

Introduction

Early one dark April morning a few years ago I was sitting in my living room in central Copenhagen, wrapped in a blanket and yearning for spring, when I opened that day's newspaper to discover that my adopted countrymen had been anointed the happiest of their species in something called the Satisfaction with Life Index, compiled by the Department of Psychology at the University of Leicester.

I checked the date on the newspaper: it wasn't 1 April. Indeed a quick look online confirmed that this was headline news around the world. Everyone from the *Daily Mail* to Al Jazeera was covering the story as if it had been handed down on a stone tablet. Denmark was the happiest place in the world. The *happiest*? This dark, wet, dull, flat little country that I now called home, with its handful of stoic, sensible people and the highest taxes in the world? Britain was forty-first on the list. A man at a university had said it, so it must be true.

'Well, they are doing an awfully good job of hiding it,' I thought to myself as I looked out of the window at the rain-swept harbour. 'They don't seem all that frisky to me.' Down below, cyclists swaddled in high-visibility Arctic gear crossed the Langebro together with umbrella-jostling pedestrians, both battling the spray from passing trucks and buses.

I thought back to the previous day's soul-sapping adventures in my recently adopted homeland. In the morning there had been my twice-weekly encounter with the sullen check-out girl at the local supermarket who, as was her habit, had rung up the cost of my prohibitively expensive, low-grade produce without acknowledging my existence. Outside, other pedestrians had tutted audibly when

I'd crossed the street on a red light; there was no traffic, but in Denmark pre-empting the green man is a provocative breach of social etiquette. I had cycled home through the drizzle to find a tax bill relieving me of an alarming proportion of that month's income, having along the way provoked the fury of a motorist who had threatened to kill me because I had infringed the no-left-turn rule (literally, he had rolled down his window and, in the manner and accent of a Bond villain, shouted, 'I vill kill you'). The evening's prime-time TV entertainment had consisted of a programme on how to tackle excessive chafing of cow udders, followed by a ten-year-old episode of *Taggart*, and then *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* – its titular, life-altering rhetoric somewhat undermined by the fact that a million kroner are worth only around £100,000, in Denmark just enough to buy you a meal out with change for the cinema.

This, I should add, was long before all those critically acclaimed Danish TV series hit the screens and New Nordic cuisine revolutionised our kitchens, long before Sarah Lund charmed us with her knitwear and Birgitte Nyborg seduced us with her pencil skirts and no-nonsense attitude to right-wing politicians, and long before the recent, seemingly ceaseless wave of Danish mania gripped the world. Back then, I had come to think of the Danes as essentially decent, hard-working, law-abiding people, rarely prone to public expressions of . . . well, anything much, let alone *happiness*. The Danes were Lutheran by nature, if not by ritual observance: they shunned ostentation, distrusted exuberant expressions of emotion, and kept themselves to themselves. Compared to, say, the Thais or Puerto Ricans or even the British, they were a frosty, solemn bunch. I would go as far as to say that of the fifty or so nationalities that I had encountered in my travels up to that point, the Danes would probably have ranked in the bottom quarter as among the *least* demonstrably joyful people on earth, along with the Swedes, the Finns and the Norwegians.

Perhaps it was all the antidepressants they were taking that was fogging their perception, I thought to myself. I had read a recent report which said that, in Europe, only the Icelanders consumed

more happy pills than the Danes, and the rate at which they were popping them was increasing. Was Danish happiness nothing more than oblivion sponsored by Prozac?

In fact, as I began to delve deeper into the Danish happiness phenomenon I discovered that the University of Leicester report was not as ground-breaking as it might have liked to think. The Danes came top of the EU's first ever well-being survey – the Eurobarometer – as long ago as 1973, and are still top today. In the latest one, more than two-thirds of the thousands of Danes who were polled claimed to be 'very satisfied' with their lives.

In 2009 there was the papal-like visit to Copenhagen of Oprah Winfrey, who cited the fact that 'people leave their children in buggies outside of cafés, that you aren't worried they will get stolen . . . that everyone isn't racing racing racing to get more more more' as the Danes's secret to success. If Oprah was anointing Denmark, it *must* be true.

