

# Understand Denmark

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# Denmark Today

The Danes are, overwhelmingly, a happy bunch. If you believe those contentment surveys and liveability lists, Denmark is one of the happiest nations on earth, with some of the best quality of life. It's not hard to see why: despite the bumps of the global financial crisis, it has among the highest per-capita GDP in the European Union and unemployment is relatively low. Education is free, and Danish social-welfare programs are the envy of many.

## Best in Print

**The Complete Fairy Tales** (Hans Christian Andersen; 1874) The most famous Danish book in the world.

**Either/Or** (Søren Kierkegaard; 1843) The first great work of the father of existentialism.

**Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow** (Peter Høeg; 1992) A worldwide hit set largely in Copenhagen.

**We, the Drowned** (Carsten Jensen; 2006) An epic tale of sailors from seafaring Marstal on Ærø.

**The Almost Nearly Perfect People** (Michael Booth; 2014) Explores the stories behind the 'Nordic miracle'.

## Best on Film

**Babette's Feast** (1987) Set in a rugged west-coast village in 1871.

**Pelle the Conqueror** (1987) Award-winning depiction of the hard life of an immigrant in 19th-century Denmark.

**Festen** (The Celebration; 1998) First of the Dogme95 movies, from celebrated writer-director Thomas Vinterberg.

**Italian for Beginners** (2000) Diverse but damaged Danes learning the language of love.

**In a Better World** (2010) Playground bullying, conflicting moral choices – engineered to question the cosy stereotype of Denmark.

## Happiness & Harmony?

There is more to the Danes' story of contentment. Stroll around Copenhagen or almost any Danish town and you'll experience some of the most harmonious civic spaces anywhere. Look a bit closer, however, and – as in a Hans Christian Andersen fable – you'll find a darker side, too. As with other European nations, there's been a gradual shift to the political right in this famously liberal nation. Concern has grown over immigration – particularly from Muslim countries – and an erosion of traditional values.

For all the talk of assimilation and the comprehensive state effort to achieve it, racial, cultural and religious fault lines and prejudices remain. This challenge to tolerance has unnerved many Danes, while many of them avoid confronting their underlying resentment towards non-European newcomers. In mid-2014, the issue was highlighted when the anti-immigration Danish People's Party won the European Parliament election with four seats and nearly 27% of the vote.

Internal 'class divisions' (of a sort) have also appeared – fanned by the media, it is alleged – between urban and rural Denmark. There is much marginalising talk about the so-called '*udkantsdanmark*'; the sparsely populated, 'peripheral' areas of the country. These outlying regions are often portrayed in the media as home to the poor (and poorly educated, and/or unemployed), while the wealthy are concentrated in the larger cities. Urbanisation is not a new phenomenon, but Copenhagen's population is increasing by about 10,000 people annually. This is placing pressure on the city's infrastructure, while also posing questions about the future prospects of *udkantsdanmark*.