy the potato holiday and I will have some Belgium chocolates, beer and lebkuchen for you.

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