

Travel

Page

42

'On a clear day you can see the famous bridge between Denmark and Sweden'

Jane Mulkerrins on a new seaside hotel near Copenhagen

MILENA PIGDANOWICZ-FIDERA / GETTY IMAGES; RICHARD LOWES / ALAMY

Tatra Mountains, Poland



25 European walking holidays

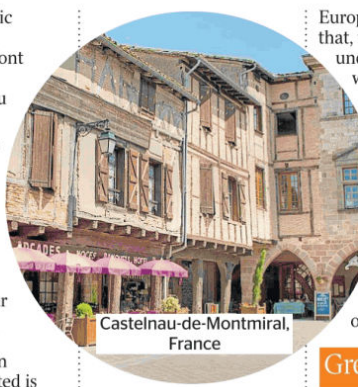
Sean Newsom picks the best trails, from Amalfi coast hikes to wild routes in Romania and Norwegian fjord adventures

Remember that song by Nancy Sinatra, *These Boots Are Made for Walkin'*? Well, Nancy, I've got news. It's not just the footwear. Our bodies are made for walking too — and there are few holiday pursuits more natural and rewarding than a proper old-fashioned hike. You stretch your legs a little, conversation is uncorked and the need to reach your goal before nightfall supplies all the purpose you need.

Suddenly, you notice your surroundings too — and that's what makes this collection of European walking holidays especially mouth-watering, because they explore some of the continent's most dramatic and

fascinating landscapes. The scenic splendour comes courtesy of destinations such as Madeira, Mont Blanc and Albania's Accursed Mountains. In the Dolomites you get a side order of serious gastronomy too. And in Umbria, Galicia and the hilltop Cathar towns of France there are deep layers of history to sift through along the way.

Our continent has plenty more going for it. World-class networks of mapped and waymarked trails are perhaps our most obvious advantage, closely followed by a plentiful supply of comfortable hotels and mountain refuges. But what's less appreciated is



Castelnaud-de-Montmiral, France

Europe's geographical range. It means that, whatever the season, you can undertake a serious hike. In mid-winter Spain's Canary Islands beckon. In spring Italy's Amalfi coast and Greece's Cycladic islands are at their best. Come summer Europe has some of the finest and most accessible mountain ranges to tramp through.

In other words, the options are almost limitless. And here's another layer of choice to go on top. Should you book on a guided or a self-guided tour? Both can be

Great walks next page

Luxury Denmark

The coolest new stay on the Danish coast

Rox Resort has Baltic views, a buzzing bar and a rooftop pool club.

Jane Mulkerrins checks in

There's no natural reason why the sybaritic bliss of a spa must be enjoyed in silence. But someone at some point decided that spas were essentially silent retreats in swimwear, quiet and solemn as a strict, contemplative convent. And as one of life's chatterers, I could fill several pages with the spas of the world in which I've been aggressively shushed.

So I am thrilled to find myself, on a wintry weekend afternoon, sprawling poolside on a daybed in a snugly robe and slippers, conversing — at great length and ordinary volume — with one of my best friends. The vast glass-roofed showpiece of the recently opened Rox Resort, with three large rooftop pools (one indoor, all heated), a sauna, sun decks, treatment rooms and two freestanding fireplaces, is not a spa, I am assured, but a Pool Club.

This means talking is actively encouraged, as are drinking and eating; there's a cocktail bar and a dumpling restaurant, and plentiful polo-shirted staff to ferry both to your daybed. There's even music, which builds from gentle daytime jazz and California soul to a punchier party beat as evening arrives (the club is open, for dipping, drinking and lounging, until lam, with non-hotel guests permitted from £46 per session).

In the spacious glass-walled sauna overlooking the chilly-looking Baltic Sea, I consider the fact that southern Denmark may not be the most obvious location for a beach resort. Nor early February the most idyllic time to visit.

However, Koge, just 21 miles from Copenhagen, is already a popular beach destination for Danes with its harbour welcoming hundreds of thousands of visitors each summer to sail and swim — but with limited accommodation. Now, with the sprawling 156-room Rox Resort, a

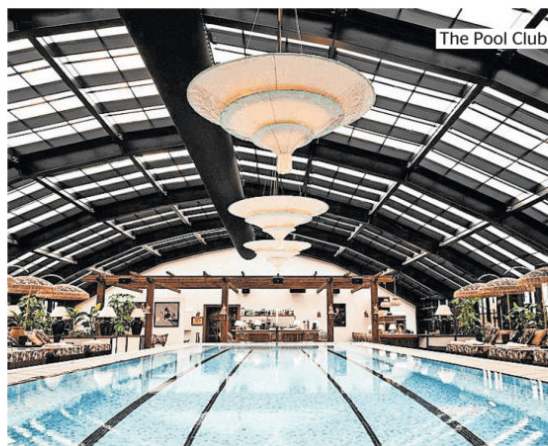
modern, stylishly Scandi take on the grand hotels of America's eastern seaboard, which opened in November — the town's first big hotel — they finally have somewhere to stay.

