

## OTHER / TRAVEL

## CHRISTIANIA

## Oasis of anarchy

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The entrance to Christiania.

Christiania, an “experiment” at self-governed community living spread over 85 acres near Copenhagen, is a thriving alternative to a capitalist or statist society, a reminder that another world is possible.

Entering Copenhagen in an unmanned metro train, our first impressions were of a blend of modernist and traditional architecture, canals with quaint bridges, bicycles with carts in front bearing babies or dogs or both. But, above all, there was a structured neatness. Just a few metres from the central part of town, we entered under a colourful archway into a different world altogether: an eclectic, colourful, creative, seemingly chaotic use of space with a huge diversity of architectural styles and profuse graffiti everywhere.

Christiania, an “experiment” at anarchic or self-governed living, began 40 years ago, at a time when the youth movement was at its peak in Denmark. The explicit purpose was to create a “free town” with the principle that everyone has the freedom to live in the way they want as long as it does not impinge on others’ freedom, to collectively create a society that moves away from “psychical and physical pollution”. The first few families “illegally” squatted on an abandoned army camp, and then for several years afterwards, as its population grew, the community had to resist repeated efforts to evict it.

Spread over 85 acres, partly urbanised and partly vegetated, with a river running through it, Christiania has about 1,000 people living in 16 local communes that are self-governed through consensus-based decision-making. The entire community meets only occasionally, and any decisions taken for it as a whole can be done only after an announcement in Christiania’s weekly newspaper.

The residents come from various backgrounds: academics, activists, artists, businesspersons, “dropouts” from the mainstream, practitioners of various trades and crafts, architects and much else. It is a welcoming home to people who are usually marginalised by society: single mothers,

queer people, immigrants, the poor and the homeless. In the 1980s, it was primarily the residents who were employed in the local workshops (cafes, building groups, childcare centres and so on), but since then it has opened up for others who need a place to stay and are in sync with an anarchist, free way of living.

The entire settlement along the cobblestone paths consists of refurbished army buildings, which was a struggle because the city administration wanted to pull them all down and rebuild anew. Some are newly built, with a more modern, ecologically conscious design. Remarkably, there is neither private ownership nor any inheritance. Hence, when spaces open up to be occupied, the descendants of the existing residents have to line up like anyone else wanting to join the community. There is an open application process, and some priority for selection lies with the immediate neighbours since they would be the ones primarily "impacted". "The decision-making process is long but it is all worth it in the end," says Natasha Verco, our local guide, a long-time visitor to Christiania.

While residents go about their own lives as they think appropriate, there are many activities in the commons: canteens and cafes, shops, gardens, laundry, bathhouse and sauna (which we happily entered for 30 minutes of bliss!), learning centres for children and youth, music and theatre and cinema centres, conference and meeting rooms, and the maintenance of roads, sewage and power. Several of these are run by democratically governed worker cooperatives, such as the one operating an organic restaurant that our host, Natasha, helps with.

The commons are funded by regular resident contributions and by charging 20 per cent of the local business earnings. The local currency, "løn", is used for most local transactions. A strong spirit of communing leads to a significantly less need for personal assets and amenities, reducing overall resource consumption. And there is constant technological innovation; one of the most well-known is the Christianiabike, a wonderful adaptation of the bicycle in which a cart gets fitted on the front, enabling babies, pets, and whatever you have just shopped to be easily carted around. These are the ones we saw when we first entered Copenhagen; they were all around us, and symbolised how this community has contributed to the society around it.

Ole Lykke Andersen, a 70-year-old self-proclaimed anarchist, who came to the town 37 years ago and now runs an "archive centre", says that "Christiania is a hope that autonomous communities are possible". "The basic values of trust and a balance of individual and collective freedom have been kept alive through endless discussions," he adds, as we chat in the blue-roofed room filled with a mass of books, articles, posters, magazines and other archival material on Christiania.

The fact that this "squatted" settlement has survived four decades is a result of several factors. Resistance to attempts at eviction was crucial in the initial years. Equally, the Danish welfare state "allowed" Christiania to practice its ideals, but played its own tricks. In 1982, when the Danish Parliament (Folketing) said that Christiania could only be accepted if it was legalised, the proposal was strongly resisted. In 1989, the squat was finally legalised and the right to collective use of the area was granted under the "Christiania Act". In 1990, an agreement was signed, according to which Christiania was mandated to pay certain civic taxes and duties. In 2001, a right-wing government made significant changes in this agreement, and negotiations broke down in 2008. But the "normalisation" of Christiania continued to be pushed.

The hashish business in the town was, and still is, a major reason for a crackdown by the government. Hashish trade takes place in Christiania's main street; it was not part of the original intent, but has grown, with the trade being carried out mostly by outsiders with significant mafia involvement, and some local residents. The residents are not united on whether they want it there or not; some feel that it is a major cause of unwanted state surveillance; others feel that it is part of the free society approach. They have, however, agreed on prohibition of hard drugs such as cocaine and heroin.

In July 2012, Christiania lost a court case and had to enter into an agreement with the state at the expense of their autonomy. Through a newly established foundation, residents collectively "bought" (at a nominal price) one-third of the site, and agreed to pay rent for the rest.

Although they have bought their peace with the state, the latter's continued gaze on everyday life evokes hostility amongst Christianites. "The agreement is the state's tool to make us behave...we

have moved from being a political to a juridical community,” an old-time resident told us in a tone of resignation. “We should not have given in; no government can ever evict us, thousands would march for us in the streets of Copenhagen.”

Another source of tension comes from Christiania having become Copenhagen’s third biggest tourist attraction. We saw hundreds of people wandering through it, gawking at things, without obviously getting a real sense of Christiania’s philosophy. An old-time resident we met was bitter that the grocery shop, their first “commercial” establishment, now has long queues (especially tourists wanting beer!), with residents having to line up to get everyday stuff. A large part of the tourist attraction is the “drug pusher” street, and several small stalls with items both from within Christiania and outside.

Towards the evening, we spotted people laughing over a glass of beer while the streets reverberated with jazz and tourists wandered about. Despite its problems, Christiania is a living alternative of a capitalist or statist society. It is a story of people who resist the state, welcome the marginalised, attempt to share resources in order to have smaller ecological footprints, experiment with anarchy and direct democracy, and inspire in discerning visitors the vibes that another world is possible.

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