



Copenhagen - First night at a Hostel

It was the first night at the Urban Camper Hostel of Copenhagen. The first night of a new type of life. I looked around at the tiny but spanking clean bit of space, enclosed by a tent door with flaps. Four bunk beds with their white sheets. Hooks for towels. Lockers to put your stuff. Cute phone charging outlets, a light switch and cubby holes at the head of the bed. The showers were in a different area. There was a common area for playing, getting drinks and coffee. People were playing foosball when I got in. I thought I would have to go and mingle some time. But I was too tired that night and would probably just flop into bed.

How in the world would I start my processes though? Where was I going to fit my stuff? And how the heck did I end up here, on the floor of this small, tight place in the middle of nowhere? Ahh, new life!

It was a far cry from the fancy hotel rooms I stayed in for work the past twenty years. I had asked for a private room to start my transition but there were some booking communication errors, and it seemed this was the one I was getting—a four-bed dorm. I didn't know it then, but it was actually a luxury for hostel stay, as most dorms go to eight beds.

Luckily, I was alone and could really spread out my stuff on the floor. I opened my suitcase—a little too big, although I did reduce my initial inventory to half of the original—and rummaged around, peeling out

my PJs, body wash, a larger toothpaste tube and flipflops. I placed them on the bed and locked my new TSA approved locks and slid the bag under the bed.

What next? I looked around at all the important stuff that I could not keep in the locker as all lockers were somehow locked, and so I needed to carry them with me. I slid all cash pouches into the laptop case, grabbed that, and my stylish cross body purse, clutched my toiletries and PJs and went to the showers. I brushed my teeth with—*aargh*—cold water and showered in a start-stop slow flow shower, thankfully warm.

Back in the room I met my first roommate. A girl, probably in her twenties, from Estonia on her way to Germany. She was traveling way better than me, with a backpack that completely fit in the locker. She was thrilled to know that I was traveling here from NYC. I checked with her about the other lockers and whether she was using more than one. She said that perhaps another girl, traveling from Chile, who had been living there for a week might be using extra lockers. I made a note to talk with her.

The bed was tempting and cute. I slid my laptop bag under the pillow, slipped the purse onto one arm, and cuddled myself to sleep (dreaming of palms touching mine, drawing wide arcs).

Noises outside were muted. The girl sleeping on the bed above me was typing on her laptop. It was all surprisingly cozy, and I slept in a deep sleep for at least one hour.

I woke up suddenly feeling claustrophobic and stumbled out of the tent. Oh, I needed air! European places have no air! And where are the windows? I thought I would not be able to survive this! I found a staff member outside and asked for a fan. She said no and that she would've loved one for the office herself. Then I discussed the locker situation, and she said that she knew about it and was trying to contact the other girls, and if I were to find them, I should let her know. I flopped back into the tent and into the bed.

The sound of the lockers woke me up and I sat up groggily to see another girl. It was probably just before midnight.

I whispered to her, “Hey, are you using extra lockers”?

“No, I am just using this one, see?”



“Oh, ok, maybe the fourth girl then.”

I slept fitfully again until I heard the lockers again; it was now two a.m. A beautiful girl in a flowing red dress was kneeling by the lockers.

“Hi, are you using two lockers?”

“No, just this one. This blue one I don’t know, it has been locked forever.”

It looked like my situation was not going to be solved tonight, but then the girl from Estonia whispered, “I am leaving early tomorrow, you can use mine.”

Relieved, I went back to bed. A part of my mind floated in the surrealness of the night, but I did sleep on and off, feeling hot and cold. Still, I woke up refreshed.

The showers were very nice actually. I also got to do yoga on the shower benches. And the wash basins did have a nifty little thing on the side to change the temperature of the water for brushing. It all turned out well in the world, and with me. Actually quite lovely, especially after some coffee!

(Unfortunately, Danish coffee is way overpriced, but that is another topic.)

WOOOFing on a Tomato Farm in Odense

Katrina and Ola were the farmer couple in whose house I was to live next; they had a small one-hectare farm in the beautiful island of Fynn (pronounced Fuenn). Originally an engineer-teacher couple, they had staked out this dream to live in a sustainable manner.

It was the first time I was actually going to stay over at someone's home —my previous WWOOF expeditions in the US were only for the day. I was somewhat apprehensive about how it would all work, the dynamics of living in someone's home not as a guest or a friend, more as an employee. But Katrina and Ola opened their beautiful home to me with overflowing kindness, affection and hospitality, and I jumped in with gusto.

I had a lovely room and access to the entire beautiful house. I loved the sunroom with its soft bed and clean pillows, especially to read in the afternoons. (I found the only two English books in the house and usurped them, *How to Grow Flowers* and *The Uprising in Myanmar*.) The sunroom flowed out into the patio, with a table and chairs, and sometimes I sat out there with my laptop when it was not raining.

The island being quite flat and surrounded by water on three sides, the wind would blow right through, blowing in the clouds and blowing them out again, the rain appearing and disappearing; many a times I would be moving in and out, lifting my laptop and setting it down repeatedly, all within the same

afternoon! But the rain gave much needed water to grow the food.

The farm was beautiful. Ola shared with me the story of how they had slowly converted the farm from the commercial rye farm to a more varied farm, producing a complex array of fruits, flowers and vegetables. They also raised chicken and rabbits and pigs and—an indulgence as



Katrina would say—two gorgeous horses that grazed in a field alongside.

The highlight of the farm were the tomato greenhouses, and over the course of my stay, I ended up picking 200 kilograms of *fifty* different varieties of tomatoes! The tomatoes were gorgeous; I didn't even know there could be so many different varieties! Big, small, sweet, tart, purple, lined, striped, with names like Queen of the Night, Aunt Ruby's German, Tigerella, and Black Beauty. Tomatoes were everywhere in the house, as none were wasted; of course they showed up in every meal, and surprisingly I began to enjoy them.

