

TRAVEL

Where you feel like a member of the club

THE 52 PLACES TRAVELER

A Danish city is revitalized, but its old-school spots are well worth seeking out

BY SEBASTIAN MODAK

On one of my last days in Aalborg, Denmark's fourth-largest city, I walked with some trepidation toward the old building that houses Christian IV's Guild, a fraternal order that was formed in 1942 as a place for Danes to drink without interference from Nazi occupiers. Now, with more than 8,000 members from all over the world — men and women alike — it's a social club with its own set of odd rules and traditions. I was about to be inducted.

Like so many other unexpected moments on my 52 Places trip so far, this one had been the result of chance encounters and saying yes when I didn't even know what I was saying yes to. Over the last months I have learned that approach often leads to the most rewarding travel experiences.

Until around the 1970s, Aalborg, with its fisheries, textile plants and aquavit distilleries, was Denmark's industrial center. Now most of the factories are closed, and after decades of depopulation, it's on the upswing as a destination for culture and, with the establishment of Aalborg University, an educational hub.

There are the telltale signs of redevelopment, common to postindustrial cities the world over. Residents like Kit Sorensen, a friend of a friend who became my de facto guide, remember when the city's gleaming waterfront looked very different.

"It was fishing boats and factories when I was growing up," she told me. "You just wouldn't go there."

Today, when the notoriously fickle weather permits, it's full of college students soaking up sunshine and cruise ship tourists hopping between gleaming new buildings. There's the Utzon Center, the last building conceived by Jorn Utzon, who grew up in Aalborg and went on to design one of the most famous buildings in the world, the Sydney Opera House. There, in the rooms hosting exhibitions on Nordic architecture, students tend to trade ideas or attend lectures.



The pedestrian-only city center in Aalborg, Denmark, is packed with shops, restaurants and bars.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SEBASTIAN MODAK/THE NEW YORK TIMES

reputation of being a hard, cold city," Helen Jensen, a restaurateur, told me.

Ms. Jensen is one of the people actively changing that reputation, with her multiroom bar and restaurant, Café Ulla Terkelsen London (named after a famous Danish television journalist's trademark signoff).

"This is so much more than an average bar," Ms. Jensen told me, in the high-ceilinged main room of her cafe, which is decorated with pastel paintings and hanging paper lanterns. "It's a place where people go to really meet each other, even if it's for the first time."

can afford it will contribute to help those who can't," Mr. Stiller told me.

Fjordbyen, in its quirkiness, is the kind of thing that most appealed to me about Aalborg, not just because it is in itself an idyllic place for an afternoon stroll, but because of how it breaks the mold of a familiar narrative, the boom-and-bust cycle of an industrial hub.

With so much development going on — modern apartment buildings sprouting up, fancy restaurants opening, a major plan to turn the shuttered Aalborg Akvavit distillery into a new cultural center — some history has been erased.

ONE OF THEIR OWN

If the stereotype of Aalborg is as a cold and harsh place filled with all-work-no-play men and women, that's certainly not what I found. By my second day in the city, I had been invited into Ms. Sorensen's childhood home in a neighboring village, where I was treated like family and given a delicious (and comforting, considering how long I've been on the road) home-cooked meal. Then, through a chain of conversations, I was invited into the Christian IV's Guild.

On the day of my induction, I was escorted through the bar and restaurant that occupies the first floor of the building and up a set of narrow wooden stairs. The guild's chambers is a dimly lit space filled with commemorative plaques, newspaper clippings and portraits of the ruler whom the group's name honors ("a pretty lousy king, to be honest," one of the members said). Then, the induction commenced.

Around an oak table, four guild members — old men in red robes — went

through the ceremony, which involved a fair amount of drinking and a lot of jokes. At one point, seeing a string dangling from the ceiling, I asked what it was for. Not missing a beat, the bespectacled, mustachioed "chief benchner" pulled the string, all four men exclaimed, "skal!" and shots of aquavit were downed.

They read me the original rules of the guild, which included punishments like having to buy rounds of beer or a set of new wax candles for offenses including "pulling a brother's beard." And then, after a ceremonial walk around the block, I was handed a key. We made sure it worked on the back door of the guildhouse, and my new friends told me it was for whenever I returned to the city. I look forward to using it.