By the time Oprah descended from the heavens I had actually left Denmark, having finally driven my wife to the very end of her tether with my incessant moaning about her homeland: the punishing weather, the heinous taxes, the predictable monoculture, the stifling insistence on lowest-common-denominator consensus, the fear of anything or anyone different from the norm, the distrust of ambition and disapproval of success, the appalling public manners, and the remorseless diet of fatty pork, salty liquorice, cheap beer and marzipan. But I still kept a wary, slightly bewildered eye on the Danish happiness phenomenon.

I shook my head in disbelief when, for example, the country topped the Gallup World Poll, which asked a thousand people over the age of fifteen in 155 countries to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, both their lives now and how they expected them to pan out in the future. Gallup asked other questions about social support ('If you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends you can count on to help you whenever you need them?'); freedom ('In your country, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your freedom to choose what you do with your life?'); and corruption ('Is corruption widespread

within businesses located in your country?'). The answers revealed that 82 per cent of Danes were 'thriving' (the highest score), while only 1 per cent were 'suffering'. Their average 'daily experience' scored a world-beating 7.9 out of 10. By way of comparison, in Togo, the lowest-ranked country, only 1 per cent were considered to be thriving.

'Perhaps they should ask the Somali immigrants in Ishøj how happy *they* are,' I would think to myself whenever I heard about these surveys and reports, although I seriously doubted any of the researchers ever ventured far outside of Copenhagen's prosperous suburbs.

Then came the final, crowning moment in the Danish happiness story: in 2012, the United Nations's first ever World Happiness Report, compiled by economists John Helliwell, Richard Layard and Jeffrey Sachs, amalgamated the results of all the current 'happiness' research – the Gallup World Polls, World and European Values Surveys, European Social Survey, and so on. And, guess what? Belgium came first! No, I'm joking. Denmark was once again judged the happiest country in the world, with Finland (2), Norway (3) and Sweden (7) close behind.

To paraphrase Lady Bracknell, to win one happiness survey may be regarded as good fortune, to win virtually every one since 1973 is convincing grounds for a definitive anthropological thesis.

In fact, Denmark was not without rivals to the title of peachiest place to live. As the UN report suggested, each of the Nordic countries has its own particular claim to life-quality supremacy. Shortly after the UN report was published, *Newsweek* announced that it was Finland, and not Denmark, that has the best quality of life, while Norway topped the UN's own Human Development Index, and another recent report claimed that Sweden is the best country to live in if you are a woman.

So, Denmark doesn't *always* come first in *all* the categories of these wellness, satisfaction and happiness surveys, but it is invariably thereabouts, and if it isn't number one, then another Nordic country almost inevitably is. Occasionally New Zealand or Japan might elbow

their way into the picture (or perhaps Singapore, or Switzerland) but, overall, the message from all of these reports, which were enthusiastically and unquestioningly reported in the European and US media, was as clear as a glass of ice-cold schnapps: the Scandinavians were not only the happiest and most contented people in the world, but also the most peaceful, tolerant, egalitarian, progressive, prosperous, modern, liberal, liberated, best-educated, most technologically advanced, and with the best pop music, coolest TV detectives and even, in the last few years, the best restaurant, to boot. Between them, these five countries – Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland – could boast the best education system in the world (Finland); a shining example of a properly secular, multicultural, modern industrial society (Sweden); colossal oil wealth, being invested in sensible, ethical, long-term things rather than silly tall buildings or Park Lane call girls (Norway); the most gender-equal society in the world, the longest-living men, and lots of haddock (Iceland); and ambitious environmental policies and generously funded welfare state systems (all of them).

The consensus was overwhelming: if you wanted to know where to look for the definitive model of how to live a fulfilled, happy, well balanced, healthy and enlightened life, you should turn your gaze north of Germany, and just to the left of Russia.

I did more than that. After some years of watching the Danish happiness bandwagon roll relentlessly on from a distance – interspersed with regular visits which, if anything, only served to confuse me more (weather still shitty? Check. Tax rate still over 50 per cent? Yep. Shops closed whenever you need them? Oh yes) – I moved back there.

