

CULTURE DESK

THE YEAR OF HYGGE, THE DANISH OBSESSION WITH GETTING COZY

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Hygge, a Danish quality of “coziness and comfortable conviviality,” is making inroads with an international audience and is the subject of a crop of new books. Photograph by Valentyn Volkov / Alamy

The Oxford Dictionaries' 2016 "word of the year" shortlist was heavy on neologisms that one wishes didn't have to exist: "alt-right," "Brexitteer," and this year's winning term, "post-truth." Among the finalists, though, there was one bit of solace: "hygge," a Danish term defined as "a quality of cosiness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment or well-being." Pronounced "hoo-guh," the word is said to have no direct translation in English, though "cozy" comes close. It derives from a sixteenth-century Norwegian term, *hugga*, meaning "to comfort" or "to console," which is related to the English word "hug." Associated with relaxation, indulgence, and gratitude, *hygge* has long been considered a part of the Danish national character. In a 1957 "Letter from Copenhagen" in *The New Yorker*, the writer Robert Shaplen reported that *hygge* was "ubiquitous" in the city: "The sidewalks are filled with smiling, *hyggelige* people, who keep lifting their hats to each other and who look at a stranger with an expression that indicates they wish they knew him well enough to lift their hats to him, too."

In the past year, this concept of Scandinavian coziness has made inroads with an international audience. At least six books about *hygge* were published in the United States this year, with more to come in 2017. (At the *Guardian*, Charlotte Higgins has done an investigation into the U.K.'s *hygge* publishing craze.) Helen Russell, a British journalist who wrote "The Year of Living Danishly," defines the term as "taking pleasure in the presence of gentle, soothing things," like a freshly brewed cup of coffee and cashmere socks. Signe Johansen, in a cookbook and wellness guide, "How to Hygge: The Nordic Secrets to a Happy Life," links *hygge* to food and drink like cardamom buns, muesli "ne plus ultra," and triple cherry gløgg, a Scandinavian mulled wine with cardamom pods and star anise; she calls it "healthy hedonism." Louisa Thomsen Brits, the author of "The Book of Hygge: The Danish Art of Contentment, Comfort, and Connection," calls it "a practical way of creating sanctuary in the middle of very real life" and "a cure for SAD"—seasonal affective disorder—"in book form."

Winter is the most *hygge* time of year. It is candles, nubby woolens, shearling slippers, woven textiles, pastries, blond wood, sheepskin rugs, lattes with milk-foam hearts, and a warm

fireplace. *Hygge* can be used as a noun, adjective, verb, or compound noun, like *hyggebukser*, otherwise known as that shabby pair of pants you would never wear in public but secretly treasure. *Hygge* can be found in a bakery and in the dry heat of a sauna in winter, surrounded by your naked neighbors. It's wholesome and nourishing, like porridge; Danish doctors recommend "tea and *hygge*" as a cure for the common cold. It's possible to *hygge* alone, wrapped in a flannel blanket with a cup of tea, but the true expression of *hygge* is joining with loved ones in a relaxed and intimate atmosphere. In "The Little Book of Hygge," the best-selling of the current crop of books, Meik Wiking, the C.E.O. of a Copenhagen think tank called the Happiness Research Institute, shares a story about a Christmas Day spent with friends in a woodsy cabin. After a hike in the snow, the friends sat around the fireplace wearing sweaters and woolen socks, listening to the crackle of the fire, and enjoying mulled wine. One of his friends asked, "Could this be any more *hygge*?" Everyone nodded when one woman replied, "Yes, if a storm were raging outside."

Like many of the best things from Scandinavia, *hygge* might seem, to some Americans, to come with a whiff of smugness. The term is often mentioned in the same paragraph that reminds us that Danes (or, depending on the year, Norwegians and Swedes) are the happiest people in the world. Perhaps Scandinavians are better able to appreciate the small, *hygge* things in life because they already have all the big ones nailed down: free university education, social security, universal health care, efficient infrastructure, paid family leave, and at least a month of vacation a year. With those necessities secured, according to Wiking, Danes are free to become "aware of the decoupling between wealth and wellbeing." "After our basic needs are met, more money doesn't lead to more happiness," he told Elle UK. "Instead, Danes are good at focusing on what brings them a better quality of life."

