

# climate change

A resurgent design scene, new art and performance venues, and world-class architecture have transformed Copenhagen into Northern Europe's hottest new creative centre, says **SETH SHERWOOD**.

Within the Copenhagen Opera House, distinctive semi-permeable glass lamps by Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson draw attention in the building's foyer. Opened in 2005, the Opera House, designed by Danish architect Henning Larsen, is one of the most expensive and technically advanced in the world.

Ludovic Morlot is feeling it. Slashing the air with his baton, the French guest conductor rhythmically rocks his head and smiles as he leads the Danish National Symphony Orchestra through Ravel's Rapsodie Espagnole. It's a fantastical and passionate piece filled with rushing dynamic changes. Bittersweet waves of strings evolve into rousing major-key anthems before plummeting into brooding dark passages that again explode into orgiastic glee.

But the real star of the evening isn't Morlot or even Ravel but the venue itself, the Copenhagen concert hall, or the Koncerthuset ([www.dr.dk/koncerthuset](http://www.dr.dk/koncerthuset)), whose main auditorium is a jagged post-modern canyon of burnt-orange hardwood filled by 15 terraced sections that encircle a sunken performance pit. Designed by superstar French architect Jean Nouvel, the much-trumpeted venue was inaugurated in 2009 after several years



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Designed by Zaha Hadid, the glass and black lava concrete extension of the Ordrupgaard museum near Jaegersborg Dyrehave is a remarkable sight in itself. The museum houses one of Northern Europe's biggest collections of 19th- and early 20th-century Danish and French art; the facade of Jean Nouvel's Copenhagen concert hall acts as a screen for video projections at night; visitors to Tivoli Gardens, Denmark's most visited attraction, chill out at one of its many eateries.

the crisp clear air of a Nordic evening. A giant blue cube glowing in the night, the building's exterior is no less stunning – and a remarkable contrast to the 19th-century townhouses and red brick church towers that fill the maritime city. “People are talking very highly of it. There’s a great buzz about it.”

The same is true of Copenhagen itself these days. From the haute Nordic cuisine of Noma ([www.noma.dk](http://www.noma.dk)) – recently named the world's best restaurant in the prestigious annual S.Pellegrino awards – to the new, palatial Moorish-style

of work and a reported cost of some 1.4 billion Danish kroner (about US\$230 million), making it one of the most expensive concert halls ever built. It's certainly impressive. Drums rumble and cymbals crash as illuminated panels cast a sultry orange glow, like a desert sunset, around the auditorium. The effect is magical. When the piece concludes, the audience gives a spirited applause, as much for the music as, it seems, for the fantastic vessel that contains it.

“It's a really gorgeous room,” rhapsodises Morlot after the performance as well-dressed middle-aged Danes file out into



Nimb hotel ([www.nimb.dk](http://www.nimb.dk)), one of the most jaw-dropping in Scandinavia, an unprecedented creative boom is in full ebullient swing. It's a new sort of attention for the Danish capital. Long known for its friendly and efficiently professional residents and its quaint traditional attractions – the iconic century-old statue of Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid and the venerable Tivoli Gardens amusement park ([www.tivoli.dk](http://www.tivoli.dk)) – the city of cobbled lanes, orange-tile roofs and picturesque waterways has rapidly exploded into a European cultural capital par excellence.

New trophies of the transformation are popping up all over the city – not just the charming storybook centre but also in the western neighbourhood of Vesterbro, a one-time worker's enclave that now brims with creative types, as well as the northern district of Norrebro, an immigrant quarter that's spilling over with coffeehouses and cocktail lounges. Along Copenhagen harbour, two massive futuristic architectural specimens – the black and glassy Royal Danish Playhouse ([www.kglteater.dk](http://www.kglteater.dk)) and the white UFO-shaped Opera House ([www.kglteater.dk](http://www.kglteater.dk)) – have materialised in recent years, complementing the Koncerthuset and vastly boosting the

city's performing arts profile. Two other acclaimed architects, Zaha Hadid and Daniel Libeskind, have helped out with a pair of museum projects – a curvy concrete addition to the Ordrupgaard art museum ([www.ordrupgaard.dk](http://www.ordrupgaard.dk)), north of the city, and the angular, wooden interiors of the Danish Jewish Museum ([www.jewmus.dk](http://www.jewmus.dk)), respectively.

