

SKAGEN

(Travel + Leisure, 2002)

We all have our own internalized topography, a particular landscape so imbedded in memory that a sight or smell can in an instant return us to childhood: this, more than any address, is what we know as home. Some people are instinctively drawn to mountains. I'm a water person myself. My landscape, shaped by a lifetime of summer visits to an aunt's cottage on the eastern shore of Nantucket, is blue ocean, salt-breeze, rounded dunes and scrubby beachside brush. Proust had his madeleine, but I will take a whiff of the sea and the feel of sand under my feet over a cookie anytime.

So when Danish friends first described Skagen (pronounced Skane) – a sandy, scrubby village at the northernmost tip of Jylland (the largest of Denmark's three main islands) – as “the Nantucket of Denmark,” they knew what they were doing: they'd been trying to get us over there for years.

My wife, Aleksandra, and I arrived in mid-August, summer's twilight in Scandinavia, when the long sunlit evenings finally begin to shorten, and dusk comes about nine o'clock; when the air, early and late in the day, carries the first cool bite of fall. Our friends own an island off the coast of Fyn (in Denmark, it seems, you can do things like own an island). And so, shortly after landing in Copenhagen, we found ourselves in the middle of a squall, driving across the second-longest suspension bridge in the world. (Completed just a few years ago, it connects the islands of Sjælland and Fyn.) 50-mile-an-hour winds shook the bridge as our car shuddered and swerved high above the turbulent waters of the Store Bælt, temporarily dampening our awe at the technological wonder of it all. But an hour or so later, as we entered the hamlet of Falsled in southern Funen, the storm was over, the sky starting to edge blue around a massive

sweep of gray cloud. On the dock behind the elegant, thatched-roof Falsled Kro – an inn where we would be staying a few days later – our friends were waiting by an old wooden motorboat to take us to their island.

About this magical place, called Illum, it's worth noting a few things, not because it's open to the public (it isn't), but simply because its pleasures, as I came to understand them, seem to me very much the pleasures of Denmark itself: a compact, rustic simplicity; an unpretentious appreciation of tradition; a preference for the natural over the artificial; and an easy, unselfconscious delight in family and friendship. The main house on Illum is thatched-roofed, old, handsome, drafty, echoing with the sounds of small children. The dining table seats twenty. An enormous wood stove occupies one corner of the living room. The island is long and narrow, covered at that time of year with head-high stalks of heathery purple flowers (a weed actually, but a beautiful one), and centered by a small copse of woods in which stands a ninth-century Viking grave. Herons fish in brackish marsh, and gulls circle constantly. Water is never far away; the light, on clear days, has a vibrancy that seems to lend even landlocked moments the indelibility of a sea voyage.

Danes are very keen on light. Skagen's pre-eminence in Denmark as a summer-vacation spot for the "well-heeled" (i.e., mostly people from Copenhagen) dates back more than a century. It was then that the first of a remarkable group of artists – attracted to this remote, medieval fishing village by its authentic character, its mammoth, ever-shifting dunes and, most of all, by the extraordinary quality of its light – began to document its rugged beauty in luminous plein-air paintings. Those very paintings, now gathered together in the Skagen Museum, form an important part of what most Danes regard as their cultural heritage. Mention Skagen to almost anyone around the country and you will immediately hear about its light and about the "Skagen School" of painters –

P.S. Krøyer, Michael and Anna Ancher, and Holger Drachmann are the best-known.

You will also hear about Hans Christian Anderson, master of the fairy tale, famous for his pen rather than his brush. Actually, the writer's time in Skagen, as we'll see later, was notably brief, if rich in the stuff of legend. Born in the small city of Odense, Anderson was a Fyn man through and through. He preferred the agricultural charms of his native island to those of sandy, light-besotted Skagen to the north. He called Fyn the "garden of Denmark"; and with its myriad farms, tidy vegetable gardens, and well-tended flower beds, it is still apparent why. Add to this an abundance of well-preserved manor houses and romantic castles like Egeskov Slot, and it seemed almost possible, as we left Falsled early one misty morning and drove northwest toward Jylland, that we were passing not through a modern land, but through one of Andersen's fairy tales. (A feeling that persisted despite the deflating promise of a local guide book, *Exploring the Fyn Countryside*, that "special natural features" of the area included "two raised bogs and a number of extremely poor bogs.")

If "raised" anything is your fancy, however, you may be in for some disappointment in Denmark. The highest point in the whole country is only 150 meters. Perhaps there are Danish mountain climbers, but I've never heard of any. So you might appreciate the sense of triumph I felt when, during a detour of Jylland's picturesque "lake district" west of the E45 highway, near a sweet village called Ry, as our car hit a noticeable downslope (who knew we'd even been climbing?), I turned to Aleksandra and exclaimed, "This is the highest point in Denmark!" Which I believe it was. My wife, however, a mountain-lover, was unimpressed. I might just as well have said that I'd seen two raised bogs and a number of extremely poor bogs.