This vision of restrained pleasure harmonizes with a related Swedish concept, *lagom*, which refers to a kind of moderation. Pronounced with a hard "G," the term is said to come from the Viking phrase *laget om*, or "around the team," meaning that you should take only a sip of the mead that's being passed around so that no one is left without. *Lagom* means "adequate," "just right," or "in balance" and it is said to have burrowed deep into the Swedish national psyche, if not that of all Scandinavians. It encourages modesty and teamwork and discourages extremes. It is related to fairness, the need for consensus, and equality. *Lagom* is how a Swede might respond when someone asks how much milk you want in your tea or if

things are going well. *Hygge* shares *lagom's* reverence for measured experience: indulging in a piece of cake, but not outright gluttony; a dinner with friends at home, but nothing fancy.

Some Scandinavians argue that *lagom*, instead of promoting virtues like humility and moderation, encourages the kind of bland conformity that Nordic countries are often accused of. In the 1933 novel “A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks,” the Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose wrote about the forced group mentality in a small fictional town called Jante. He lists ten soul-deadening rules by which the townspeople live, including “you are not to think you are special,” “you are not to think you are good at anything,” and “you are not to convince yourself that you are better than we are.” In an article in *T* about his youthful dreams of fame, Karl Ove Knausgaard wrote about his own experience of what is known in Scandinavia as “the Law of Jante.” As an adolescent in Norway, he wrote, “it didn’t take much more than a slightly outlandish hat or a pair of unusual trousers before people told you off, laughed at you or, in the worst case, ignored you. ‘He thinks he’s special’ was the worst thing anyone could say about you.” *Jante* presents the more insidious side of *lagom*. Rather than celebrating modesty, it perceives individuality as a threat to the group. Robert Shaplen’s “Letter from Copenhagen” quotes one Dane saying, “A foreigner shouldn’t be too different from us if he wants to be liked. . . . We want everybody to be the way we are, because it gives us confidence in ourselves.”

Louisa Thomsen Brits, a British-Danish writer, casts *hygge* as a state of mindfulness: how to make essential and mundane tasks dignified, joyful, and beautiful, how to live a life connected with loved ones. Her “Book of Hygge” focusses on the concept’s philosophical and spiritual underpinnings rather than its quirky objects. She explains that many households in Denmark still have a copy of a folk songbook that they sing from to “affirm the ideas of simplicity, cheerfulness, reciprocity, community, and belonging.” Danes, she says, prefer to gather in small groups “to emphasize the unity of their inner circles.” She admits that this can make them appear “intimidating and impenetrable.” These tendencies lend *hygge* its contradictions: what many see as humble, decent, and community-oriented may appear to others as insular and a rejection of what’s different and unfamiliar. Scandinavia has a reputation for tolerance, but all three countries are tense over immigration these days and have seen surging support for far-right groups. Bo Lidegaard, a Danish historian, told the *Times* in September that many Danes feel strongly that “we are a multiethnic society . . .

but we are not and should never become a multicultural society.” *Hygge* encourages its practitioners to shelter, cluster, and enclose.

The most striking thing about *hygge*, though, might be how its proponents tend to take prosperity for granted. All the encouragements toward superior handicrafts and Scandinavian design, the accounts of daily fireside gatherings and freshly baked pastries assume a certain level of material wealth and an abundance of leisure time. As a life philosophy, *hygge* is unabashedly bourgeois, and American readers of a certain stripe will be familiar with its hallmark images—still-lives of hands cradling a mug, candles lit at dusk on a picnic table, bikes with woven baskets and child safety seats leaning against a colorful brick wall. Artisanal this and homemade that, fetishizing what’s rustic as authentic, what’s simple as sophisticated: urban American sophisticates already know this aesthetic; we’ve aspired to it for a long time.

What many Americans do not aspire to is Scandinavia’s high taxes or socialist ideas. When transferred to the United States, the kind of understated luxury that Danes consider a shared national trait starts to seem like little more than a symbol of economic status—the very thing that Scandinavian countries have sought to jettison. Still, there are some lessons from *hygge* that Americans might heed. There’s the Nordic insistence on knowing how to do practical things and doing them well, on taking care of your body with time outdoors every day. The hard-earned lesson of frigid Scandinavian winters is that there’s no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothes—that all you really need to get through difficult times is shelter and sustenance, kith and kin.

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