Ola taught me how to pluck it at the stem exactly at the point where it is bent down sharply. A tomato is ready when this bend is pronounced and when it is slightly heavy with softness, it pops right out. Pruning is a continuous project; the vines need to be pruned of excess leaves and anything touching the ground, they have to be



lifted and trained higher. I wish I knew some of these tips and tricks when I struggled with my tomatoes in Texas!

Picking currants is more complex. The fruit is small and tender, but the stem attached is firm. So, there is always a great danger of crushing the berry while picking it. A rolling, tugging motion is needed, which I never really figured out. I ended up picking a box of about 250 per fifteen minutes. Slow going! The box would be charged some 40 kroner. Here I was, a business strategist at \$300/hour, making 160 kroner/hour for the farmer! Very productive! But this is really the national fruit for the Danish and currant jam is a standby on all breakfast tables. Currant jam with cheese on nutty bread is one of the yummiest breakfasts I have had!

All the farm goodness came into delicious dinners. Every day, promptly at five p.m., Ola donned a professional apron and started cooking, the beautiful wood countertop soon filling up with chopped

veggies, marinated meats and sauces. The dinner would get ready at seven, and we all gathered around—me, another girl from Oregon, and the family and guests.

As conversation flowed, traversing topics of Africa, gun violence in the US, Denmark politics, healthcare across countries, cold water sea swimming, marathon runs... with this disparate group of people, over a wonderful meal of roast chicken, potatoes, and a zucchini flower and tomato salad...I felt a strange sense of calm and peace descend on me.

How was it possible to so easily relate to complete strangers so deeply and so quickly? The Asian me would say this could have only been possible with family and relatives. Yet, it could actually be harder to find it with them. What is really a relationship, I mused? We have some in built definitions and expectations, but really, it may take very little to enjoy a good relationship.

Chicken Run!

One evening, Katrina got up from the dinner table and said, “Well, I need to now go outside and figure out how to send chickens to their new home.” They had moved the coop far away to another field.

She didn’t sound very enthusiastic so I said I would join for moral support.

When we went outside, we saw the five hens pecking around, perfectly content. Katrina went to them with some mashed potato in a plate and started making an interesting *cluck-cluck* sound. The hens came to peck from the plate. Well, all, except one. She moved backwards at a snail’s pace, until we gave up on her.

Patiently, Katrina led the others about fifty feet along the raspberry patch, and almost to the dividing line to the next field where the coop was now set up. I was watching from a distance, thinking I would contribute by getting that errant hen.

But suddenly the hens turned back before the dividing line. Katrina tried again, the hens took a few steps, but again then they turned back at the last line. And so forth. Finally, puzzled, she was ready to give up.

I offered to start this time. I got rice grains in a cup from home and started jiggling it, *chan-chan*. By now the hens were back to the original starting line.

Patiently we started covering the fifty feet area again. I also added the *cluck-cluck* for good measure and then in a flash of inspiration, threw a handful of rice seeds on the ground. They started moving forward to get the rice.

I moved backwards, slowly pacing myself—*cluck, cluck*, throw; *cluck, cluck*, throw and so forth. This time I got all five hens. Again, we worked our way towards the end of the raspberry patch. And now the hens distinctly slowed down.

“*Cluck, cluck.*” I threw more rice. They turned their back to me and pecked at the rice left behind. Desperately I threw more. They turned forward again. I threw again, in front the leading hen.

“Come, come baby,” I coaxed, “only a little more”.

The hen took a few steps forward into the groove. Just when I heaved a sigh of relief, promptly it turned back on me again!

It started drizzling, and there was a lot of rice on the ground and a lot of mud.

Katrina came over and we discussed that there seemed an issue at that very spot. She remembered that before there used to be an electric fence dividing the fields because of the horses, and perhaps the hens remembered it? But of course!

She sighed philosophically. “Well, if they last tomorrow, we can try something else.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“Well, a fox did take a few hens before, and once even the pigs ate them.”

She seemed resigned that they would go.

Such is the life of the farmer. You love and nurture and hope and pray, but yet at the back of your mind, you are also ready for it all to be destroyed in a minute. I was very sad.

The next morning I sprinted out of bed and rushed to the fields. There were five hens clucking away at the compost pile. I was relieved. Later, we moved the coop back to the main field, and everyone lived happily thereafter.

Odense Trips

From the farm, I took a number of bus trips into Odense; sometimes I traveled there with Ola who operated a stand at a farmer's market. This market was by a beautiful museum dedicated to the work of HC Anderson –author of famous children's books such as *The Emperor's New Clothes* and *The Ugly*

Duckling - who was born here.

The museum is absolutely gorgeous, built in flowing curves of glass and wood, and multiple levels of greenery, including living roofs. The whole feeling is that of being enveloped in a graceful dance of green and light.



I also remember a trip to a museum called the Funan village. This is the kind of museum I best enjoy– one which brings together history, geography, human society, and nature, all at the same time. This open-air museum had multiple homes, workshops, homesteads, barns, and even a huge smithy and windmill, all depicting life from the 1800s emphasizing



circular living. The houses were sturdy and durable, almost 500 years old, and yet built of local materials such as timber, clay, stone and straw. I was really struck by the art of the thatched roof on all the buildings, an intricate arrangement of multiple layers that made a neat, thick, well-trimmed roof that stayed for decades. There were also workshop buildings for weaving, milling, curing, tool repairs and blacksmith, all serving to show the importance of reducing waste. I highly recommend this place for lovers of all things natural!