OTHER PLACES I LOVED

- I had the privilege of taking a tour of Regan Vest, a 60,000-square-foot Cold War-era bunker hidden in the forest just outside Aalborg that was revealed to the public in 2012. It will be opening as a museum in 2021. Meant to house the Danish government, including the queen, in the event of a nuclear attack, it's filled with relics from the 1960s. There's no better embodiment of the tension and fear that characterized the Cold War.

- Restaurant Tabu might seem unassuming from the outside, but in its modern interior, I had one of the best meals of my trip. The prix fixe menu lists locations in northern Denmark, giving a provenance for each course but not a description of its contents. Over the course of an hour and a half, I had poached oysters from just offshore, black lobster from the Limfjord and a skewer that one of the chefs assured me was the "most ethical pork in Denmark." The only reason I could see that Tabu hasn't been showered with Michelin stars and other accolades is that it is in Aalborg and not Copenhagen. So go there now.

- Street Food, a five-minute walk from Fjordbyen along the water, is the first food hall of its kind in the city, featuring 17 vendors hawking fare from all over the world. Everything on offer looked fantastic — and its owner told me that the vendors had to apply and go through a rigorous process to get a spot — but I'd recommend making a beeline for Duck It, which serves a pulled duck burger that is pure indulgent happiness.

Farther down the harborfront is the Musikkens Hus, opened in 2014, a concrete-and-glass jumble of cubes and waves that houses a state-of-the-art concert hall and a music school, and one of the innovative buildings that landed the city on the 52 Places to Go list.

But that's not what drew me in — or brought me through the wooden doors of the guildhouse.

HITTING THE BODEGAS

With Ms. Sorensen's help, I saw the things that really set the city apart and make it so much more than a place pumping money into "revitalization" schemes. The pedestrian center of the city is filled with modern shops and includes Jomfru Ane Gade, a string of bars and clubs whose clientele makes me, at 30, seem positively geriatric.

But venture down one of the less immediately charming streets and you'll see another side to the night life. On almost every corner, you'll find what locals call bodegas. Not to be confused with New York convenience stores, these are old-school dives frequented by locals, like Café Alpha, which claims to be the oldest pub in the city. It's easy to imagine the bodegas filled with factory workers fresh off their shift, instead of the retirees and college students who frequent them now.

Through the cigarette smoke, locals young and old talk the night away. (Smoking is prohibited in bars and restaurants in Denmark, but a legal loophole allows bars smaller than 40 square meters to skirt the rule. I also heard that some slightly larger bodegas will leave out a collection jar for donations to be put toward fines for allowing smoking indoors.)

"Because of the past, we still have a

A NEIGHBORHOOD APART

On the western edge of the city, hugging the coast of the fjord that cuts through northern Denmark, are 121 hand-built houses, each its own experiment in do-it-yourself construction and artistic expression. One is a deep eggplant purple, a gradient of sunset reds outlining each window; another has the head of a great white shark jutting from its facade. Around the corner two neighbors have collaborated on a design, stringing up a set of worn sneakers on a wire they've pulled between their roofs.

This is Fjordbyen, once a fishing village and now a kind of social experiment in egalitarianism and community leadership.

Aalborg is a practical place whose daily rituals are its real charms.

"You'll find everybody living here — from wealthy businessmen to people with no teeth," Torben Stiller, who spends part of the year in a small house he built off one of Fjordbyen's intersecting gravel paths, told me. "And everybody helps each other out."

The people of Fjordbyen intentionally maintain a mixed-income population. As the city of Aalborg has recently assured them that they can continue existing somewhat separately from the rest of the rapidly developing city (a bit like Copenhagen's Christiania, but without the drugs) they've also come up with new rules, like making sure the wooden houses, some set no more than two feet apart, meet fire code.

