

**Your On the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

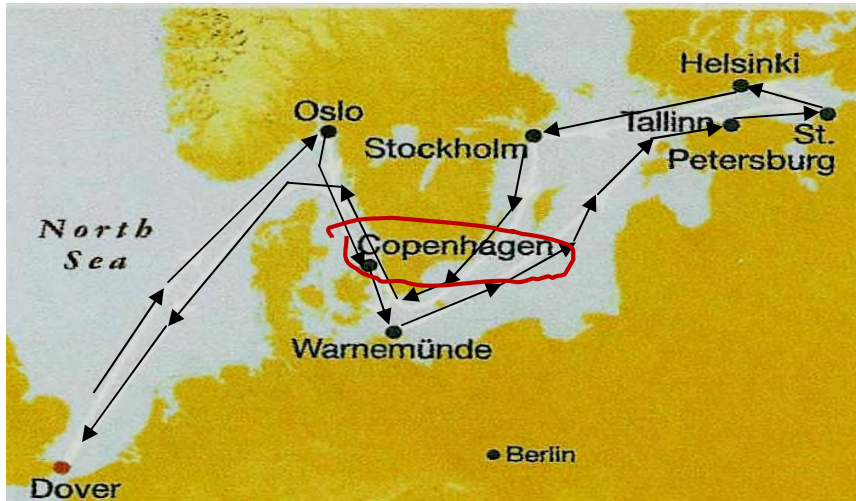
**The Baltic Sea Tour:
Copenhagen, Denmark**

The Baltic Sea Tour

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Chapter 3: Copenhagen, Denmark Report One



August 5, 2008

We left Norway last night and arrived in Copenhagen, Denmark, this morning. During the cruise, I am happy to report I won a Texas Hold'um tournament at the ship's casino. No small feat, as my poker skills are modest. But for last night, I could not help but fill inside straights. Trying to fill inside straights is one reason I seldom win at poker, but it was also the reason I drove my fellow players crazy last night. After raking in the winnings with an improbable hand, one of the players asked me if I happened to own the casino.

Copenhagen is one of the most beautiful cities I have had the pleasure to visit. This trip was my first to this city. I never had contracts with the Danes, but I did meet a lot of them when I conducted public seminars in London. They came across the Channel to listen to my lectures and take in the nightlife in London.

We began our exploration of Copenhagen by walking through the downtown area and listening to our guide describe the forts, buildings, and monuments located in this part of the city. After a short walk from our ship, we came across one of the most famous landmarks in Copenhagen: The Little Mermaid, shown in Figure 1.

Hans Christian Andersen was a Danish writer of fairy tales, who in 1837 wrote a story about a mermaid. His adopted city, Copenhagen, erected this statue at the entrance to the harbor. According to our guide, the statue is made of cast bronze and reflects the Danish love of simple form.



Figure 1. The Little Mermaid.

The Little Mermaid is also a Walt Disney motion picture about a mermaid who longs to learn more about humankind and to know how it feels to be human. An evil octopus gives the mermaid human legs and a chance to live on land. In turn, the mermaid has to exchange her beautiful voice for the legs. A prince comes along and saves the mermaid, her voice, her fins, *et al.* Every one lives happily ever after.

The guide explained that the statue in Figure 1 has had her arm cut off. She has been beheaded twice, painted many times, and pushed into the water repeatedly. Ah, those peaceful Danes. Anyway, I like the Disney story better. And who knows? All those assaults on the little mermaid might have come from some religious fanatics who can't stand to be around exposed fins.

Ugly America?

As mentioned in an earlier report, during this trip I wished to gain some thoughts of Europeans about the United States. Today, I asked our guide, "What's your take on America?" (Conversation is paraphrased from my notes.)

- She responded, "Hmm. You're American?"
- "Yes, that's why I asked."
- "How can your country be so wealthy and have so much poverty?"
- "That's what happens with a free market nation. Some win. Some lose."
- "Not here. We've a free market, too."
- "Yes, but your taxes are out of sight."
- "But we have no significant poverty in our country. All Danes have health care. You don't. No one sleeps on the streets here. They do in your country. We've no ghettos. You do. ...I've been to New York. It doesn't compare to our cities. We also live and let live. You don't. You're in everyone's back yard, and you can't even take care of your own."

Whew, but then I did ask her opinion. I wanted to counter, but she executed a 180⁰ pirouette and returned to the tour group.

I was skeptical of all her claims, but I was aware that Denmark is both a free market and a welfare state. (Where America has been heading for the past six decades.) I've read that Denmark is rated as having the world's highest level of income equality. I scribbled out my notes about her points, and looked for an opportunity to talk with her again, but to no avail. Maybe it was just as well. I had some homework to do.