On a clear day I am told you can see the famous bridge between Denmark and Sweden. Today, following the heaviest snowfall the region has received for more than a decade and with the edge of the sea thickly frozen, it's impossible even to tell where the beach ends and the Baltic begins. None of which is deterring the hardy local members of the Koge sauna club, however. Wearing pyjamas, we sip coffee and watch from our floor-to-ceiling windows as they dash stoically from the dark green wooden sauna hut to the hole that's been cut in the ice in the harbour's natural swimming pool.

Owned by the ESS Group, which has 16 hotels in Sweden and Denmark, including beach and mountain resorts and boutique city hotels, Rox is a riot of colourful, quirky design and whimsical furnishings. There's no restrained Scandinavian minimalism here. The open-plan ground floor is home to the "barception" (a reception desk that is also a long, flamboyantly upholstered bar), a pool table, a dartboard, shuffleboard, a plant count to rival Kew's and well over a hundred armchairs, sofas and chaises longues in various velvets and animal prints.

Jonas Stenberg, one of the founders of the group, is an entrepreneur with a background in nightclubs rather than hotels who built his hospitality brand on the

“There's even a retro after-dinner drinks trolley featuring a ten-litre vat of Mas Amiel



belief that people do not travel for a room alone, but for atmosphere, energy and a sense of place.

To that end, in spite of the extensive lounging opportunities, Rox is a resort designed for doers. There are padel courts, forthcoming tennis courts, and by the summer a rooftop yoga studio and outdoor gym, along with a cold plunge pool and croquet lawn. There's also a fleet of bikes (traditional and electric) and Copenhagen is just a 90-minute ride away along the coast.

Today, however, with treacherous conditions for two wheels, we abandon our bike ambitions after breakfast (included and extensive) and instead take a snowy stomp into Koge, half an hour away on foot.

Blessed with a large natural harbour, the market town dates back to the 13th century. It's now an increasingly popular commuter town (28 minutes by train) for those priced out of Copenhagen itself and who fancy living by the beach.

A vibrant social scene has sprung up around the renowned waterfront Braunstein microbrewery with its modern, architecturally impressive glass taphouse

(braunstein.dk). Yes, there's drinking and festivals and music events, but this is Denmark; the cycling enthusiast Michael Braunstein tells us that he is keen for it to be "a community and not simply a bar", so it is also the hub for multiple cycling and running clubs. It's a hotspot for the burgeoning bikepacking (mountain biking and backpacking) scene and for trail runners en route to and from the island of Bornholm — a ferry ride away — which hosts regular races.

Back at the Rox, we head to the RF Smith restaurant, which serves steaks-meets-Sichuan fare (mains from £19). With a whopping 220 seats it occupies multiple areas, but we instinctively head towards the far end, past the gloriously glitzy mirrored bar to the tables that face the snowy tundra and the sea. It will be magical come summer with its glass doors open wide, but it's a different sort of magical in winter too: cosy and almost otherworldly.

We are persuaded to have the signature menu (£102pp), four indulgent courses including oysters, beef tataki, roasted langoustines, ribeye steak and chips, and a flaming Smith, the house twist on a baked

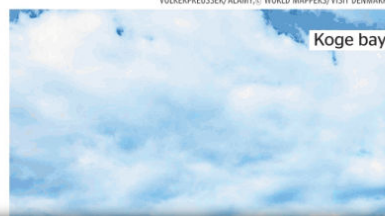




The hotel lounge



A bedroom at Rox Resort



Koge bay



Hotel Sanders, Nyhavn

Copenhagen is designed for cycling, so it's a huge help that you can rent bikes at this boutique bolt hole close to Nyhavn's colourful waterfront promenade. The hotel's backstory is all to do with the dream of the owner (a former Danish ballet star), but more important for visitors is the striking rooftop terrace, homely living room, marquee cocktail bar and subtle bygone style that eschews progressive Danish design.

Details B&B doubles from £326 (hotelsanders.com)

Chic hotels in Copenhagen

Villa Copenhagen, city centre

When centrally located Villa Copenhagen opened in 2020 heads turned. The brag was that it would be the dame hotel for the 21st century. It doesn't disappoint. There's a rooftop pool and a terrace with a cafe and bakery/coffee shop. It's a stroll through a design museum, with all the curves in the building. They call it "conscious design" but we prefer "knocking your socks off". B&B doubles from £290 (villacopenhagen.com)

Sanders, Nyhavn

Nyhavn is designed for cycling, so it's a huge help that you can rent bikes at this boutique bolt hole close to Nyhavn's colourful waterfront promenade. The hotel's backstory is all to do with the dream of the owner (a former Danish ballet star), but more important for visitors is the striking rooftop terrace, homely living room, marquee cocktail bar and subtle bygone style that eschews progressive Danish design.

Details B&B doubles from £326 (hotelsanders.com)

Coco Hotel, Vesterbro

Copenhagen Food Collective, the eco-savvy owner of this hotel, runs 19 of the city's most memorable restaurants — so the organic food served here is no half-hearted affair. There's Coco Café for friend-making and filter coffee drinking; Olise, a modern bistro next door; plus a summer terrace and live music sessions. Most importantly, the guilt-free reason to stay is that the hotel is powered by its own solar farm, and there's an iron-clad commitment to being plastic-free and energy efficient.