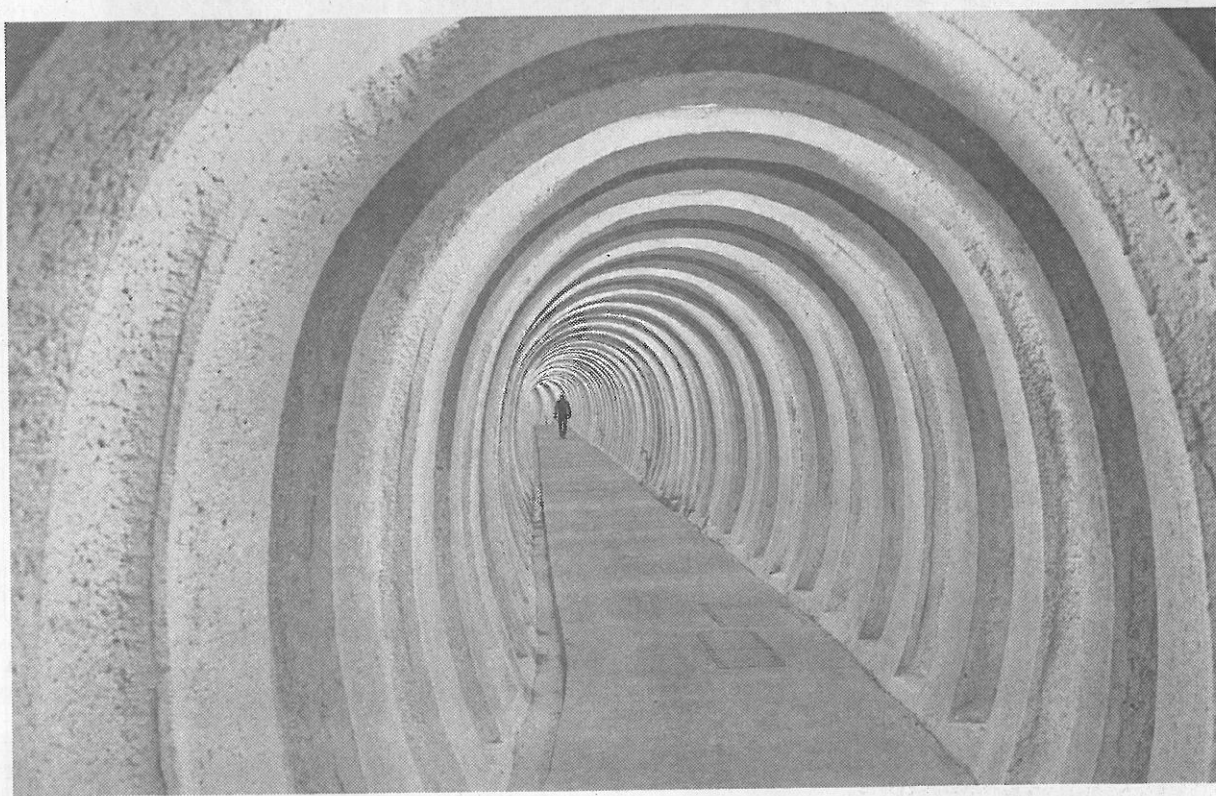
"It's expensive to do — but we don't have a choice. So the people here who

The wooden rowhouses that once filled the city are few and far between (I was lucky to stay in one I found on Airbnb whose adorableness was only heightened by my roommate, an old cat).

Some of the really old houses can still be found on one single-lane cobblestone street, Hjelmerstad, where their odd angles, bright primary colors and steep roofs look like a Cubist's interpretation of quaint. The fact that it's one of the few places where the city's medieval origins are still on display might have made me sad anywhere else. But this is a practical place whose daily rituals — rather than displays of the past or gleaming visions of the future — are its real charm.

One gem hides in such plain sight that its overseer, Flemming Møller Mortensen, says that even Aalborgians forget it exists. That's partially because the Aalborg Kloster, a monastery and hospital built in 1431, hasn't been turned into a museum. Instead, the building is now set up as 26 apartments reserved for seniors. In the cellar, there are still ghoulish frescoes from the 16th century depicting sin. Around 20 years ago, during a renovation, workers found a cache of weapons within the walls thought to have belonged to the Churchill Group, the underground resistance group founded during the Nazi occupation. On a tour of the space (visitors can book online), Mr. Mortensen, who is also a member of Parliament, told me its transition to its current purpose is a particularly Danish approach to historical landmarks.

"We have this sanctuary with a marvelous history in the middle of the city, and we want people to really use it — to live it," Mr. Mortensen said. "The people here know they are part of a special community."



Regan Vest, a Cold War bunker just outside the city, is set to open to the public in 2021 as a museum.