

Travel

The Copenhagen canalside hotel on a mission to bring people together

Conviviality and communal meals distinguish a hotel in the Danish capital opened by the founders of Flying Tiger



Sarah Turner APRIL 3 2024

At exactly 7pm every evening, everyone leaves the bar of the Kanalhuset hotel in Copenhagen and heads into its restaurant. Today, five people are celebrating birthdays, so each gets a spirited rendition — from everyone — of Denmark’s cheery birthday song.

Then the food starts to arrive at both ends of the long tables at which we’re seated. The high-ceilinged room is decorated sparingly with 1970s artefacts, including a sideboard with blue-and-green panels and a family of Bjørn Wiinblad’s large round-faced ceramic figurines.

I haven’t eaten like this — with strangers — since school. Vegetarians get an alternative dish, but most of us have the big fat meatballs with a sauce that has been swirled through with tahini, yoghurt and pomegranate seeds. Waiters in T-shirts also bring large salad bowls with speckled lollo rosso and chicory, plus couscous studded with olives and blood oranges. We pass around dishes; we ask each other if we’d like more of anything. Which generally they (and I) do because the hotel’s chef is the talented Kristofer Josefsson, previously at the city’s acclaimed Restaurant Wilhelm.

Dinner at Kanalhuset is more than just a meal — rather, it’s a statement of intent. Almost all new hotels talk about how they are striving for a sense of community, eager to be a buzzing hub for both locals and visitors, but Kanalhuset actually follows through with that aspiration, making socialising all but compulsory.

“We’re trying to make this a place where social connection is easy, not difficult, where people talk to each other and share experiences,” says Lennart Lajboschitz, who owns the hotel with his wife Sus.



Kanalhuset is housed in an 18th-century former naval school building in Christianshavn © Jens Lindhe



As the name implies, Kanalhuset sits on the canal side © Jens Lindhe



The hotel has 12 rooms and 14 apartments in the Christianshavn neighbourhood

The Lajboschitzes can afford to consider their social convictions rather than simply the bottom line – they are the founders of Flying Tiger, the retail chain selling quirky gifts and homewares that has more than 840 stores in 27 countries.

Born in 1959 in Copenhagen, Lennart was a photographer and teacher but also had a stall in a flea market. He and his wife opened their first proper shop in 1988, selling umbrellas, sunglasses and surplus goods, then opened the first Flying Tiger in 1995. The name stems from the fact that everything in the shop originally cost 10 Danish kroner, and the Danish word for a 10-kroner coin sounds like the Danish word for “tiger”. (In the UK, the chain was rather less charitably dubbed a “posh pound shop”.)

The couple sold 70 per cent of their holding in 2012 and their remaining stake in 2021. With his grey hair and ready smile, Lennart still comes across as more teacher than business magnate, and when he reaches for a quote it’s from Joni Mitchell. “She said something like that in the ’60s we were trying to change the world. In the ’70s, we found out that we couldn’t do it as a society, but we had to find our way individually. And in the ’80s, we gave up and it became just about money again.”



Co-founder Lennart Lajboschitz, whose vision of connection and hospitality includes . . .



. . . communal table tennis at his earlier project Folkehuset Absalon © Alamy

Back at Kanalhuset, pudding is a pineapple and rum-infused cream with a blood-orange sorbet on a bed of caramelised oats. The cost, 200 kroner (£23) for two courses is absurdly reasonable for a meal of such quality in a hotel in a European capital.

In between passing the plates up and down and agreeing on how delicious everything is, my neighbour Nicolai tells me he's a librarian who lives in a collective just outside Copenhagen ("We have our own living spaces but share a kitchen") and is here with his girlfriend Marie, a speech and language therapist, who appears to be quite contented not living in a collective because she is based in Copenhagen.



Nicolai, Marie and the two people on my other side —two friends who live near the hotel — all talk in English to me because this is Denmark and everyone seems to be bilingual, and it's a very privileged, unusually intimate introduction to my stay in the city.

Built in the 18th century in the cobbled Christianshavn neighbourhood as a boarding school for young naval cadets, the imposing buttery-yellow Kanalhuset building now has 12 hotel rooms and 14 apartments. I'm in one of the apartments, which has floorboards painted a soothing grey, a view on to the canal and furniture that ranges from the 1930s onwards but has settled most comfortably in the 1970s.

Here and in Kanalhuset's bar, the chairs and sofas have been reupholstered in jewel-like colours, and the ceramics and paintings come from flea markets and antique shops. "It's a fantasy of 1970s," admits Sus Lajboschitz, who is responsible for the decor. "Nobody actually lived like this then."

It wasn't the football we sold that was important. It was about playing football with your friends

Lennart Lajboschitz

The evening meal has been served communally since the hotel opened in 2020 and the hotel also uses yoga, a cold-water swimming club, boat trips and other activities to bring guests and locals together.

Lennart argues that this focus on community is not very far removed from the initial vision for Flying Tiger. “When Sus was the chief buyer, it wasn’t the football we were selling that was important. It was about playing football with your friends. It was not the blanket that was interesting, it was you going on a picnic trip in the woods,” he says.



Adorning the bar at Kanalhuset are ceramics from flea markets and antique shop

The precedent for Kanalhuset’s community-first hospitality is a redundant church in the city’s Vesterbro district that Lajboschitz bought on a whim in 2014. “A friend was selling several surplus churches and suggested I take a look at it. When I did, I rang up Sus to say I’d bought it.”

Today, it’s called Folkehuset Absalon (absaloncph.dk) and true to Lennart’s long-standing passion for the game, there’s a table tennis table at the entrance and a box of bats and balls for people to help themselves to. With people at their laptops and young parents chatting over coffee and cake, it may look like a delightfully chaotic age-inclusive youth club, but the acoustics have been carefully adjusted away from hymn singing to suit conversations and the Danish artist Tal-R set a palette of eight colours that are used throughout.



Shared dinner at Kanalhuset is more than just a meal — rather a statement of intent . . . with socialising all but compulsory'

Roughly 100 activities a week take place in a warren of rooms, including chess, yoga and rug-making; some are held in English — but at Absalon's heart is its 6pm communal meal, where 200 people sit down together 364 days of the year (on New Year's Eve, it holds a party for the people who work there instead). It's an essential experience for visitors to Copenhagen, and at 60-100 kroner (£7-£11.50), one of the cheapest. All the tables have flowers and candles, and like Kanalhuset everything is served on vintage china.

The Lajboschitzes seem committed to the idea of communal living at home, as well as in their hospitality projects. About 40 of the extended family live in another part of the Kanalhuset complex, including both Lennart and Sus's mothers, Lajboschitz's brother and his family as well as their four children and their families.

"It's very difficult for individuals to do anything about the big world where so much feels wrong," Lennart says as we're wrapping up our chat, "but in the small world most of us can do things. And if I don't take part in that small world, then I know why the world looks like it does."

Details

Sarah Turner was a guest of Visit Denmark (visitdenmark.com) and Wonderful Copenhagen (wonderfulcopenhagen.com). Double rooms at Kanalhuset (kanalhusetcph.com) start at £105, not including breakfast; apartments start at £218

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