Later, back at my stateroom, where The Economist's *Pocket World of Figures booklet* travels with me, I looked up her claims and decided to map out some statistics about other countries visited during this journey (I'm comparing the United Kingdom, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Russia, Finland, and Sweden with the United States):¹

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Per Person of Countries Visited:

Country	GDP Per Person	World Rank	
Norway	\$64,240	3	
Denmark	\$47,910	8	
U.S.	\$41,640	10	
Sweden	\$39,740	11	
Finland	\$37,150	15	
United Kingdom	\$36,830	16	
Germany	\$33,800	23	
Estonia	\$10,080	61	
Russia	---	---	(data not available)

So what? Just this: The ultimate worth of a political and governmental philosophy is based on its ability to provide physical safety, financial security, and freedom of choice to its citizens. Reviewing this table, "Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Per Person of Countries Visited," America is not doing badly at all. It's in the top ten.

Wait one moment. Only number 10? How can that be? Every day, we are "propagandized" by FOX news and Rush that we are the greatest country in the world? In comparison to what? If we look at income and compare our position to college football rankings, we can't even qualify for a BCS bowl berth.

OK, but our resident "patriots" claim our greatness is because of our democracy, as if we were the only country in the world to hold elections. The fact is (with the possible exception of Russia) each country listed in the table also holds legitimate elections---plus their "elected" officials do not gerrymander themselves into permanent job descriptions.

What makes us so much more powerful than these other rich countries? We have more people. Our national GNP dwarfs all others. We have more money to spend. (And keep those borders open in Arizona!)

Great, but what are we spending it on? Not bridges, highways, education, or research; the fuel that keeps a nation humming. We're spending our wealth on consumables and worthless mortgages, while bailing out inept and corrupt financial institutions that created "financial weapons of mass destruction."²

Take a look at the second table below, "Quality of Life Index of Cities Visited." America does not have a city listed until the 29th place, San Francisco. I was surprised, and the guide was on target. Copenhagen is ranked number 1. New York is 48.

¹ *Pocket World of Figures*, 2008 Edition, *The Economist* (London: Profile Books 2007).

² Comment made by Warren Buffett about credit default swaps.

Quality of Life Index of Cities Visited:³

City	Index⁴	World Rank	
Copenhagen	106.2	1	
Berlin	105.2	16	
Stockholm	104.7	20	
Oslo	103.5	26	
San Francisco	103.2	29 ⁵	
Helsinki	103.1	30	
London	101.2	39	
St. Petersburg	---	---	(data not available)
Moscow	---	---	(data not available)
New York	100.0	48	(tour guide's comparison)

It might appear I am denigrating my country. No, what I am attempting to do is offer a dose of reality into what seems to be the refusal of many Americans to acknowledge there are effective alternatives to capitalism. They deal with a combination of state intervention into the capital markets, while supporting private entrepreneurship, which are practiced effectively in most of the Baltic Sea countries. We should not be so proud as to think we cannot learn from their models.

I'm suggesting that the Baltic Sea social democracies, in return for higher taxes, without the shrinking of civil liberties, have created cultures with enviable public transportation, high quality health care for all, and excellent education.

Idealism, Rule of Law, and GDP: Three Ramparts for Cool Countries

What makes America so great and different from say Norway or Denmark? It comes from our (1) idealism, (2) rule of law, and (3) GDP (gross domestic product). But other countries, such as the Scandinavian nations, are also idealistic. They also adhere to the rule of law, and they also produce a healthy GDP.

But the magnitude---the scope and size---of their Three Ramparts for Cool Countries pale in comparison to the United States. Just consider: The GNP of the United States is almost *three times* that of the nearest GNP also-ran (Japan).

But as I have regaled over the past four years in "Your on the Street Reporter" reports, we are wasting away our legacy. Beyond those described in this essay, I'll not re-hash the specific issues. For my new readers, let me know if you want to receive previous reports about this topic.

Happiness is filling-out ten ☺s on the Survey Form

Enough about weighty issues. Now for a fun-filled fact:

³ Based on 39 factors ranging from recreation to political stability.

⁴ Based on New York = 100.0

⁵ The highest ranked U.S. city.

From 2006 to 2008, surveys ranked Denmark as "the happiest place in the world." Whoa! Who conducted these surveys? I suspected they were performed by the Denmark Bureau of Tourism. I made a phone call to this bureau:

- A person at the Denmark Bureau of Tourism answered the phone. He spoke a foreign language. My main problem with traveling to a foreign country is that it is populated with too many foreigners.
- I asked, "Can you speak English?"
- "Yes, how may I help you?"
- "I've come across surveys that reveal Danes are the happiest people in the world and Denmark is the happiest place on earth. Did your bureau conduct those surveys?"
- "Ha. No, I am familiar with the surveys, and we do make use of them."
- "Can you tell me where I can find out more about them?"
- "Certainly, just a moment....They were conducted by the University of Leischester and Erasmus University Rotterdam."
- "Thanks, I'll check with them. Say, have you heard this one? 'Every fourth child in Norway is Swedish. That's why the Norwegians only have three children.' "
- "Ha. Yes, but I heard it as, 'Every fourth child in Denmark is Swedish. That's why the Danes only have three children.' "

I rang off and decided to find more about those happiness surveys. It turns out the universities did indeed conduct such surveys. One is a study titled the "World Map of Happiness." The other is the "World Database of Happiness." I also learned the results were tabulated by evaluating the answer to, "How happy are you?" by a scale ranging from ten (☺☺☺☺☺☺☺☺☺☺ = happy) to one (☹ = not happy, or ☹).