Details B&B doubles from £101 (coco-hotel.com)



Manon Les Suites

Manon Les Suites, city centre

Well, this may not be what you expect. A Balinese-influenced tropical pool draped with foliage, a jungle gym, a rooftop restaurant and a sauna with cold bucket showers — this is Denmark via Denpasar with southeast Asian-inspired public spaces that are dressed to the nines. Despite all this tropical flair, uncluttered rooms are fuss-free, while the hotel overlooks Copenhagen's delightful rectangular lakes. Note: only over-15s are welcome.

Details B&B doubles from £207, including spa access (guldsmedenhotels.com) Mike MacEcheran To read a longer version of this list, see thetimes.com/travel

Alaska. Lighter à la carte options include lemon sole and Arctic char, but it's a meat and seafood-forward menu, with no skimping on butter. There's even a retro after-dinner drinks trolley, featuring a ten-litre vat of Mas Amiel, a French grenache-based version of port, served via a foot-long pipette.

Breakfast is similarly generous — an eclectic Scandinavian buffet with dried fruits, cereals, yoghurts, pastries, breads, cheeses and meats, cooked options and à la carte eggs too. I manage to see off an entire individually cooked bread and butter pudding every morning. If you can find any room for lunch after that there's an all-day menu featuring salads, sandwiches and burgers, plus lighter snacks up at the Pool Club's dumpling bar (try the shiitake mushroom dumplings, £15, best devoured in a soggy swimsuit, with a margarita).

Full of steak, chips, wine and Mas Amiel, we somehow stagger up the "secret" staircase connecting the restaurant to the Birdcage, a spectacular double-height glass box with a vast freestanding fireplace and a horseshoe-shaped brass bar, which is already featuring on lists of the best cocktail bars in Copenhagen.

The house martini (£12) is made with two sorts of vermouth, lemon and a splash of chardonnay, and is served with its own little tray of DIY fixings — olives, lemon peel, brine if you like it dirty — plus a "sidecar", a generous, dangerous extra serving of martini on ice to top it up with. There's also a drink called the Dulce, a smooth yet light after-dinner tippie for which I failed

to find out the ingredients — because if you sit at the bar for long you become a guinea pig/tester for the persuasive staff, and recalling the ingredients of anything becomes quite hard.

Excellent drinks aside, whoever is in charge of HR at Rox deserves a bonus: the service is not only smooth and attentive but genuinely warm and authentic, with a quirky sprinkling of showbiz credentials. Frans Jeppsson Wall, the charismatic head barman at the Birdcage, represented Sweden in the 2016 Eurovision song contest aged 17, came fifth, and reached No 1 in the Swedish charts. Marc Mariboe Christensen, meanwhile, a sommelier in RF Smith, was a professional dancer on *Vild Med Dans*, the Danish version of *Strictly Come Dancing*.

It is more than 24 hours into our stay before I realise that I've barely seen any children. It's not an adults-only hotel — children, and dogs, are welcome — but in the fine tradition of Danish self-regulation they are very much their parents'/owners' responsibility.

Children are permitted in the Pool Club between 8am and 10am, and a couple of suites have a second bedroom featuring clever boat-like bunk beds.

All the 156 bedrooms are spacious, smartly designed and extremely comfortable, with super-king beds, vast velvet headboards, myriad lamps, exquisitely soft robes, sleep masks and stylish amenities. Most have showers rather than baths (there is no shortage of other places to bathe), all have balconies, and 70 per cent

are sea-facing. And if you really like the bed, headboard or lamps you can take them home, via the Home of Ess website.

In spite of the subzero temperatures — and the previous night's martinis — with Copenhagen less than 30 minutes by train, it's a must-see. The snow and cold simply mean we have to spend more time in the myriad bakeries and design shops — losing several hours in the royally appointed homeware emporium Illums Bolighus — and make regular stops for glogg, Danish glühwein, served at the city's little red, green and gold tower-shaped concessions (£8).

With the barges and sightseeing cruisers moored along the picturesque Nyhavn waterfront completely iced in, boat trips are out today, but we stroll to the modernist DR Koncerthuset, home of the Danish National Symphony Orchestra, and through Christiansborg Palace, the seat of Denmark's parliament made internationally famous by the drama series *Borgen*.

Back at the Rox there's an upbeat afternoon party vibe in the Pool Club, the perfect spot to see off any Sunday scaries. As I make the most of my cabana and my last few hours of robe-clad people-watching, I'm picturing the scene here in summer, with the vast rooftop pools and decks open, tennis and croquet and cold plunge pools under way, bike rides along the coast to the city, and windows flung wide to a Baltic breeze. And as southern European temperatures continue to soar, beach holidays in southern Denmark — with showbiz staff and a spa you won't get shushed in — don't start to sound too silly after all.

Need to know

Jane Mulkerrins was a guest of Rox Resort, which has B&B doubles from £232 (roxresort.com). Fly to Copenhagen