This wasn't some magnanimous gesture of forgiveness, nor a bold experiment to test the boundaries of human endurance: my wife wanted to move back to her homeland and, despite every molecule of my being screaming, 'Don't you remember what it was actually like to *live* there, Michael?' I have learned from harrowing experience over the years that it is usually best in the long run if I just do what she says.

If anything, the fever for all things Nordic only intensified around the world after I returned to live there. The world, it seemed, could not get enough of contemporary Viking culture: Swedish crime authors Henning Mankell and Stieg Larsson began to shift millions of books, and Danmarks Radio (DR), the Danish national broadcaster, sold three series of its miserabilist crime epic, *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*), to 120 countries, and even saw it remade for American TV. The company's follow-up, the political drama *Borgen* ('The Castle' – the nickname given to the Danish parliament building), won a BAFTA and a million viewers on BBC4; and even *Broen* (*The Bridge*), a Danish–Swedish crime series, was a hit. (No matter that there was little original about *Forbrydelsen* other than its setting – we had seen tough female cops many times before; no matter that *Borgen* was a third-rate *West Wing*, albeit with better lampshades; or that *The Bridge* was actually really, really rubbish.) Suddenly Danish architects, most notably Bjarke Ingels, were knocking out major international building projects as if they were made out of Lego blocks, and works by artists like Olafur Eliasson were appearing everywhere from Louis Vuitton window displays to the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern. A former Danish prime minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, took over as the head of NATO and a former Finnish president, Martti Ahtisaari, won the Nobel Peace Prize. Danish films had a major moment, winning Oscars and awards at Cannes with directors such as Thomas Vinterberg, Lars von Trier, Susanne Bier and Nicolas Winding Refn becoming among the most acclaimed of the current era, and the actor Mads Mikkelsen (*Casino Royale*, *The Hunt*, *Hannibal*) became such a regular figure on Danish and international screens that these days he calls to mind John Updike's famous couplet on a similarly ubiquitous French actor: 'I think that I shall never view / A French film without Depardieu'. And, of course, there was the New Nordic food 'revolution' and the journey of the Copenhagen restaurant Noma from obscure joke to international trendsetter, named best restaurant in the world three times in a row and making its head chef, René Redzepi, a *Time* magazine cover star.

Elsewhere in the region, Finland gave us Angry Birds, won

Eurovision with a band apparently made up of orcs (Lordi) and, for a while at least, mobile phones that took up permanent residence in everyone's inside breast pocket. Meanwhile Sweden continued its domination of our high streets with H&M and Ikea, and of our airwaves with pop producers and singers too numerous to list here, as well as giving us Skype and Spotify; Norway kept the world supplied with oil and fish fingers; and the Icelanders embarked on their extraordinary fiscal buccaneering spree.

No matter where I turned for my news, I could not escape the (Iceland aside) almost exclusively adulatory coverage of all things Scandinavian. If our newspapers, TV and radio were to be believed, the Nordic countries simply could not put a foot wrong. These were the promised lands of equality, easy living, quality of life and home baking. But I had seen a different side actually living up here in the cold, grey north and, though there were many aspects to Scandinavian living that were indeed exemplary, and from which the rest of the world could learn a great deal, I grew increasingly frustrated by the lack of nuance in the picture being painted of my adopted homeland.

One thing in particular about this new-found love of all things Scandinavian – be it their free-form schools, whitewashed interior design, consensus-driven political systems or chunky jumpers – which struck me as particularly odd: considering all this positive PR, and with awareness of the so-called Nordic miracle at an all-time high, why wasn't everyone flocking to live here? Why did people still dream of a house in Spain or France? Why weren't they packing up their mules and heading for Aalborg or Trondheim? For all the crime literature and TV shows, why was our knowledge of Scandinavia still so abysmally lacking? How come you have no idea where Aalborg or Trondheim actually are (be honest)? Why can no one you know speak Swedish or 'get by' in Norwegian? Name the Danish foreign minister. Or Norway's most popular comedian. Or a Finnish person. Any Finnish person.