In the harbour areas known as Frihavn and Nordhavn in the neighbourhood of Osterbro, meanwhile, new design showrooms are flourishing. The main attractions are Paustian ([www.paustian.dk](http://www.paustian.dk)) – an emporium of top modern Scandinavian and international furniture that also houses its own Michelin-starred restaurant, Bo Bech at Restaurant Paustian ([www.bobech.net](http://www.bobech.net)) – and Gubi ([www.gubi.dk](http://www.gubi.dk)), a fast-rising design firm whose simple, colourful furnishings fill other Copenhagen hotspots like The Paul restaurant ([www.thepaul.dk](http://www.thepaul.dk)) and the recently renovated Hotel Astoria ([www.dgi-byen.com/hotelastoria](http://www.dgi-byen.com/hotelastoria)). Even the Little Mermaid has been given an avant-garde spin. The statue was sent to China in March where it'll remain until October for the World Expo in Shanghai, in exchange for a video installation by prominent Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei that will occupy the vacant spot. >>



## artistic rebirth

The swap is symbolic of the new Copenhagen, where contemporary art is thriving in some of the least likely places. Just a few years ago, the old 19th-century Charlottenborg building was revitalised into the city's largest contemporary art venue, Kunsthal Charlottenborg ([www.kunsthalcharlottenborg.dk](http://www.kunsthalcharlottenborg.dk)). Its annual Spring Exhibition, which brings together top avant-garde paintings, sculptures, installations, architecture and more, is one of Copenhagen's yearly highlights.

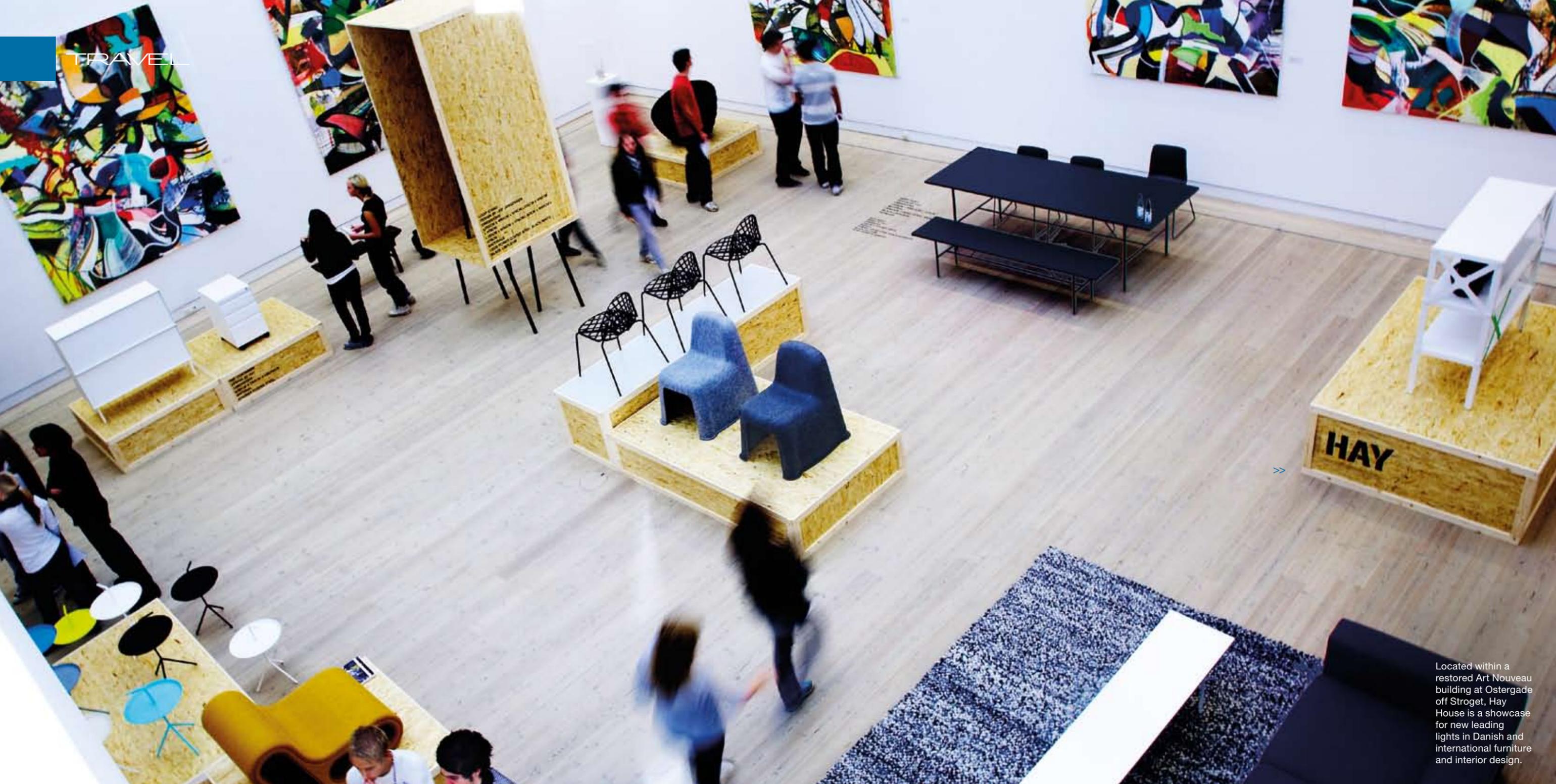
But the art scene's expansion is most visible in Kodbyen – literally 'Meat City' – a downbeat, slightly seedy meat-packing district along the railroad tracks of the Vesterbro district that the city is transforming into an incubator of creativity. Many of its former butcheries and processing plants now contain design firms and edgy art spaces.

