

ÜBER cool

Scandi-fan Louise Cummings gets her fix of Nordic culture with a trip to Denmark's second city Aarhus during the vibrant festival season.

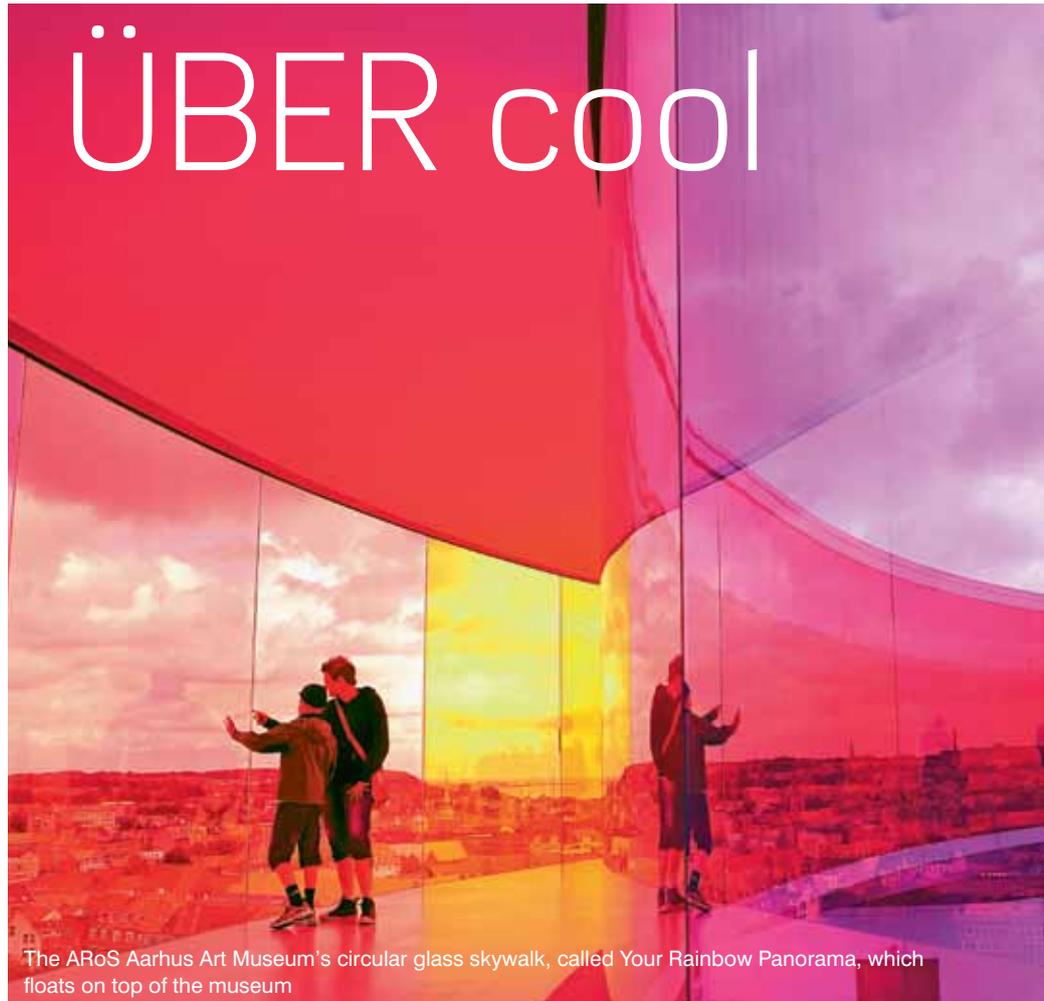
My obsession with all things Scandi has been a long time in gestation. Perhaps from the day I was born when the strains of *Fernando* floated along the labour ward, heavyweights of scandipop Abba having topped the charts in 1976.

Growing up I was seduced by the simplicity and functionality of Danish and Swedish design (I spent an inordinate amount of time in Ikea as a student). Then, as a postgrad, I flat shared with an über-cool Swedish girl called Pia who was so effortlessly chic, I insisted she give me a Nordic makeover.

More recently I mini-mooned in Iceland, blown away by the other-worldly beauty and shining glaciers of the remote island. So, you see, I was a Scandi fan long before Stieg Larsson's gripping Millennium trilogy, Nordic Noir dramas, and chunky knit Fair Isle sweaters became de rigueur. Yet I'd never set foot in Norway, Sweden or Denmark, so I started with the latter, visiting during the 50th Aarhus Festival, Scandinavia's largest cultural event.

A dynamic city on the Jutland Peninsula, just 15 minutes by bike from the beach, harbour and forest, Aarhus is Denmark's second city after Copenhagen. Young at heart (13 per cent of the population are students), it's been named European Capital of Culture 2017 – with a theme of 'Rethink' – so the city is currently being reimaged, its dockland set to become a vibrant new neighbourhood providing 7,000 homes and 12,000 jobs. Impressive stuff.

A short flight from Stansted to Billund, and an hour or so's drive through flat Scandinavian countryside, we were in the festival city by lunchtime. First stop was the four-star designer hotel Comwell Aarhus, which is a short walk from ARoS art museum, the main shopping street



The ARoS Aarhus Art Museum's circular glass skywalk, called Your Rainbow Panorama, which floats on top of the museum

and quaint Latin Quarter. The eco boutique hotel opened last summer, and its contemporary interior, from carpets to wallpaper, is the handiwork of internationally renowned Danish design house HAY (I loved it from the minute I spotted oversized lights resembling fluffy clouds floating about the reception desk!).

