



Cool, low-key cafés are what Danes weave into the fabric of their lives

› beating heart. It's a working container port, the largest in Denmark, and the waterfront, called Aarhus Ø, is undergoing urban redevelopment. Angular newbuilds, civic and residential, jive with cranes and tankers.

One of these is DOKK1, a fabulous polygonal glass structure that squats over the mouth of the Aarhus river. Beneath it, there's a four-storey automated underground car park; average retrieval time 64 seconds, retrieval contingent on you being able to work out how to deposit your car in the first place without taking you with it, only robots for company. It's a feat we pulled off, but only after collaring two Danish humans near the ticket bay and appealing for help.

Above ground, DOKK1 is home to a public library. This one, Scandinavia's largest, has exhibition, co-working and community spaces, an indoor playground and a giant brass gong because, why not? It's also got a cool, low-key café, because we are in Denmark and cool, low-key cafés, taking time out and doing things together, are what Danes weave into the fabric of their lives.

Coastline, lakes, fjords, Denmark's got plenty of all this, too, and yet Danes love an urban swim. The Harbour Bath, or Havnebadet, further along the 8.5km quay, is the world's largest seawater pool. An aquatic playground, you can wakeboard, SUP, sail, swim. Its circular diving pool and network of boardwalks

Great Danes Stay, eat and visit

Where to stay

In Aarhus, the centrally located Villa Hotel Provence, a 39-bedroom French boutique hotel, is decorated with Provençal maximalism and peppered with retro French film posters and antiques. There's a cobbled courtyard, too, but no restaurants. Elegant double rooms from £240 per night (villaprovence.dk).

Where to eat

In Ebeltøft, Restaurant Støvlen occupies an 18th-century cobblers. Offering sharing and an à la carte menu, there's always a catch of the day. Desserts include an apple cake of vanilla, chocolate and lime (restaurant-stoehlen.dk). In Aarhus, world cuisine is on offer at Aarhus Street Food.

Must visit

Kongernes Jelling is home of the Viking kings in Jutland. This complex comprises the Kongernes Jelling museum and three Unesco sites: two Viking burial mounds built by King Gorm the Old and his son Harald Bluetooth, the church, and two runic stones (natmus.dk).

reminded me of the old Penguin Pool in London Zoo. Lucky penguins, I used to think, before learning that the spiral concrete ramps didn't suit them.

One of the things I like so much about Denmark, as I am now discovering it, is the way public spaces and functional design encourage the pursuit of simple pleasures. The electric boats you can hire from GoBoat at Pier 2 feature a big wooden table in the middle, for drinks and snacks. What looks like a giant globe greenhouse in Aarhus City Park, also on Pier 2, is in fact a funky glass geodesic dome with a tree-house café, bar and cultural hub inside it. We sat down, had a cold drink, hung out, just because.

Danes also do a sleek museum shop. Aarhus's ARoS Art Museum (aros.dk) is a one-stop Christmas shopping destination (I know it's early, but you'll thank me). The other good thing about ARoS is that Olafur Eliasson's transparent circular walkway on the roof is a top navigational tool. Like the cathedral spire, you can see it pretty much wherever you are in Aarhus, which is a merciful thing, the visitors inside silhouetted against the colours of the rainbow. Also, ARoS's new subterranean Salling Gallery opened in June, and will be followed by an even bigger space, the Dome, by light and space visionary James Turrell, at the end of the year. ARoS is flexing.