"You might still meet a butcher going to work carrying a pig," says local art impresario Bo Bjerggaard, whose eponymous Galleri Bo Bjerggaard ([www.bjerggaard.com](http://www.bjerggaard.com)) was one of the area's pioneers in 2007. "But we also have two nice Icelandic girls below us who have a bar. Our neighbours are architects, who moved in a few months ago. You have graphic designers. You have people making furniture."

As he talks, a dozen Saturday afternoon art aficionados stroll through the gallery's exhibition of abstract paintings by the celebrated German painter Sigmar Polke. Among the other A-list clients of the gallery – which represents its artists throughout Scandinavia – are the German rabble-rouser Jonathan Meese; British-born artist-filmmaker Eve Sussman; and one of Denmark's top living painters, Per Kirkeby. Collectively, Meat City galleries like Bo Bjerggaard and neighbour V1 ([www.v1gallery.com](http://www.v1gallery.com)) – which has hosted shows by street-art luminaries like Banksy, the mysterious British graffiti master, and Shepard Fairey, creator of the famous Barack Obama 'Hope' poster – have elevated Copenhagen into a respected destination in the global contemporary art scene. >>

ABOVE: Admire a painting at the Kunsthal Charlottenborg, the city's largest contemporary art exhibition space at 1,400 sq m. RIGHT: Paintings by Danish artist Per Kirkeby are available at the Galleri Bo Bjerggaard, located in 'Meat City', Copenhagen's new hotbed of creativity.





Located within a restored Art Nouveau building at Ostergade off Stroget, Hay House is a showcase for new leading lights in Danish and international furniture and interior design. >>

## design renaissance

For design, the mecca has always been Stroget, the city's famous pedestrian shopping boulevard in the heart of the city. Many of the iconic design stores and items in the windows – celebrated Danish products like Bodum kitchenware, Georg Jensen silver, Bang & Olufsen stereos, Arne Jacobsen furnishing – need no introduction. Their status is longstanding, classic, assured. Yet to some of the younger generation of

design fans, that smacks of establishment.

