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Personal Journey: Unpronounceable hospitality in Denmark

By Steven Schultz For The Inquirer

"You're going to die up there," came the warnings from my coworkers after I announced that I was going to spend Christmas in Denmark. "You'll freeze to death."

Although I am prone to midwinter depression, I packed my bags and flew off to visit friends in Vejle, Denmark, during the coldest, darkest part of the year - determined to tough it out. Little did I know, that wasn't going to be necessary, because of something called hygge.

Hygge is a Danish word that can't be translated or even pronounced in English. The closest I came to saying the word out loud produced peals of side-splitting laughter from my Danish hosts. Say "hooga," stretch out the "oooh," and stick a "y" sound somewhere in the middle while imagining drinking straws stuck in your nose, and you'll get close.

Hygge is a process. It's the fine art of hosting and cultural refinement that Danes have perfected with relish. When a Dane says you have a hyggily home, it's the highest compliment. Hygge can best be defined as a full-scale assault against the winter blues, enacted by an army of friends packing an arsenal of warmth, firelight, food and drink.

Because Scandinavian winters are so miserable, hygge requires a toasty living space best augmented with a wood stove or an open fire.

Food is the next wave of attack. Copious piles of smoked salmon - laks - adorn every table. Huge open-faced sandwiches - smorrebrod - piled high with eggs, meats, cheeses, fish and/or vegetables on rich, dark breads are just a start. If you can walk out of a Danish home unassisted, you have not eaten enough.

Drink is the rough equivalent of the heavy cavalry in the Hyggian Army. Start with hot tea and coffee, always within arm's reach. Every Danish table offers a variety of alcoholic beverages. Danish yule beers, rich, powerful ales available only during the holidays, are the centerpiece. They are surrounded with other Nordic drinks, most notably varm glug, a sweet, hot wine; aquavit, a powerful anise-flavored "snaps" (the Danish word for schnapps); and a local favorite called Nord's Oil, a vodka laced with hand-crushed licorice candy, shaken well, and served by the shot. I had my suspicions that homemade Nord's Oil might have been the reason for many a Viking raid over the years, but after one shot I forgot to ask.

Light is the final weapon that Danes deploy against winter. Candles burn everywhere in Danish homes. Indeed, if I had to create a two-word definition for hygge, it would be "reflected light." Hygge is the reflected light of culture, friendship and hospitality that shows in the faces of the Danes I met. To me, it is the most effective defense against the winter blues ever created.

Steven Schultz lives in Ardmore, Montgomery County.

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The writer (right, in blue) ensconced in the welcoming "hygge" of a Danish home - a weapon against winter consisting of warmth, food, drink and cultural refinement.

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