A Taste of South Denmark – Nature, History and Food

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By virtue of its geography the region of South Denmark has been the target of many an invader over the centuries. Each one has been drawn by the region's wealth of natural resources and each has left its mark on the landscape or contributed subtle influences to the regional cuisine. UK visitors are now able to follow in their footsteps and explore this fascinating region, which has plenty to excite the curious traveller.

Here's some of the must-see things to do along the way…

Nature
The natural topography of the region has helped to shape its history, spanning from the flat marshland on the west Jutland coast to the hilly forested areas in the east and making it a popular region with hikers and bikers.

Take the Haervejen Road
One of the best ways to explore the region on foot or by bike is via Denmark's longest trail, the ancient Haervejen Road (Military Road), which runs all the way from Viborg in North Jutland to Hamburg in Germany. Parts of the route can trace their history back as far as 4000BC with many historical landmarks to be found in South Denmark in the form of ancient mounds, defensive ditches and settlements along the road, including the Haerulf Stone, a runic stone dating from the 10th century.

Follow the Gendarme path
An alternative trail is the stunning 74km coastal Gendarme path, a European quality hiking trail. Starting in the forest of Harraldskov in Padborg on the German border it follows South Denmark's eastern coastline from Flensburg Bay and the beaches at Broager, passing the historical battlefield at Dybbøl and town of Sønderborg and on to the island of Als. The path was created in 1920 and gets its name from the little blue Gendarme guards who were responsible for patrolling the steep cliffs, deep forests and flat beaches, guarding the border and preventing smugglers. It fell into decline in the 1950s but has recently been restored and is now part of the European Long Distance Path.

Take a boat to Årø
Following the coastline north take the fiord boat Helene across to the pretty little island of Årø. Once Germany's most northerly island, and in the years between 1864 and 1920 a key route for smugglers, it is now an idyllic island in the Little Belt with a picturesque town of narrow streets, stone walls, fences and beautiful family farms leading to a network of cycling routes. Take a tractor ride around the island, dropping into the island's own vineyard, or join a nature guide for a beach safari to find herbs and mushrooms for lunch.

Migrate to the Wadden Sea
The south west coast is equally rewarding, especially for wildlife spotters heading to the UNESCO protected Wadden Sea National Park. The area is rich in wildlife and one of the world's most valuable tidal areas. Located in the middle of the Eastern Atlantic migratory routes it attracts between 10–12 million migratory birds each year that use the coastline as their stopover and wintering area in northern Europe.

In addition to the birdlife, this vast wetland area and beaches are home to Denmark's largest population of spotted seals, with sightings throughout the summer months being virtually guaranteed. One of the best ways to see them is on the Seal and Wadden Sea Safaris that depart from Esbjerg Harbour each day.

Alternatively, to learn more about the region visit the Wadden Sea Centre. Exhibits at the centre include the travelling life of migratory birds; a cultural exhibition of life in the area from the middle ages to the present day; and a fascinating multimedia show about the storm surges that have affected the Wadden Sea over the centuries.

Go oyster hunting
From October to Easter, the centre organises for groups of oyster hunters to take a 3km guided walk out to the oyster beds, where participants are invited to pick and eat as many delicious oysters as they wish. In so doing visitors can also do their bit for the environment by helping to remove these non-native Pacific Oysters, which are considered a pest by environmentalists. The Pacific Oysters were first introduced to the region in the 1980s and have since become established, taking over the areas that were once

populated by the native blue mussels. The decline of the blue mussel population is leading to a decline in shellfish eating birds, and is therefore having an impact on the native biodiversity of the ecosystem.

See the Black Sun
The centre can also organise to take groups to some of the best spots to observe the mesmerising natural phenomenon of 'The Black Sun'. This dance at dusk by huge numbers of migratory starlings takes place in Spring (mid-March for two to three weeks) and Autumn (from mid-August for two months) as they come at the end of each day to feed on flies and garden chafer grubs and create extraordinary circling flocks at sunset.

History
The battles for control of this region have left their marks across the landscape, from the famous encounter between Denmark and Germany in 1864 through to the First and Second World Wars.

Be a part of history
By means of interactive exhibits and reenactments of the key events visitors can get close to the story, journeying back in time to walk amongst active and living museums and participate in the many historical events and festivals throughout the year.

A novel new way to explore the famous battlefield at Dybbøl, location for the legendary battle of 1864 when Southern Jutland came under German rule, is to take a Segway guided tour following the road through the battlefields, past trenches and the mill of Dybbøl. Or experience a unique '1864' themed dinner at the Baltic Hotel in Horuphav, which offers a new interpretation of traditional courses and ingredients from the year of the battle.

For those with an interest in more recent conflicts take a visit to the Zepplin museum at Tonder and see the bunkers of the Northern German Defence Line from World War One which are spread across South Jutland.

Food
South Denmark has one of the best preserved regional cuisines in Denmark, with a proud tradition of exquisite produce used by top chefs in innovative gourmet restaurants that specialise in the finest local ingredients. From lamb raised on the flat grassy marshland in the west to the fertile soil in the east the area has the ideal conditions for the development of a varied cuisine with lots of seasonal flavours.

Strongly influenced by Germany, especially in the tradition of sausages and smoked meat production, following the arrival of German butchers to settle in the area, even today it plays a major role in Southern Jutland kitchen.

But dating back to the 1700s and 1800s, when sailors first vistited the Orient, spices such as nutmeg, curry and saffron were brought home and added to their dishes, creating a melting pot of flavours that are still used today in South Denmark to a far greater extent than in other Danish areas.

Try a South Denmark Coffee Table
Not for the faint-hearted, the traditonal South Denmark Coffee Table consists of 14 types of cake (seven soft sponge cakes and pies as well as seven biscuit-based cakes). It can be experienced at a number of places across the region including the ancient Gram Castle where the tradiiton is maintained each Sunday. The story behind this custom dates from the time after the war in 1864 when local groups gathered together to sing patriotic songs and maintain Danish traditions. As alcohol was banned, the women of the area began baking a variety of cakes. A competition arose amongst those to see who could bring the most creative, beautiful and tasty cakes for these meetings and this has been maintained to this day.

With such a plethora of things to pack in, it's the perfect location for a long weekend break of history, nature and delicious Danish food.

Getting there

Under two hours' flying time, Denmark has a good selection of flights from the UK to both Billund and Aarhus airports with Ryanair. Flights from Stansted to Billund run twice daily, while Stansted to Aarhus flights run once daily.

For accommodation and experiences go towww.visitsonderjylland.dk where information is in English, Danish and German.

See the interactive experience map:http://www.visitsonderjylland.dk/en/experiences/the-experience-map

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