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Copenhagen: mixing modernism and fairy tales

Wahyuni Kamah, Contributor, Copenhagen

"To travel is to live," said famous author Hans Christian Andersen. And to travel to his homeland, Denmark, is to live life to its fullest.

Copenhagen, which means merchants' town, is one of the few capitals in the world that has many things to offer to both visitors and residents. One can enjoy taking in the medieval architecture dating back to the Renaissance era as well as post-modern buildings designed by world-class architects.

Founded by Bishop Absalon in 1167, Copenhagen used to be a small fishing village on the coast. But now it has turned into one of the most important trading centers in the world.

Although the city looks modern, imaginary figures from fairy tales have become Copenhagen's mascots. Each year, international exhibitions and art and cultural festivals are staged in the city, not to mention world-class sporting events.

Exploring the 90 square kilometers of Copenhagen's downtown area on foot is really worthwhile. One can explore every facade of the city, which accommodates about 1.8 million inhabitants.

Besides Danish, locals also speak fluent English and German.

The Danes are extremely proud of Andersen and they have even named a street after him: the H.C. Andersen Boulevard, located near City Hall in the downtown area. A giant statue of Andersen has been erected next to City Hall.

"You haven't been to Copenhagen if you didn't sit on his lap and listen to his stories," joked one resident.

Another famous sight in Copenhagen is definitely the 165-centimeter high bronze statue of the Little Mermaid, who sits forlornly on a stone by the sea at Langelinie Quay.

The Little Mermaid, or *Lille Havrue* in Danish, is the main character from Andersen's story. Presented by

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Carl Jacobsen to the city of Copenhagen in 1913, the statue has become not only the city's mascot, but also the country's.

The city of Copenhagen has a relaxing atmosphere. Pedestrians can enjoy strolling along streets lined with the best stores, watch live events at the plaza in front of City Hall or stop for refreshments at restaurants, cafes, pubs and clubs around the city.

Cobblestone streets in the downtown area give the city an enchanting look of antiquity, particularly since there are no modern concrete buildings. Only hotels several stories high are permitted to be built in Central Copenhagen.

Another attraction that is a must-see is Amalienborg Palace -- which is accessible from the Larsens Plads pedestrian lane. It is an octagonal complex, which is the official residence of the royal family. The complex comprises four great Rococo-style buildings. When the Christianborg Palace was gutted by fire in 1794, King Christian VIII moved the residence to Amalienborg. If the flag on the tower is flying, that means Queen Margrethe II is at home.

Each building is guarded by the young Danish Royal Life Guard, who wear the traditional uniform. Visitors, who are allowed to drive their cars into Amalienborg Square, always come to the palace and take pictures with the guards.

"We like to tease them. They'll never get angry or smile," said Pernille, a resident.

Copenhagen -- which was bombed twice by British troops in the early 1800s and was almost entirely destroyed during World War II by Nazis -- has also attracted asylum seekers from many countries as 11.5 percent of its population are foreigners. It has also been called the most friendly gay city in the world.

The city has a more human touch with a large number of cyclists, but not professional ones. There are over 100 bicycle "stations" scattered throughout Copenhagen. Bicycles are another alternative means of transportation for visitors. Bicycles can be rented from *Kobenhavens Cykler* at Central Station for 50 kroner per day with a deposit of 300 kroner.

Even Crown Prince Frederik's girlfriend, Australian Mary Donaldson, rides her bike to work even though three bodyguards still tail her from behind.

But for those who don't want to travel on bikes, take the public transportation as the buses and trains are safe, clean and efficient. With a Copenhagen Card,

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you can have unlimited travel on buses and trains throughout the Greater Copenhagen area. The card also grants its users free admission to more than 70 museums and sights. It also offers discounts at 20 museums and other services.

The card is available at most tourist offices, major stations and travel agencies.

Visiting a famous city would not be complete without tasting the dishes it is famous for. So is the case with Copenhagen. One should not pass up the chance to try the famous cakes and pastries on offer here. You can also visit fancy ethnic restaurants that are centered in the western part of Vesterbro District or, for tourists on a tight budget, try the food stalls in Nørrebro district.

