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Joy and the City

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Jidle scrolling on the phone while commuting to work can unsuspectingly award one with treasures. Mine was a gold mine of words that describe feelings of happiness and wellness. With an extra swift swipe of the thumb, I was immersed in *coçaigne*, French for an imaginary land of luxury and idleness; there was *eudaimonia*, the Greek word to describe a state of happiness, health and prosperity; and *hygge* (pronounced hoo-guh), a Danish word that helps you

articulate a feeling of wellbeing. More intriguing was the fact that none of these words have counterparts in English.

I wasn't unfamiliar with *hygge*. An encounter with it took me back a year and a half, when I was in Copenhagen. I was walking along Harbour Bath Island Brygge, and couldn't help but notice an abiding unhurried vibe. I attributed it to a cheerful sunny day – there was a patch of grass to sunbathe on after a dip in the common city pool, which was across the road from where I stood. Everyone looked unflustered and satisfied. Picnic baskets propped on chequered spreads,

colourful sun umbrellas and people in swimsuits made for a perfect recipe for unwinding. Later, a local friend explained that this inexplicable feeling of calm and collectedness was closest to *hygge*, although my summery version of this was off by a couple of months. *Hygge* is usually associated with a cosy, Christmas-y ambience of snow, hot cocoa or whisky, friends by the fireplace and a holistic feeling of nourishment. If only there was some intimacy to the scene, I would have been completely accurate about the essence of the word. It is derived from a 16th-century

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Norwegian term, *hugga*, which meant 'to comfort'. Some say it could be related to the English word 'hug'.

Once articulated by my friend, and firmly lodged in my memory, the idea only found encouragement in the succession of experiences that day. The feeling of conviviality seemed to seep into every occasion in Copenhagen and I was the ideal target for imbibing the spirit of *hygge*. It hung over restaurants, embraced one during a walk around Freetown Christiania and was certainly present in the pubs of Nyhavn, the most popular waterfront walkway in the city. The ubiquitous feeling of fulfillment permeated the entire city.

In the spotlight of the happiest moments of my time was a walk through Vesterbro, the erstwhile meat packing district of the city that is now the hotspot for hip bars, art galleries and shops. What entirely embodied *hygge* was an old building, wedged between relatively newer graffitied walls. It was Central Hotel & Café, the world's tiniest hotel. Expecting to get a room for a night was heretical, since it's always booked for the next few seasons. Not surprising, since there is only one room to let out. Instead, I had to make do with a coffee at the café on the ground floor. This was no cutting

edge café as others in Vesterbro, but certainly worthy of the pilgrimage for its relaxed vibe. Having hurried down the cobblestoned street that led up to Christiansborg Tårnet – Copenhagen's highest point – and through the Carlsberg factory, and making a quick stop at The Little Mermaid statue and Amalienborg Palace, a break at Central gave me a taste of the most authentic flavour of *hygge*. I finally understood why this feeling was celebrated across the country, and why the Danes are known to be the happiest in the world.

The year after my trip, the bestseller, *The Little Book of Hygge: Danish Secrets to Happy Living*, hit the stands. Naturally, I rushed to the bookstore to get my hands on a copy. Author Meik Wiking, CEO of the Happiness Institute in Copenhagen, explained the idea of *hygge* to readers across the world with feel-good examples. The word gained so much prominence that, in the same year, Oxford Dictionaries shortlisted *hygge* as one of their 'Words of the Year 2016'.

That evening, book in hand, I lay in bed in my most worn-out pajamas, with the family dog at my feet. It couldn't have been a better ode to my hangover of *hygge*. 🌿



Supriya is a travel writer and editor with words in international and national publications. She has authored over 30 books for Lonely Planet Guidebooks (India & UK), Roli Books, Times Books and several other publishing houses. www.supriyaseghal.com



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