Few of us visit Japan or Russia or speak their languages but, though you might not be able to name all of their political leaders,

artists, or second-tier cities, I'm guessing you would be able to name at least *some*. Scandinavia, though, really is *terra incognita*. The Romans didn't bother with it. Charlemagne couldn't care less. As Nordic historian T. K. Derry writes in his history of the region, for literally thousands of years 'the north remained almost entirely outside the sphere of interest of civilised man'. Even today the lack of interest is deafening. A. A. Gill, writing recently in the *Sunday Times*, described this part of the world as 'a collection of countries we can't tell apart'.

Part of the reason for our collective blind spot – and I am the first to admit that I was quite fantastically ignorant of the region before I first moved here – is the fact that comparatively few of us ever travel in this part of the world. For all its scenic wonder, the cost of visiting Scandinavia coupled with its discouraging climate (not to mention the continuing existence of France) tend to dissuade most from holidaying here. Where is the travel writing on the North? Waterstones' shelves are buckling beneath the weight of Mediterranean memoirs – *Dipsomaniac Among the Olive Groves*, *Extra-marital Affairs on Oranges*, and so on – but no one, it seems, wants to spend *A Year in Turku*, or try *Driving Over Lingonberries*.

One day, while standing for half an hour waiting to be served at my local chemists (Danish *apoteks* are run on a monopoly basis so customer service is not a priority), it dawned on me that, for all the glowing *Guardian* profiles of Sofie Gråbøl (the star of *The Killing*), for all the articles about Faroese knitwear, and recipes for twenty ways with foraged weeds (and I must put my hand up here, I wrote more than a couple of the latter), the truth is that we learn more from our schoolteachers, televisions and newspapers about the lives of remote Amazonian tribes than we do about actual Scandinavians and how they *actually* live.

This is odd because the Danes and Norwegians are our nearest neighbours to the east, the Icelanders our nearest to the north and, in terms of our national character, we have more in common with all of them than we do with the French or Germans: our humour, tolerance, distrust of religious dogma and political authority, honesty, stoicism in

the face of dismal weather, social orderliness, poor diet, lack of sartorial elan, and so on. (This versus the emotional incontinence, endemic corruption, banana-skin humour, adolescent temperament, slapdash personal hygiene, exquisite cuisine and elegant tailoring of our southern neighbours.)

You could even go as far as to argue that we Britons are, essentially, Scandinavians. Well, a bit. The cultural links are undeniably deep and enduring, dating back to the infamous first raid on the monastery at Lindisfarne on 8 January, 793 when, as contemporary records have it, ‘The harrowing inroads of heathen men made lamentable havoc in the church of God in the Holy-island.’

Viking kings went on to rule a third of Britain – the territory known as the Danelaw – during a period which culminated with that great spell-checker booby trap, Cnut, as undisputed king of all England. Excavations of a ship burial at Sutton Hoo have given plenty of evidence of a Swedish link, too. After they had got the raping and pillaging out of their systems, there is strong evidence that Vikings of various tribes settled amicably among the Anglo Saxons, traded, intermarried and had a major influence on the indigenous population.

They certainly left their mark on the English language. A Norwegian language professor at Oslo University, Jan Terje Faarlund, recently went as far as declaring English a Scandinavian language, pointing to shared vocabulary, similar verb-then-object word order (as opposed to German grammar), and so on. The division of Yorkshire into north, east and west ‘ridings’ comes from the Viking term for a ‘third’; I am guessing that Yorkshire’s ‘dales’ are of Nordic derivation, too (*dal* is Danish for valley); and I have often wondered if northern England’s glottal stops are not some kind of linguistic infection from the Danes (who, when they speak, can often sound as if they are swallowing not just most of the consonants in each word, but their very tongues). Then there are some of the days of the week (*Wodin* or *Odin* for Wednesday; *Thor* for Thursday; *Freya* for Friday), and many place names. The Domesday Book is full of Scandinavian names for settlements: any town ending in ‘-by’ or

‘-thorpe’ (meaning ‘town’ and ‘smaller settlement’) was once a Viking settlement – Derby, Whitby, Scunthorpe, Cleethorpes, and so on. I was born near a town called East Grinstead, whose name, I assume, is of Danish origin (*sted* meaning ‘place’, and a common Danish town name ending); and in London I used to live five minutes from Denmark Hill, a name which stems from a more recent connection, admittedly: it was once the home of the Danish consort of Queen Anne, the Danish and British royal families having been tightly intertwined by marriage over many centuries.