"If you had asked me two years ago, I would have said that the industry was still identified with furniture from the 1950s and 1960s," says designer Rolf Hay, a champion of young, emerging Danish talents. "But today I think that several design companies have created a positive image for themselves."

His is certainly one of them. In 2003, he launched Hay ([www.hay.dk](http://www.hay.dk)), which now has three stores, including a vast cool space in an 1896 building off Stroget that opened in 2008. Situated a stone's throw from its classic Danish forebears, the store brims on a weekend afternoon with couples who eagerly eyeball products that combine the mid-century devotion to simplicity and efficiency with a modern

sense of playfulness. Along one wall are some green Round One chairs by Leif Jorgensen, which suggest giant sprockets of bicycle chain cast in foam. Nearby is a black Prince Chair, made from neoprene rubber featuring cut-outs of various shapes, like a giant paper snowflake. Hay has called the chair's creator, the British-Danish designer Louise Campbell, "among the best in the world" at new furniture design. >>



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP: Award-winning housing complex 'Mountain Dwellings' has apartments with roof gardens facing the sun, in a stacked structure over 10 storeys; the Cabinn Metro hotel

adds a striking dash of colour to the streets of Orestad; the Copenhagen Central Station, the largest train station in Denmark, has served commuters from its present location for 99 years.

## ultramodern urbanism

To see recent cutting-edge design on a monumental scale, hop on the city's new metro line towards the airport. Less than a decade ago, the outlying area of Orestad was a flat, barren no-man's land. Today, sleek driverless trains shoot you through a fast-growing crop of architectural experiments. Soaring rows of sci-fi windmills like airplane propellers dot the coastline, while vast experiments in glass and steel sprout from the ground. Like a Nordic version of Dubai, the passing landscape of this purpose-built district teems with bold new facilities for residents, business travellers and tourists, many of which were devised by the boldface names of the blueprint world.

Aside from the Jean Nouvel-designed concert hall with its glowing, blue exterior, you'll find cantilevered rooms in the IT University of Copenhagen building ([www.itu.dk](http://www.itu.dk)), from the hand of Henning Larsen, the famous Danish architect. There's also the airy and functional Bella Center convention



complex ([www.bella.dk](http://www.bella.dk)); the blocky, cascading apartment structure VM Bjerget ([www.vmbjerget.dk](http://www.vmbjerget.dk)) – 'Mountain Dwellings' – an architectural Babel that has been racking up international awards for its hot, young Danish creators, the Bjarke Ingels Group; the ecologically groundbreaking Crowne Plaza Copenhagen Towers hotel ([www.cpcopenhagen.dk](http://www.cpcopenhagen.dk)), sheathed in ultra-thin solar panels and drawing all its energy from renewable sources; and the 709-room budget Cabinn Metro hotel ([www.cabinn.com/english/kbh/metro/metro.html](http://www.cabinn.com/english/kbh/metro/metro.html)), now Denmark's largest, designed by Daniel Libeskind.

"Vision and a new kind of courage among the city council, investors and architects has set the scene for a completely new and ambitious approach to the shaping and reshaping of the city," explains Sanne Lindhardt, director of the Danish Architecture Center. "The city now functions as an enormous case study on how to create lively and socially sustainable city districts."

And that reshaping is set to roll on. In Orestad City, Libeskind is creating an entirely new neighbourhood, Orestad Down Town, whose marquee attractions will be a pair of gleaming, tilting skyscrapers and a cultural institute. A futuristic new aquarium, The Blue Planet, and a towering hotel, Bella Sky ([www.bellasky.dk](http://www.bellasky.dk)), are also underway.

Elsewhere in Copenhagen, a disused Carlsberg brewery site is being transformed into a vast district of eco-friendly housing and shopping, and legendary Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas is creating a new home for the Danish Architecture Center itself.