My room – one of 240 with panoramic views of the city – had a few little surprises courtesy of HAY; a blue budgie perched on top of my bedstead looked so incredibly lifelike I had to clamber up and give it a nudge to ensure it wasn't real.

With an exhilarating afternoon on the cards, we gathered at Comwell's à la carte Restaurant V for lunch. Much of the fare hails from the fields, beaches and woodlands of East Jutland, including buckthorn from Fløjstrup and smoked salmon from Comwell's own smokehouse. A delicious Scandinavian platter featuring air-dried ham, grilled artichoke, smoked salmon, Danish Brie, rye bread, veal, Danish frittata AND home-made chocolate cake proved the perfect smörgåsbord.

Grateful for a short walk, we headed to the docklands for a SeaRangers boat tour. Decked out in lifejacket and waterproofs, we bounced along the bay at breakneck speed. Eventually slowing to admire the Iceberg, a jagged award-winning feat of architecture rising from the harbour, our molecular biologist guide explained an oasis of life exists beneath the waves on a coral reef established in the Ice Age, from lobster and seals

to the smallest whales in the world. She also captivated us with talk of bloodthirsty Viking death traps once used to fend off marauding attackers.

That evening we were treated to a night of cabaret at Tivoli Friheden, a traditional amusement park. As part of the festival, Hermans – an 800-seat theatre in the park – hosted International Natcabaret Moulin de Paris, a truly eye-opening showcase, starring sultry dancing girls, lithe aerial artists, illusionists and dancing boys covering their modesty with incredibly small towels! Blush.

culture cultures

Next day, we headed south to explore the Frederiksbjerg neighbourhood, a shopaholics' paradise full of brilliant boutiques, and Godsbanen, the city's 'cultural production centre', which once housed one of Denmark's largest train freight yards. There we discovered a group of Vikings who you can rent out for 2,000 crowns a day (yes, honestly). "We have people coming from all over the world to train to be Vikings, from New Zealand, Alaska, all over Europe," one of the burly Danes told us. "We can raid and fight and play games," he smiled, before drawing his sword to demonstrate his fighting skills.

The Danes are as passionate about their bikes as their smörgåsbords, so we took to two wheels with Cycling Aarhus to explore the city. I had a wobbly start, but was soon up to speed, cycling along the blustery waterfront and meandering



LEFT:
Den Gamle By, the world's first open-air museum of urban history

RIGHT:
Ron Mueck's giant sculpture *Boy*

BELOW:
The Moesgaard museum



BELOW: The four-star designer hotel Comwell Aarhus, complete with fake budgie, and a tasty smörgåsbord



through the Latin Quarter. VinDenmark, at the marina, was a wonderful lunch stop, where we rewarded our aerobic efforts at the wine shop's self-service bar, pouring a glass of chardonnay and helping ourselves to a rustic tapas platter.

We spent the afternoon at Den Gamle By, the world's first open-air museum of urban history – and I have to say, I loved every cobble of it. Taking you through life in the 1800s, 1920s and 1970s, costumed characters play folk from a bygone era, while geese roam freely, and transport is by horse and cart. As a child of the 70s, I enjoyed snooping around a groovy apartment from the period which had a magic mirror showing you how you'd look in a series of psychedelic outfits!

That evening we were Aarhus Festival-bound. The celebration, which runs August to September, attracts local, national and international artists, with entertainment spilling out on to the city's streets. En route to the pop-up festival restaurant, we took in interesting exhibits, including kooky sculptures created from junk scavenged from Aarhus tip and a ginormous harp erected on the façade of the concert hall, allowing you to play 30 huge strings. Mind-boggling stuff.

We were true culture vultures on our final day, taking in two awesome museums. The first was the Moesgaard, which opened in October 2014, and rises angularly out of the ground, its grass roof perfect for picnics with panoramas. Offering a fresh perspective on Danish history, from

the Stone Age to the Middle Ages, it's currently hosting a groundbreaking exhibition of China's Terracotta Army, featuring artefacts that have never left China before.

I could have spent all day at ARoS Aarhus Art Museum, which provides a rose-tinted view of the world, quite literally. Thanks to Danish Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson's circular glass skywalk, Your Rainbow Panorama, which floats on top of the museum, you find yourself bathed in red and yellow and pink and green. . . Frankly, it's rather trippy, but the 360° views of Aarhus are dazzling.

Downstairs there's an impressive collection of paintings, sculptures and installations from some of the world's most progressive artists, but it's well worth taking the lift to the bottom floor. There, you'll find Ron Mueck's *Boy*, a giant sculpture of a crouching child which is epically lifelike. Craning my neck to look up at the 'boy', feeling like a Lilliputian, I was struck by how much there is to see in the cultural powerhouse that is Aarhus. I'll need a return visit to see it all. Oh, and a jaunt to Copenhagen, before I continue on my Scandi fest with a cruise down the Norwegian fjords and an island-hopping trip through Sweden. Skål!

FACTfile



Rent a Viking!

✈ **Getting there:** Ryanair has direct flights from London Stansted to Aarhus airport and Billund airport from as little as £19.99 one-way.

Where to stay: The 240-room four-star hotel Comwell Aarhus (comwellaarhus.dk) or the centrally-located Hotel Scandic Aarhus City (scandichotels.com/Hotels/Denmark/Aarhus/Arhus-City).

Festival fever: Find out about Aarhus's various festivals at visitaarhus.com.