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Embracing the Light in Skagen

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March 1, 2013

Retrace the footsteps of famous artists and writers by discovering the land of magical light right at the very top of Denmark. By CHRISTINA NG

I was at the end of the world. Surrounding me were two roaring seas with different names. My feet felt the chilly waters of both seas at the same time, as the bodies of water were separated only by a sandy point shaped like the tip of a hunting knife. This was Grenen: the northernmost point of the Danish Peninsula, north of the town of Skagen, where two seas, Skagerrak from the west and Kattegat from the east, meet.

My partner and I had cruised down Denmark's national highway 40 in our Volkswagen, starting out from central Aarhus and heading up to Skagen, a picturesque town located at the northernmost tip of Denmark. We were blessed with beautiful scenery of clear blue fjords and leafy trees during our two-hour drive - summer in Denmark was indeed glorious.

According to the Skagen tourist office, the town experiences more sunshine during the summer months of June to August than anywhere else in Denmark. Danes flock here during this time to enjoy the sun and celebrate the light. This luminous light, which changes minute by minute as the clouds stream overhead, is truly remarkable: significant enough for a place to be known for it, and for well-known artists to be inspired by it.

At the very tip of Denmark



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Yet, considering how remote it all sounds, the route to Grenen was far from deserted. Walking from the Grenen car park to the tip of the peninsula, we passed flocks of tourists taking pictures along the rugged coastline – gleefully trying out various poses where the two seas came together.

And just when we thought we were finally alone with nature at the top of the world, we saw a bus moving slowly across a narrow stretch of the beach. This was the Sandormen (<http://sandormen.dk/en>), a tractor-driven bus that runs from the Grenen car park, ferrying visitors to the very tip. You can choose to go on foot too, which would give you more time to take in the raw landscape.

From Grenen, we decided to walk back to the Skagen town centre. If you prefer not to walk or drive, you can rent a bike in Skagen town before coming out to Grenen. Skagen CykelUdlejning (http://www.skagen-cykeludlejning.dk/sprog_en) offers a wide range of bicycles for hire. There are paved bicycle paths all over the peninsula that will take you through dunes, marshland and pine forest where deer dwell.

In the path of writers



As we strolled leisurely towards the town centre, we passed Danish poet and dramatist Holger Drachmann's grave on a long, thin, sweeping stretch of sand. The writer won the hearts of the Danes with his tragedies *Volund Smed* (Wayland the Smith, 1894) and *Brav-karl* (1897), establishing himself as one of the most popular playwrights in Denmark.

We reached the grey lighthouse called the Skagen Fyr (<http://visitdenmark.com/en-gb/danmark/skagen-fyr-gdk600368>). Constructed in 1858 and standing 46m tall, it is Denmark's second tallest lighthouse. When you climb the 210 steps to the top of the lighthouse and stand on its balcony, you'll be rewarded with a boundless view of the rugged landscape, with its sparse foliage and starkly empty shoreline.

Looking down at the vastness from the lighthouse, it suddenly made sense that the fictional detective Kurt Wallander, created by Swedish crime writer Henning Mankell, came to this untainted wilderness to ease his troubled mind, walking mile after mile, day after day, along windswept beaches.

It was also easy to see why this land of light so enchanted famed Danish scribe Hans Christian Andersen, author of *The Little Mermaid*. After his visit to Skagen in 1859, he wrote a story based on the Den Tilsandede Kirke (<http://www.visitdenmark.com/en-gb/danmark/den-tilsandede-kirke-gdk695262>) (Sand-Buried Church), a church built in the 14th century, which, over the next several hundred years, became slowly buried by drifting sands. The situation became so bad that parishioners had to dig their way in and out of it to attend services. Today, only the steeple is visible above ground.

The Skagen painters



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A painting by Michael Ancher, on display at the Skagens Museum.

After leaving the lighthouse, our stomachs started to growl, and we proceeded to the **Brondums Hotel** (<http://broendums-hotel.dk/default.asp?id=57>) in the town centre for lunch.

It was in this hotel that a group of artists in the 1880s, famously known as the Skagen painters, used to gather and chat, whiling their time away playing cards or exchanging philosophies over tea. Led by Danish painters P.S. Kroyer and Anna and Michael Ancher, the group enjoyed a bohemian lifestyle, in tune with the untamed landscape on which they resided. Their paintings portrayed local fishermen at work, as well as themselves – the painters and their friends – reading in the garden and throwing lunch parties. Stand in Brondums Hotel's dining room and you'll recognise the backdrop for some of their paintings.

After a delicious lunch of smorrebrod (Danish open sandwiches) topped with homemade pickled herring and an assortment of cheeses, it seemed natural that we should visit the **Skagens Museum** (<http://skagensmuseum.dk/en>), since we had just connected with the painters at their favourite haunt. Founded in 1908, the museum is a charming little gallery that houses many of their works. The collection includes more than 1,800 paintings, sketches, graphic works, sculptures and ceramics, and some offer a fascinating glimpse of what the fishermen's lives were like in what appeared to be an enchanted time.

The stroll in the museum had further piqued our curiosity about the artists' lives in this beautiful town, so we headed to painters **Anna and Michael Ancher's house** (<http://anchershushus.dk/english.html>). Their home has been preserved to look just as it did when they lived there. With its large collection of paintings and antique pieces of furniture, it gave an insight into how they lived in the late 19th century.

The town's rich artistic heritage meant that there was also good shopping to be had, whether it was glass, pottery or silverware. Numerous galleries and shops on Sankt Laurentii Vej, the main street in Skagen town centre, offered plenty of artistic souvenirs that we could choose to take home.

Shopping aside, the best thing about Skagen is its expansive wilderness and radiant light – which is what attracted a constant stream of artists in the first place. We knew we wanted to be back again to take in its intoxicating natural beauty; nestled in this corner of the world where the skies and the seas meet in loving union.

Fast facts

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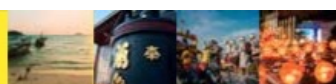
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• MORE INFORMATION

www.skagen-tourist.dk (<http://www.skagen-tourist.dk/In-int/toppenafdanmark/tourist>)

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