The winner was Denmark. Most of the Danes responded with nines and tens, although they did complain about high taxes. They pay some of the highest taxes in the world: between 50 percent to 70 percent of their incomes. In turn, the Danes say they feel "tryghed," their word for "tucked-in."

I am happy for those who want to be tucked-in and find a way to be tucked-in. I am happy for Dane, the Plumber who makes as much money as Dane, the Banker. I'm told the Danes do not choose careers based on income or status. They have the philosophy of "Jante-lov": You're not better than anyone else.

In the survey, a garbage man rated his happiness as ☺☺☺☺☺☺☺☺☺☺:⁶

He said he doesn't mind collecting garbage for a living, because he works just five hours in the morning and then can spend the rest of the day at home with family or coaching his daughter's handball team. Dion says no one judges his choice of career, and he actually loves what he does because he has many friends along his route. It makes him happy when he sees the children who wave to him and the old ladies who bring him cups of coffee.

⁶ ABC News, January 8, 2007.

I am happy for Dion, the garbage man, because Dion is happy. His situation and the situation in Denmark seem to work.

But I am not sure I could get along in a tucked-in world. I suspect I am too conditioned to fighting for the loose blanket. No question, in my older years, I am content with a tucked-in world, but I wish to be the one who did the tucking-in; the one (not the state) who made it possible to be tucked-in. In these later years, the notion that my work and efforts not only allow me to be tucked-in, but also allow me to sleep between silk sheets (which I choose not to do) gives me a great sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

To each his or her own... and enough about sleeping preferences. Here's some interesting news about how the Brits filled-in the happiness surveys:

Can't Buy Me Happiness!

The citizens in the United Kingdom did not evaluate themselves as being happy. They ranked themselves in position number 41. I attributed this low happiness index to recent restrictions on their tavern hours.

A recent BBC survey found that 81 percent of UK's citizens think their government should be focusing on making them happier rather than wealthier. It appears the Brits took to heart the Beatles song, "Can't Buy Me Happiness."

I hear the British government is now working on a plan to make their citizens less wealthy, but more happy. If you have an idea about how this plan might succeed, share it with me. I'll publish your findings and tons of royalty money will come in. I'll keep all the money. You can keep all the happiness.

Palintology

One last thought. During this report on the Danes and the article on Norway, we have touched on socialism and welfare states. I had forgotten the details of socialism, so I took to the dictionary:⁷

Political system of communal ownership: a political theory or system in which the means of production and distribution are controlled by the people and operated according to equity and fairness rather than market principles.

The recent candidate for Vice President of the United States, Sarah Palin is the Republican Governor of Alaska. In an interview, a few weeks before she was nominated for the Vice Presidential slot, she explained Alaska's political philosophy:⁸

...we're set up, unlike other states in the union, where it's collectively Alaskans (who) own the resources. So, we share in the wealth when the development of these resources occurs.

⁷ "Socialism," *Microsoft Encarta*, 2006, 1993-2005 Microsoft Corporation.

⁸ Sarah Palin, "Like Socialism," Comment, *The New Yorker*, November 3, 2008, 46.

Sounds a lot like socialism. Sounds a lot like Denmark's tucked-in tryghed. Thus far this year, each Alaskan has received \$3,269 from the state of Alaska for doing absolutely nothing but living in Alaska.

Hats off to those manly, independent, rugged, individualistic, Republican Alaskans, who sport red garb during the day, but get tucked in each night with a blue blanket.

It's a wrap. As I write, our national government is printing money and selling bonds to keep us....somewhat...tucked-in. Anon says, "I has seen the welfare state, and it is us."

In the next report, we tour the canals of Copenhagen and gain other perspectives about Europe and America.

Copenhagen, Denmark Report Two

August 5, 2008

I decided not to engage our tour guide again about her views on the failings of America. The truth is, she was pretty much in sync with America's citizens: We need to regroup. Perhaps the upcoming presidential election will provide just such an opportunity.