Thanks to all of these adventurous gambits, Lindhardt observes, "Copenhagen has experienced a massive international interest over the past years". It seems sure to continue as the city continues to surge. To appropriate the words of literature's most famous Dane, Prince Hamlet: "Something is rockin' in the state of Denmark." >>

To truly immerse yourself in Copenhagen's buzzy design scene, consider the following hotel and dining options (the city boasts 12 Michelin-starred restaurants) on your next visit – where creativity and style are as much a feature as the facilities and food.

## stay

### Nimb

Sporting North African-style arches and a Venetian marble facade, Nimb hotel was built upon the site of a 19th-century Moorish-inspired bazaar. Rooms at this five-star boutique hotel come with antique furniture, fireplaces, spacious bathrooms and noteworthy art, plus all overlook the Tivoli Gardens. The hotel has a Michelin-starred restaurant, a brasserie and its own gourmet dairy. [www.nimb.dk](http://www.nimb.dk)

### Hotel Astoria

Dating back to the 1930s, this hotel's 93 guest rooms were recently revamped by modern Danish design firm Gubi, with specially designed furniture and a stylish black and white colour scheme. Part of the DGI-byen complex, hotel guests also enjoy free access to the Swim Centre and Fitness Centre. [www.dgi-byen.com/hotelastoria](http://www.dgi-byen.com/hotelastoria)

### Crowne Plaza Copenhagen Towers

Denmark's only CO2-neutral hotel is a 366-room building running on eco-friendly tech – as well as the pedal power of its guests! The hotel announced recently that power produced by electricity-generating bicycles in the gym will be fed into the main power supply. Guests who generate 10 watt hours or more will receive a complimentary meal worth approximately 200 kroner. [www.cpcopenhagen.dk](http://www.cpcopenhagen.dk)

## eat

### Noma

Helmed by chef du jour Rene Redzepi, this is the restaurant on everyone's lips at the moment. Priding itself on the use of locally sourced seasonal Nordic ingredients, Noma – based in a converted 19th-century warehouse – has consistently featured in S.Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants list in recent years and in 2010, it ended Spanish eatery El Bulli's unbroken four-year run at the top. [www.noma.dk](http://www.noma.dk)

### Bo Bech at Restaurant Paustian

Located amid city wharves, in the complex that houses luxury furniture boutique Paustian, this white, open-spaced restaurant with abstract paintings is run by chef Bo Bech, one of Denmark's leading exponents of molecular gastronomy. Meal options include, among others, a surprise Alchemist menu and a vegetarian Chlorophyll menu. [www.bobech.net](http://www.bobech.net)

### The Paul

Named after its intrepid British-born chef Paul Cunningham, who scours the world in search of ideas for his Danish-International-themed restaurant, this chic glass-enclosed eatery counts local celebrities as fans. Nestled within the heart of the Tivoli Gardens, it's only open during park season. [www.thepaul.dk](http://www.thepaul.dk)



The Brasserie located within the Nimb hotel offers Scandinavian fare, and its menu is changed monthly in order to make the most of seasonal ingredients. BELOW: Local and seasonal produce also feature heavily at the award-winning Noma, offering creative interpretations such as this dish of asparagus and woodruff with shoots of fiddlehead, hops and bulrush.



## FAST FACTS

### CURRENCY

Danish kroner  
US\$1 = 6.10 kroner

### VISA

Requirements vary. Visit [www.nyidanmark.dk/en-us/coming\\_to\\_dk/coming\\_to\\_dk.htm](http://www.nyidanmark.dk/en-us/coming_to_dk/coming_to_dk.htm)

### BEST TIME TO VISIT

Due to its far northerly location, Denmark is very dark in winter and fall. From May to September the days are long and the heat is mild.

### HOW TO GET THERE

Singapore Airlines flies 3 times weekly from Singapore to Copenhagen.

### MORE INFORMATION

[www.visitcopenhagen.com](http://www.visitcopenhagen.com)

PHOTOGRAPHY: JAN LYKKE CHRISTENSEN / PHOTOLIBRARY / VISITDENMARK / SEBER+SEIER