

Travel

Cold feet: Lucy Kellaway visits a no-nonsense Nordic spa

In Copenhagen, a 95C sauna is followed by a swim in the freezing Baltic



Lucy Kellaway at the Kurhotel Skodsborg © Henrik Riis
Lucy Kellaway FEBRUARY 1, 2017

The sky over Copenhagen was leaden — just as viewers of *Borgen* and *The Bridge* would expect it to be. In the darkness of midday the bridge that connects Denmark to Sweden was barely visible; all I could see from the cab was a few yards of the Baltic Sea, flat and grey. How cold is it in there, I asked the driver. Around two degrees, maybe three, he said. It wasn't an idle question as the following day I would be taking a dip in it, after having scorched myself in a sauna first.

I'd agreed to the trip partly because I thought I liked jumping into cold water. I'd taken a dip in the English Channel on New Year's Eve, which was bone-chilling enough at a relatively balmy 12C. But I also wanted to get to know a country that is not only the happiest place on earth, but has the best chair designers, too. And then there is the unpronounceable *hygge*, which seems to boil down to keeping warm and burning a lot of candles — a sound idea in such a climate.

Copenhagen has been decreed by my colleague [Tyler Brûlé](#) as the “most liveable” city in the world, and after about 20 minutes in the place I found myself agreeing. It is the right size. It was scarcely bombed in the war. Its old buildings are gorgeous — but so are its new ones. The water that laps the city everywhere is as clear as drinking water. Outside its royal palace it has guards in bearskins — only there are no tourists gawping at them, because being royal is no big deal. Copenhagen's main furniture department store makes the Conran Shop look both snobbish and vulgar, while in its poshest jewellery store, Georg Jensen, I watched a sweet shop assistant take ages with a woman who looked like Mrs Tiggy-Winkle and was dithering over a simple bracelet.

There is also an egalitarian feel to the place we were staying, Kurhotel Skodsborg, 20 minutes' drive from the centre of town. It is a large white lump of old and new — part old summer haunt

of King Frederick VII, and part modern spa designed by Henning Larsen Architects. It sits there stolidly, separated from the sea by a road, but once inside it is the very spirit of *hygge* — all candles, modern decor, *smørrebrød* and someone tinkling on the piano.

The hotel has been a spa for 115 years, and so takes that sort of thing pretty seriously. I, on the other hand, don't take it seriously at all. I dislike the boredom, the expense and the faffing of a spa. Yet this one was different. In the infrared sauna a row of ageing Danes in swimming costumes (the Danish having the same attitude to nudity as the Brits) were sitting on wooden slatted seats having their insides microwaved. One was eating an apple. They looked as natural as if sitting in a bus queue.



A room at the Kurhotel Skodsborg

I subjected myself to a Swedish massage, which was sufficiently painful to allow me to indulge in the fantasy that it was doing me some good. But what was genuinely good was what happened afterwards. I was made to lie on a heated wooden recliner under a brown knitted blanket and given a ginger shot and a chocolate.

It's not only the post-massage chaise longue that is heated in the name of *hygge*. The marble table at which we ate dinner was heated, too. On to this warm slab, the courses kept coming: a huge lumpfish stuffed with roe. Ox heart with raw beetroot. Fried sweetbreads. I felt obscurely let down when three hours later they stopped coming and instead we were brought herb tea that consisted of a bunch of leaves sticking out of a glass teapot that yielded a delicate pink drink once boiling water was added.

Over dinner I told the hotel's manager what a simply splendid place Denmark was and how I wished I lived there. How civilised! How equal! She shook her head sadly. Hadn't I heard of the Law of Jante, according to which all individual success is disparaged? It might be a good thing for teamwork, but it's no way to run a country.

After a brief break for a sleep in a comfortable modern bedroom, we were back at the trough for a candlelit breakfast, after which I cancelled my date with the nutritionist and went off instead for a brisk walk in the 1,000 acres of the king's hunting forest to try to let the contents of my stomach settle before being roasted in the sauna.

This, according to the muscular woman who was in charge of our session, was something to take very seriously indeed. It was 95C inside the wood-lined cabin and hotter still on the higher benches. Everything would be OK, she assured us, so long as we didn't panic but allowed our hearts to race in response to the heat and closed our eyes and breathed.



Lucy Kellaway in the hotel's sauna with other guests © Henrik Riis

The latter was easier said than done. Every time I inhaled, the air scorched the inside of my nose. Breathe with your mouth, she ordered. I was just about getting used to it when there was a crack like a whip and then a scorching wave of droplets fell on my skin. I disobeyed orders and opened my eyes. The woman was cracking a towel at each of us in turn, scalding us one after another.

While she did so she kept up a babble about "toxins", but then said something more to my liking: "Think of all the bloody great things you've done." I would have loved to do this, only the fear of the next crack of the whip kept interfering. Worse, I was fretting about how much longer I could stay in this inferno before my blood started to boil in my veins.

Finally, we were released. We put on our dressing gowns and filed out into the murk and made our way over the road. Passing motorists took no notice of the stream of people with beetroot faces in white gowns and slippers going down to the jetty.



Walking down the jetty

I lowered myself into the sea, yelling as the cold gripped like an iron clamp around my body, swam six strokes around to the steps at the other side and heaved myself out. My heart was hammering and I was shouting in both agony and joy. Never had I experienced pleasure and pain that had been so tightly joined together. As I stood there on the jetty all I could think was: I want more. So I got back in, and counted to five, trying to pay attention to what was happening. My heart hammered. More crushing pain. More wild exhilaration.

This time when I got out I was incoherent with cold. My jaws were slamming together. I looked at my skin, which had taken on a sinister piebald look of rhubarb and custard. Never have I felt more alive. Never have I looked more as if I were about die.

Back in the sauna a second time, even the cracking of the whip and the scalding steam held no terror. It was over; I wanted to do it again.

This can't be good for us, I said to a young woman as we got dressed. She concurred: the last time she'd felt anything like it was after having taken a large amount of MDMA.



Lucy Kellaway coming out of the sea © Henrik Riis

The next thing on the menu was lunch, which was good as I was ravenously hungry. What was less good was that we had to make it ourselves under the eye of Thomas Rode Andersen, a Michelin-starred chef and devotee of the caveman diet. He is Denmark's answer to Jamie Oliver, only while the former runs to fat, Rode Andersen is a hench hunk who when he isn't teaching Danish execs to make quenelles of roe and chive, is marching them around the forest getting them to do press-ups on logs. Still high, and not sure if I was hot or cold, I was put to work cutting up cos lettuce leaves into the shape of pine trees and shredding cauliflower florets.

The dish was beautifully pretty and nice enough to eat — although wasn't what I really wanted after a trip to the extremes of what my body could stand. I would have given much for a toasted cheese sandwich.



On the way to the airport the clouds lifted and the sun came out. Danes were cycling home from work although it was only 4pm, the women's hair streaming out from under woolly hats. No one wears helmets as they assume they are not going to die.

I didn't die either on my brief visit to Denmark. I didn't feel more healthy as a result of the spa, but I did feel happier. Hygge is pleasure in small things; I'd had that and much more. Pleasure in thrill, in beauty, in democracy and the miracle wrought by a candle or two in a place where darkness is visible.

Photographs: Henrik Riis; PR shots

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