Family words – mother (*mor*), father (*far*), sister (*søster*) brother (*bror*) are all pretty close too, although, sadly in my view, the English never adopted the Scandinavians’ very useful *far-far*, *mor-mor*, *far-mor*, *mor-far* method of distinguishing between maternal and paternal grandparents.

‘Even today Yorkshire farmers can talk to Norwegian farmers about sheep and understand each other,’ Dr Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, a lecturer in Scandinavian History at the University of Cambridge, told me when I asked her about the Viking legacy in Britain. I have heard something similar regarding the ability of the fishermen of Norfolk to make themselves understood by their colleagues from the western coast of Jutland. Rowe also pointed to other cultural links: the influence of Nordic culture on authors ranging from J. R. R. Tolkien to J. K. Rowling, as well as on new age and heavy metal iconography.

The Scandinavian influence has extended further west too, of course. The Norwegian Viking Leif Ericson discovered America around AD 1000. Admittedly, having failed to see the attraction of Newfoundland he promptly turned around and went home again, but Scandinavian efforts to populate North America were more successful 900 years on when 1.2 million Swedes, along with many Norwegians and some Finns, sailed across the Atlantic. At one point in the 1860s, a tenth of all immigrants arriving in the United States were from Scandinavia, many of them ending up in Minnesota, where the landscape reminded them of home. Today there are said to be almost five million Norwegian Americans and as many Swedish

Americans in the States. If it wasn't for them, we wouldn't have Uma Thurman and Scarlett Johanssen.

What makes the current Nordic mania so unlikely is that during the twentieth century the popular cultural influences tended mostly to flow in the opposite direction. Socialise with Scandinavian males of a certain age, for instance, and the conversation will at some point almost certainly turn to the sketches of Monty Python. The women, meanwhile, will share misty-eyed memories of the male cast members of *Brideshead Revisited*, or of their time working as au pairs in London. All will be familiar with *Upstairs Downstairs*, Trevor Eve and *Not the Nine O'Clock News*, and firmly believe *Keeping Up Appearances* is a documentary of English life. Despite their highly advanced education systems, Scandinavians are addicted to *Midsomer Murders*. Give them an ivy-clad Cotswold cottage and a fresh corpse and they are in heaven. Even British cabinet reshuffles make the news in Denmark. I wonder how many British cabinet members could name their Danish opposite number?

Perhaps the vague familiarity, the superficial *sameness*, is one of the reasons that we in Britain haven't really cared to get to know anything beyond fictional representations of the Scandinavians. Also, though stereotypical depictions usually include reference to their sexual liberalism and physical beauty, somehow they still manage to project an image of being pious, sanctimonious Lutherans. It is a neat trick to be thought of as being both deeply hot and off-puttingly frigid, isn't it? And it doesn't help that the Scandinavians are not very forward when it comes to coming forward: they aren't ones to boast. It is against their rules (literally, as we will discover). Look up the word 'reticent' in the dictionary and you won't find a picture of an awkward Finn standing in a corner looking at his shoelaces, but you should.

While I was writing this book, several people – including some Danes and, in particular, many Swedes – expressed genuine bemusement that they would be of the slightest interest to anyone outside Scandinavia. 'Why do you think people will want to know about us?' they asked. 'What is there to know?' 'We are all so boring and

stiff.' 'There must be more interesting people in the world to write about. Why don't you go to southern Europe?' It seems Scandinavians tend to regard themselves rather as we do, a bit like bottle banks: functional and worthy, but plagued by an unremitting dullness which tends to discourage further investigation. Industrious, trustworthy and politically correct, the Scandinavians are the actuary at the party, five countries' worth of local government Liberal Democrats, finger-wagging social workers, and humourless party poopers.