Back to the highway: we drove north, past the cities of Århus and Randers, stopping for a sandwich in Hobro (don't do it), then up beyond Aalborg and eastward again toward the port town of Frederishavn. Here the highway and all that it symbolizes get left behind, the road hugs the coastline, the white-capped blue of the Kattegat appears close enough to touch: Jutland – Denmark itself – narrowing down to a spit of wild dune and heath, with two different seas – the Kattegat to the east, and the Skagerrak to the west – on either side. At the end of this spit lies Skagen.

Actually, Skagen is two places, closely related yet distinct. There is Skagen proper – working fishing port; home of Brøndum's Hotel, through whose portrait-filled dining room the lifeblood of 19th century Danish art flowed for three wondrous decades; and, these days, a quaintly touristic place of museums and shops and hotels. And then some three kilometers to the southwest, tucked among grassy dunes on the Skagerrak coast, there is the beachy, sleepily aristocratic Gammel ("Old") Skagen, made up of six small hotels, a handful of restaurants, one general store, and two or three dozen time-share cottages, each built in the traditional style, with yellow plaster walls and red tile roofs marked at either end by a lacey ribbon of white. At the suggestion of our Danish friends we'd booked a room in Gammel Skagen, in Strandhotelet, which – simple, modestly elegant, and literally nestled beside a dune – quickly came to feel like the embodiment of the place.

Just north of the hotel there is access to a wide beach, a favorite of the summer crowd from Copenhagen, that runs in both directions as far as the eye can see. On our first evening, only a few couples lingered there, stealing a peaceful hour before dinner, talking quietly or simply staring out across the gray-blue Skagerrak toward an invisible Norway. We strolled back past the hotel and, where the paved road stopped, onto a stepped path that climbed a steep dune atop which stands a *sømærket*, a massive wooden structure placed there

generations ago as a marker for boats. And from this spot there is a magnificent view of the boundless sea, notched with ships, that surrounds this improbable spit of land; and of great, humped sand dunes, tufted with hearty vegetation, rolling southward toward the largest dune of all, called the Råbjerg Mile, which like some benevolent monster still grows by twenty feet a year. On all of these surfaces the fading light was reflected with extraordinary intensity.

It all looked calm enough, and beautiful. But start any Skagen local going on the subject of sand, I soon discovered, and you will get an earful. For at one time, a couple of hundred years ago, the entire spit, from the Råbjerg Mile to the northernmost tip of Grenen (where the Kattegat and Skagerrak meet dramatically in a rip), was more or less obliterated by migrating dunes. By the end of the 18th century, the fishing village of Skagen, once a proud medieval trading center with a population of four thousand, had been reduced to about six hundred inhabitants, and its church buried up to its tower.

I mention all this because you have to have an affinity for sand to truly appreciate Skagen. But if you do – if you are moved, as I am, by the sight of a dune rising out of scrubby heath like an albino mountain, or of a church tower poking its godly, defiant head out of the ever-shifting ground – then you might just fall in love with Skagen, whose tough-minded inhabitants never stopped building their houses, fishing, praying, planting trees against the wind, even after the artists arrived and began to show the rest of the world what life was like here at the tip of the world.

One of those artists, the gifted Anna Ancher, was a local, born in 1859 in Brøndum's, her family's newly opened inn, on the night of a visit by Hans Christian Andersen. History has it (history, of course, being just another form of story-telling) that the renowned fabulist grew so belligerent as a result of dinner being late that Anna's mother gave birth prematurely due to stress. Andersen

had traveled the great distance to Skagen by mail-coach, as Holger Drachmann and Michael Ancher and eventually P.S. Krøyer would in the years after him, to witness firsthand the rugged fishermen and the harsh conditions of their everyday lives. The writer, absorbed with his own concerns, never did return; but the painters did, summer after summer, drawn as much by the gorgeous light and dramatic natural surroundings as by the daily toil of the fishermen. And it was Anna Ancher, by then married to Michael Ancher, who gave these artists a natural tie with the locals (necessary for procuring subjects for their paintings), as well as a meeting-place and home.

Such connections were in my head as, after breakfast one morning, I entered the Skagen Museum. Almost the first thing you encounter is the old Brøndum's dining room, transplanted in its entirety from the hotel down the street. And there, in dozens of small portraits lining the dark-paneled walls (the method of bill-payment most preferred by painters), are the leading figures of Skagen's artistic past. It's a moving sight – the “real” faces of the artists – and fitting preparation, somehow, for the collection of pictures that unfolds in the succeeding galleries, where you see depicted, with luminous skill and sympathy, the “real” faces of the Skagen fisherman of the second half of the 19th century.

