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- **FAIRY TALE UNIVERSE IN DENMARK'S ODENSE**
- **DOHA IMPRESSES WITH EVER-GROWING SKYLINE**

oneworld

Enchanting
Odense

Journey into this charming Danish city where fantasy and reality co-exist

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A distinct whimsical air drifts through Odense. Etched into cobblestones are red footprints that guide you down nooks and crannies in search of historical landmarks. Lining narrow streets and alleys are 16th to 19th-century candy-coloured cottages with maroon timber, brick chimneys, and peaked roofs made of terracotta shingles. Violet flowers, purple tulips, bluebells, and white blossoms frame doorways and gardens.

Sculptures of mermaids intertwined with other fabled characters form pillars on Claus Bergs Gade. A one-legged statue of a brave tin soldier stands watch along Overgade Street. A stainless steel model shaped like a paper boat sits quietly in the river Odense Å which flows through the city.

One gets the feeling that this small city of roughly 175,000 in southern Denmark has blended reality with fantasy so perfectly that its residents exist in both worlds as if they were the very same. "Many visitors think these are just colourful models," shares local resident Lone Weideman when I asked her about its fairytale-like houses. "They are in fact residential. People live in them."

A 90-minute train ride from Copenhagen brings you to the island of Funen and its capital, Odense, which lives and breathes the fables of its native son – prolific 19th-century Danish author, poet, and artist Hans Christian Andersen.

Chances are you've probably thumbed through one of his fairytales as a child. His timeless sagas include *The Little Mermaid*, *The Ugly Duckling*, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, and *The Brave Tin*

Soldier. During his lifetime, he produced over 156 classic fairytales, 14 novels, over 1,000 poems and more than 50 works of drama.

Born in 1805, Andersen grew up in Odense right at the transitional cusp from the 18th to 19th century – an era when rampant poverty and high childhood mortality rates prevailed despite progress in science and technology. So Andersen's imagination soared.

His mind began to create alternate worlds inspired by daily life in Odense, and these fantasies would later manifest as popular tales we know so well today.

FOOTPRINTS

To follow his story through the city, you have to look down. Down at red slender footprints that mark a 3.1-kilometre trek around Odense. These footprints will take you to 13 landmarks that played a significant role in Andersen's life and relationship with the city.

Your first stop along the route is his birthplace, an unassuming ochre cottage he shared with six other families for the first two years of his life. Once located in the slums of Odense, his birth home has been physically woven into the modern steel-and-glass H.C. Andersen museum (museum.odense.dk), which chronicles his personal and professional life from 1805 until 1875 when he died of cancer. It was within the museum I also discovered Andersen the artist, who made intricate paper cuttings with nothing more than a crude pair of scissors.

A quick dash across a small courtyard with red oversized funnel-like figures takes you into the Tinderbox, which is a cultural art centre where children can live out his stories by becoming characters themselves. Neon spotlights illuminate wooden stages that bring makeshift worlds to life with costumes, props, and makeup.

The next stop is Sortebrødre Torv (Black Friars' Square), where farmers gather to sell produce every Wednesday and Saturday all year round. The square dates back to the 12th-13th century and was named after Black Friar monks who once ran a monastery in Odense.

❶ A plaque in front of The Workhouse where Andersen studied

❷ Carla Lang Nielsen moved to Denmark from Canada 20 years ago

❸ Footsteps guide visitors around Odense's iconic landmarks

❹ Andersen's childhood home on Munkemøllestræde

❺ Cheesemaker Graham Smith slicing a block of artisan cheese

❻ Merete displays her wares at the farmer's market

MARKETS

Today, farmers sell all sorts of fresh fruit, vegetables, and flowers in addition to freshly caught fish, brown eggs, and artisan cheeses. Bright orange carrots, red cabbages, pink rhubarb stalks, and purple grapes glisten under the sun with equally colourful brick houses in the background.

"Some farmers have been at this market for generations," shares farmer Carla Lang Nielsen, pointing over to a couple of herb and vegetable vendors. "Like Merete, who makes wool jackets, sweaters, and dresses from wool sheared off her own sheep."

Originally from Canada, Carla Lang Nielsen moved to Denmark 20 years ago and now runs a pig farm called Hindsholmgrisen (hindsholmgrisen. dk). She has been selling organic pork products at the market for the last three years. Graham Smith, a local cheese

maker at the market, is also a transplant to Odense from Scotland. He moved to the charming city 40 years ago, leaving behind his career as a horticulturist – a tree surgeon, he says – to pursue his dream of making cheese.

I noticed this common thread of people leaving past lives to live out their dreams amidst the fairytale heart of Odense. Sortebrødre Torv was where Andersen himself often daydreamed of performing on the local stage theatre as a teenager. He lived in Odense until he was 14, when his passion for acting and theatre moved him to Copenhagen to join the Royal Danish Theatre.

There are several markets on Saturdays, including flea markets (loppemarkedetinedergade.dk), where you can buy antiques amidst a sea of porcelain knick-knacks and eccentric Danish designs, and a children's toy market on Flakhaven, where kids can sell their used toys and buy new ones.

CHILD'S PLAY

Following Andersen's footsteps around town, you trace his childhood route as well as his 19th-century playgrounds, from

① Colourful houses on Hans Jensens Straede

Events to look out for:

PARADES
Catch the Hans Christian Andersen parade daily as well as the *20 Fairytales in 20 Minutes* show from 27 June to 8 Aug.
hcandersen-paraden.dk

PLAYS
The Hans Christian Andersen Festival Plays perform fairytales at the open-air museum in Funen Village from 16 July to 8 Aug.
hcandersenfestspillene.dk

FESTIVALS
The Hans Christian Andersen Festival will be held with over 270 events including cabaret, concerts, and performances on 16-23 Aug.
hcafestivals.dk

MARKETS
During the first two weekends of December, Odense's old quarter transforms into a traditional Christmas market with decorations, festive booths, and seasonal vendors.
visitodense.com

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the 19th century historic First Hotel Grand (firsthotels.dk), built in 1897, feels palatial and has hosted royalty and aristocrats.

"Life itself is the most wonderful fairytale," he shares in the story *What The Whole Family Said*. Even though Andersen would eventually move away, his dynamic tales continue to live on in Odense. ■

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the white workhouse with brown wood panels where he studied as a pre-teen to the washing site along the river's bank where his mother washed costumes and clothes for Odense's upper class citizens.

The washing site was one of his makeshift playgrounds as was the elegant Odense Palace where his mother also worked as a washerwoman. His playmates included fellow servant children as well as Crown Prince Frits, who would become King Frederik VII of Denmark in 1848.

MODERN DAY

Today, Odense is Denmark's third-largest city after Copenhagen and Aarhus, with a slew of activities, festivals, and parades that pay tribute to the author. During the bicentennial celebration of his birth in 2005, metal sun faces made to resemble paper cuttings of Andersen's face were erected all over the city in his memory.

His sagas seem to permeate every pore of Odense, from traditional Danish restaurant Den Grimme Ælling or The Ugly Duckling (grimme-aelling.dk), which serves a variety of potatoes and roast meats to abstract paintings of ducklings adorning the walls of upscale restaurant Pasfall (thomaspasfall.dk), which serves new Nordic cuisine. Even

① Colourful houses on Hans Jensens Straede

② Fairytale-like courtyard between Tinderbox and Andersen Museum

③ Handmade puppets in Østerbyes Gård (Easttown Courtyard), an extension of the Møntergården Museum built in 1631

④ Roast lamb with vegetables at Den Grimme Ælling

⑤ A painting of a duckling on the wall of upscale restaurant, Pasfall

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