So, how do I hope to hold your attention for the duration of this book? The short answer is that I find the Danes, Swedes, Finns, Icelanders, and even the Norwegians, utterly fascinating, and I suspect you will, too, once you find out the truth about how brilliant and progressive, but also how downright weird, they can be. As Oprah would have discovered had she stayed longer than an afternoon, and I have finally, grudgingly, begun to concede, there is so very much more to learn from the Nordic lands – about how they live their lives, the priorities they make and how they handle their wealth; about how societies can function better and more fairly; how people can live their lives in balance with their careers, educate themselves effectively, and support each other. About how, in the final analysis, to be happy. They are funny, too. And not always intentionally, either, which as far as I am concerned is the very best kind of funny.

I dug a little deeper into the Nordic miracle. Was there a Scandinavian template for a better way of living? Were there elements of Nordic exceptionalism – as the phenomenon has been termed – that were transferable, or was it location-specific, a quirk of history and geography? And, if people outside of Scandinavia really knew what it was like to actually live in this part of the world, would they still envy the Danes and their brethren quite so much?

'If you had to be reborn anywhere in the world as a person with average talents and income, you would want to be a Viking,' proclaimed *The Economist*, ever so slightly backhandedly, in a special Nordic-themed edition. But where were the discussions about Nordic totalitarianism and how uptight the Swedes are; about how the

Norwegians have been corrupted by their oil wealth to the point where they can't even be bothered to peel their own bananas; how the Finns are self-medicating themselves into oblivion; how the Danes are in denial about their debt, their vanishing work ethic, and their place in the world; and how the Icelanders are, essentially, feral?

Once you begin to look more closely at the Nordic societies and their people, once you go beyond the Western media's current Scandinavian tropes – the Sunday supplement features on Swedish summer houses peopled by blonde women in floral print dresses carrying baskets of wild garlic and surrounded by children with artfully mussed hair – a more complex, often darker, occasionally quite troubling picture begins to emerge. This encompasses everything from the relatively benign downsides to living among such comfortable, homogenous, egalitarian societies as these (in other words, when everyone earns the same amount of money, lives in the same kinds of homes, dresses the same, drives the same cars, eats the same food, reads the same books, has the same opinion about knitwear and beards, broadly similar religious beliefs, and goes to the same places on their holidays, things can get just a *teensy* bit dull – see the chapters on Sweden for more on this), to the more serious fissures in Nordic society: the racism and Islamophobia, the slow decline of social equality, the alcoholism, and the vast, over-stretched public sectors which require levels of taxation which would be deemed utterly preposterous by anyone who hasn't had them slowly creep up on them over the last fifty years like a deadly tide choking off all hope, energy and ambition . . .

. . . Where was I? Anyway, so, yes, I decided to go on a journey to try to fill in some of the gaps in my Nordic experience. I set off to explore these five lands in more depth, revisiting each of them several times, meeting with historians, anthropologists, journalists, novelists, artists, politicians, philosophers, scientists, elf-watchers and Santa Claus.

The trip would ultimately take me from my home in the Danish countryside to the frigid waters of the Norwegian Arctic, to the

fearful geysers of Iceland and the badlands of the most notorious Swedish housing estate; from Santa's grotto to Legoland, and from the Danish Riviera to the Rotten Banana.

But the first lesson before I set off, offered, following a long pause and a deep sigh, by a Danish diplomat friend who had patiently endured a speech by me encompassing much of the above, was that, technically speaking, neither the Finns nor the Icelanders were actually Scandinavians: that term refers to the people of the original Viking lands, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, only. But, as I discovered on my travels round the region, the Finns have reserved the right to opt in or out of the old marauders' club as and when it suits them, and I don't think the Icelanders would be too upset to be labelled Scandinavians either. Strictly speaking, if we are going to lump all five countries together we really ought to use the term 'Nordic'. But this is my book and so I reserve the right to bandy both terms about pretty much interchangeably.

So let us begin on our quest to unearth the truth about the Nordic miracle, and where better to start than at a party.