Anyway, this day was meant for pleasure, not debating the pros and cons of America with a tour guide. Sure, I wanted to gather some personal views of Europeans about my country, but such a survey did not require 24/7 attention. With the goal of having some fun, Reporterette and I took a boat trip through the canals of Copenhagen. Figure 2 shows scenes from this excursion...one I hope you will have a chance to experience someday.



Figure 2. Copenhagen Scenes.

Figure 2.a shows the boat we took for a tour through the city. Notice the buildings. They were built in the 1500s and are lined up on both sides of the canal. They extend for several blocks down the canal. One of the boatmen informed us this street constitutes the longest bar in Europe.

Figure 2.b shows another canal, most of which have houseboats along their sides. As seen in Figure 2.c, the bridges over the canals don't offer much head room for the boat passengers; about six inches of leeway at high tide. Apparently, Denmark has yet to create an OSHA.

Can you imagine such a dangerous setup in America? Nope, Uncle Sam is looking out for just about everything in our lives. Bumped heads from low slung bridges are our government's concern, unless the bumps come from collapsing Interstate bridges. OK, it's a minor point about those drowned drivers from that faulty bridge in Minneapolis, as OSHA was too busy on more important matters to check out this facility.

Recently, I was standing in a check-out line at a package store. Reporterette and I were giving a party, and I had in my cart a couple cases of beer and a dozen bottles of wine. It made no sense to place these containers into bags, because I was going to put them in my car and transfer them to another cart at home. Besides, I was saving a tree branch.

- Reporter, "Don't bother with bags or boxes. Just put the stuff back in the cart."
- Cashier, "No can do sir. The law requires all alcohol be placed in a container---some sort of package---before leaving the store."
- "Really? OK, how about those Cokes?"
- "No, I'll just put them in the cart. They're not alcoholic."
- "OK. Look I know you're obeying the law, but can you tell me why such a law exists?"
- "Sure. It was passed because some people claimed passers-by might see customers coming out of these stores carrying bottles of alcohol, and would be upset. Or a teenager might see a bottle and get some ideas about drinking."

God help America. Our bridges are collapsing around us. Our Interstate guard rails are rusting away. Our financial infrastructure is very close to failure. Medicare and Medicaid are on target to bankrupt us. All the while, our leaders fixate on bumped heads, naming airports after Presidents, building bridges to nowhere, and micromanaging package stores and their packaging practices.

Say what you will about the socialistic, self-coddling Europeans, I am able to walk into an English market, purchase a bottle of wine, and carry it out of the store in its naked, natural state.

Kicking Ass and Taking Names....eh, Slaves

The boat tour guide informed us the building shown in Figure 2.d was built with funds from Denmark selling the Virgin Islands to the United States.

For some people who only know about the Danes of the last century or so---and perhaps that included our tour guide---they may harbor the appearance of a passive, laid-back nation, doing good deeds and staying in its own back yard.

While this image holds now, in the past Denmark was just another member of the marauding European states. These countries believed they had the right to subjugate any part of this earth whose inhabitants could indeed be subjugated---almost always to plunder. Even pagan cultures called-up their gods to justify their actions. Later, as Christianity became popular, God and Jesus were invoked to rationalize the mayhem.

Denmark has a long history of slavery. Its rulers and business people did not bring many of the slaves to Europe. Usually, the rich families kept one slave per household: “From Africa to Caribbean, with rum and sugar coming back to Denmark.”⁹

But during the Danish occupations of St. Thomas and St. Croix, 30,000 slaves, “...worked on sugar plantations.”¹⁰

Only in America: A Presidential Candidate who is Black...with a Muslim Name

Why bring up this topic? For these reasons: In spite of Europe’s supposedly tolerant populace, some countries are ossified in cultural stagnation. They go about their business surrounded by a centuries-old practice of class discrimination. Perhaps the most blatant and ironic example is the so-named bastion of egalitarianism, France.

Yet, across the Atlantic pond, the supposedly intolerant, biased Americans are seriously considering placing a black man into the White House. A black man with a Muslim name. A black man with an Islamic heritage.

I do not pretend to be an expert on Europe. Or for that matter, America. Or for that matter, much of anything. I’m reminded of anon’s observation, “A specialist is one who comes to know more and more about less and less, until he knows everything about nothing.” My take on this matter is that I know very little about anything.

That stated, it was with wonder when I discussed the current presidential campaign with the Europeans. They are amazed that America, long stereotyped as quasi- KKK, may elect a black man as the United States President. Irrespective of our red or blue political leanings, we Americans should be proud of ourselves in this regard. If I were visiting Paris on this jaunt, I’d be tempted to place a sign around my neck and walk around the Champs-Elysses proclaiming, “We practice what we preach. How about you?”

Let’s head for Berlin.

⁹ Taken from a page on a Web site. Sorry, I did not record the domain name.

¹⁰ Frank Moya Pons, *History of the Caribbean*, Markus Wiener Publishers, Princeton, NJ, 2007, p. 122.