Such visual juxtaposition of artists and fishermen seems at once apt and contradictory (with the exception of Anna Ancher, there was no socializing, no community, between the summer-resident artists and the local fishermen), and gives the history of Skagen its stimulating tension: on the one hand, the aesthetic concerns of art and the life of the convivial mind; on the other hand, the grueling reality of subsistence fishing and the barren beauty of a mountain of sand or a rip in the seas. In a single day you can go, as I did, from the Skagen Museum to the painting-filled house of Michael and Anna Ancher down the street; to lunch at a fish “shack” on the harbor; to a cafe' full of students; to a perfectly preserved 18th century fisherman's cottage; to a stretch of beach

painted by Krøyer in a dozen different ways, to dinner in Brondum's elegant, painting-filled dining-room (a replacement for the one now in the museum). And the next morning, crack of dawn, you, like me, can leave your spouse sleeping and wander bleary-eyed among the fishing warehouses that line the harbor, searching in vain for a fish auction that numerous people insisted you *must* see (none of whom, you will later discover, has ever actually been to a fish auction at the crack of dawn). And yes, it's true, you might feel briefly bitter about this experience (having never actually found the fish auction); but you will feel too, in the pungent monuments of the docks and crying of the gulls and the absence of tourists, an oddly stirring resonance that is the quiet pulse of Skagen.

The town, of course, represents different things to different people. Having lunch one day at the harborside restaurant Pakhuset, we struck up a conversation with our pretty, open-faced young waitress. Celeste Arnold, 25, the daughter of a Danish mother and an American father, was born and has spent most of her life in Skagen. Between delivering orders of cod fritters, herring, and pints of beer to tables of mostly German tourists, she lingered at our table, obviously happy to have a chance to use her excellent English. The sun was shining and gulls hovered overhead, ready to dive-bomb anyone careless enough to wave a french fry. Celest had lived briefly in New York, she told us, and was currently a student at the university in Århus. But wherever she went, she could not seem to get over her love of Skagen, nor did she wish to. Her Skagen was naturally a different place than what the tourists or even the summer residents saw. Her favorite months were not June and July, but the cooler, less populated September and October. Her favorite beach was not the one in Gammel Skagen, but the Sønderstrand by the old lighthouse. "Summer and winter people don't mingle much," she added without a trace of bitterness, and went on to calmly discuss the rise of "big fishing" in the area that is gradually squeezing out independent fishermen, and the efforts of locals to build a movie theater in town after the old one had closed eight years ago. And

describing Susie and Leo, the comically infamous Captain-and-Tenille-like duo who have been singing in Skagen for some twenty years, Celeste burst out laughing. “They sing really horribly and Susie sews all their clothes.” But in Skagen, she assured us, nobody mocks them because “they’re kind of like really weird family.” (Sadly, the act wasn’t on during our stay.)

“Family” is a word often cited by summer residents too, if in a somewhat more nostalgic vein, for their deep attachment to Skagen. Toward the end of our trip I paid a visit to a handsome, middle-aged woman named Birtna Jerlange (a friend of friends) at her home in the exclusive Klampenborg section of Copenhagen. The Jerlangs and their two children have been going to Skagen for a quarter century. Birtna is a strong, clear-eyed psychotherapist. But as we sat in her sun-filled livingroom drinking tea and talking about her feelings for Skagen, she grew more emotional, and an elegiac tone deepened her voice. “In Skagen, I think there’s a feeling of something very old-fashioned, mixed here with something very fashionable,” she said. “People know each other. There’s still a community. You go to the museum to see the fishermen as they were; then the next morning you buy fish from the fishermen in the port.” In American terms, at least as I observed it, the sense of fashion in Skagen is perhaps more Yankee than cosmopolitan.

The Jerlangs own a time-share in Gammel Skagen for the last week of July and the first week of August. (Mentally I found the idea of a time-share, with its implications of downmarket Florida, hard to square with my vision of the pure, scrubby tip of Denmark.) For most of the summer families, Birtna said, the summer routine remains the same as it always has – buying fish, bicycling, swimming. Teenagers usually eat dinner with their parents, before heading out to a club whose name, in English, means “shrimp trap” (no one but my wife and me seemed to find this funny), but which the parents commonly refer to as “The Babysitter.”

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There are actually three lighthouses in Skagen: a gray one, a white one, and an original one that resembles a giant, primitive wooden lever. Past this odd structure, off the road to Grunen that runs north of town, lies Celeste Arnold's favorite beach, which was P.S. Krøyer's favorite, too.

I was still on the footpath leading to the beach when the sound of high-pitched laughter reached me. Coming out onto the wide stretch of fine sand littered with small dark stones, I saw them: several dozen young children in T-shirts and bathing suits gathered at the edge of the water, some playing soccer, others splashing in the shallows. Here was the strand I'd seen depicted in the best of Krøyer's paintings: wide, flat, framed by the grass-covered dunes on one side and the light-giving Kattegat on the other; the tall gray lighthouse to the north; the town to the south – though in Krøyer's day there had been neither harbor nor fishing warehouses there, just the gulls whirling overhead as they were doing now.

He'd painted a series of various-sized pictures of two beautiful, elegantly dressed women strolling this section of beach, seen from behind, with the gray lighthouse in the distance. And standing on the beach now I could see, in a way I hadn't before, what a delicate thing composition is: how Krøyer kept changing the size of the canvas, its shape, the placement of the women and their relative centrality to the picture as a whole – until finally, just left of middle, with a broad sweeping view that seems to encompass all that is Skagen, he got it right.

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