However, for those who are reluctant to give Danish food a try, there are many options to choose from, such as Japanese, Chinese and even Indonesian restaurants, not to mention those offering dishes from North Africa, Mexico, Italy and Pakistan.

Denmark is hanging onto its local currency, the kroner, but most of the larger shops in Copenhagen are accepting euros.

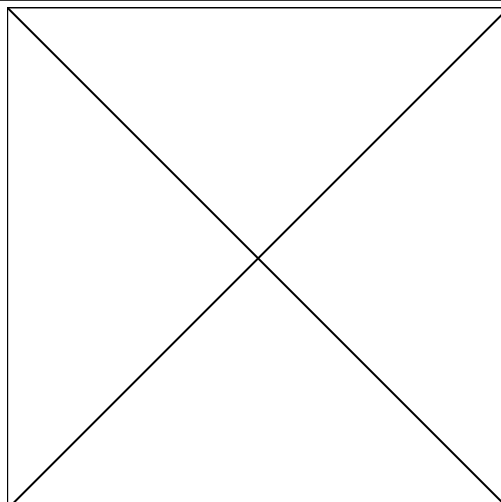
However, prices are higher in Denmark compared to other European countries, with the exception of Norway. To get information on affordable accommodation, try visiting the Copenhagen Tourist Information at Bernstorffsgade 1 to get a list.

The best time to visit the city is from April to September. During that time the famous Tivoli Pleasure Gardens, located across from City Hall, is open and the Canal Tour takes tourists on an enchanting journey. February is the coldest month of the year and July is the warmest, with an average temperature of 16.6 Celsius degrees.

***I-box* What to see in Copenhagen** 1. National Gallery (Nationalmuseet) Located at Ny Vestergade 10, it is the main museum of cultural history in Denmark. The collection includes evidence of human activities in Denmark and around the world from over the last 10,000 years. Opening hours are from Tuesday to Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is 40 kroner. 2. Nyhavn or New Harbor This is certainly a place for enjoying the romanticism of Copenhagen: Colorfully painted, old houses from the 18th century, pedestrians passing upmarket cafes and restaurants and canals with boats offering tours. 3. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek Located at Dantes Plads 7, this gallery houses Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan and Roman art collections. There is also French and Danish art from the 19th and 20th centuries. It is open from Tuesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Admission is 30 kroner. 4. Tivoli Garden This is a place that will appeal to both children and adults. There are art performances, games and restaurants offering both international and Danish cuisine. Open from April 19 to Sept. 22. Admission is 50-55 kroner for adults and 25-30 kroner for children. 5. Canal Tour The tour departs from Gammel Strand, or Nyhavn, and journeys through the harbor and various canals. Tourists can see historical buildings and a part of the city. The tour takes about 50 minutes and costs 50 kroner. It runs daily from March 28 to Oct. 20. 6. Museum Erotica Everything you wanted to know about love, sex and pornography is all under one roof. The other Erotica Museum in Europe is in Amsterdam. It is open daily. Admission fee is 89 kroner. 7. Stroget This is a pedestrian-only street that weaves through the downtown core of Copenhagen. Strolling down Stroget gives pedestrians the opportunity to see up close the shops selling the finest Danish products and designs. Many cafes and restaurants along Stroget are in old buildings dating back to the 18th century. Many important, historical buildings and museums are only a short distance from Stroget. 8. Amalienborg Palace The palace has been the official residence of the royal family since their former residence of Christiansborg Palace burned down in 1794. It is open from Tuesday to Sunday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. from Nov. 1 to April 30, and then every day from May 1 to Oct. 31. The admission fee is 40 kroner. 9. Rosenborg Palace The Rosenborg Palace was built by Christian IV in 1606. It has housed the treasures of the royal family for the past 400 years. The King's Garden (Kongens Have) was built as a retreat outside the fortified town. It is open from Jan. 2 to Oct. 31, and the admission fee is 60 kroner.

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