

THE (UN)HAPPIEST EXPATS
IN THE HAPPIEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD

The (Un)Happiest Expats in the Happiest Country in the World

**When the best of Danish culture
goes wrong**

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Colophon

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Preface: How to read this book

This book is an invitation to reflect – on Denmark, on belonging, and on what it means to feel at home in a country that prides itself on equality, trust, and happiness.

It began as a conversation between two people who have lived both inside and outside Danish culture, sometimes comfortably, sometimes uneasily. One of us was born here and returned after years abroad; the other came from abroad and made Denmark home. We have both belonged and not belonged. Those tensions shape this book.

This is not an academic study, nor a diagnosis. It is not a condemnation or a celebration. It is an attempt to hold the paradoxes of Danish society up to the light and reflect on what we see. It's not a book of answers, but of perspectives.

We look at the paradoxes through the lens of five deeply rooted Danish values: Equality, Trust, Independence, Privacy, and Humor – drawing on and adapting the structure of Anatolie's earlier book, *Danish Culture is an "Extreme". A Book on the Danish Mentality, For Expats and their Few Danish Friends* (2024).

Our central argument is that these same cherished values – admired both inside and outside Denmark – can pres-

ent invisible challenges for expats trying to integrate and feel at home. This is not because one culture is better than another, but because both Danes and expats often overlook the powerful cultural expectations that lie beneath the surface.

We argue that the issue is seldom hostility or intentional exclusion. Rather, it lies in the subtle, unspoken social norms that make integration difficult. The Danish mentality works well for those who were raised within it. For outsiders, however, these very traits can become unexpected obstacles.

Equality in Denmark is not just about equal rights – it’s about sameness. Modesty and humility are social ideals, and everyone is expected to be “just like the rest of us.” For expats, this can make it difficult to stand out, even in harmless ways, without feeling like a social misfit.

Trust is foundational in Danish society. People trust each other and trust their institutions. But in practice, this often means there is little guidance, little supervision, and few check-ins. For internationals, this can feel like being left to navigate everything alone. You’re trusted – but you’re also on your own.

Independence is instilled from early childhood. Children are encouraged to be self-reliant, and adults are expected not to depend too much on others. But for expats – especially those from cultures where interdependence is valued – this can feel like a lack of support. Asking for help may

seem awkward, and offering help may be perceived as intrusive. What feels like freedom to Danes can feel like abandonment to internationals.

Privacy is deeply respected. People keep to themselves, and unannounced visits are uncommon. This creates a calm and orderly atmosphere – but also a certain distance. For expats from more spontaneous cultures, this can feel like coldness. A polite silence may be misread as rejection.

Humor in Denmark tends to be dry, ironic, and self-deprecating. Jokes are subtle, often delivered without expressive cues. For internationals, this can lead to misunderstandings. What Danes see as “just teasing,” others may take personally. In a society where humor helps build bonds, not speaking the unspoken rules can make it hard to connect.

We hope this book offers recognition and relief: for internationals who have felt alone in their experience, and for Danes curious about how their culture is perceived from the outside. You can read it as a whole or read the parts that speak to you. Each chapter stands alone.

We hope you’ll find it interesting, maybe challenging – and for some, comforting.

- Signe and Anatolie

About the authors

Anatolie and Signe come from very different backgrounds – and they are “digging through the same mountain” from different directions, towards the same goal: supporting internationals and Danes, and this time through a book in the form of a dialogue.

Anatolie arrived in Denmark 21 years ago from his native Moldova and made the town of Herning his home. His drive, curiosity and ‘obsession’ about how other people think and live made him reflect a lot about the Danish culture and society by turning complex cultural patterns into clear, relatable insights. It has also motivated him to travel the world and think about his own international background while taking root in ‘little’ Denmark.

Anatolie is the author of *Danish Culture is an ‘Extreme’*, a sharp, honest, and humorous take on the cultural codes and contradictions that define life in Denmark. He has held many talks on Danish culture all over Denmark. And he has initiated and has been part of a variety of international organizations and initiatives in Denmark with the goal to support internationals in Denmark.

Anatolie has been teaching Intercultural Communication at Aarhus University and other universities in Denmark. Currently, he is a full-time associate professor at VIA

University College. He is married to Vimke, who is Dutch. They have a son, Oliver, and newborn twin girls, Arya and Julia. He is a big fan of sauna and has even built one himself in his garden. He also enjoys good vodka and classic mafia films.

Signe holds a Master of Law degree from the University of Copenhagen and a degree in Political Science from College of Europe in Bruges. She has spent over 20 years as a Danish diplomat, with postings in India, China, and Israel, where she navigated some of the world's most politically and psychologically complex landscapes. In Israel Signe served as deputy ambassador during her last four years in diplomacy. That posting changed her understanding of 'truth' and 'identity', as she tried to make sense of a country and a region shaped by intractable conflicts, and by deep divisions in power, interests and beliefs. That experience changed her profoundly. Signe struggles to write about it and has contemplated leaving it out entirely. And that, too, says something.

Returning to Denmark in 2018, wiser about herself and her own culture, she shifted her focus to executive coaching and psychotherapy, where she could combine cross-cultural insight with deep psychological work. Her work sits at the intersection of leadership, culture, psychology, and organizational life, helping Danish and international leaders explore the unspoken codes that shape how they lead.

Signe speaks regularly on navigating cultural complexity in leadership and leads workshops on leadership, diversity, and Danish-international dynamics.

She lives in Copenhagen with her two children, Rosa and Storm. Signe likes neither vodka nor saunas and prefers to spend her free time on the sofa watching movies with her family, meeting friends, reading a book or chatting with an AI.

Key reports

The InterNations Expats Insider Reports, 2014 - 2025

According to the World Happiness Reports, Denmark has consistently ranked among the top three happiest countries since the report's inception in 2012, reflecting its sustained high levels of happiness and well-being (1).

In some ways, this is reflected in the Expat Insider series by InterNations – the world's largest global expat network – provides one of the most consistent yearly assessments of expat life worldwide.

Between 2014 and 2025, Denmark has been included in the ranking of between 46 and 67 countries based on key themes such as Quality of Life, Ease of Settling In, Working Abroad, and Expat Essentials (2).

Respondents evaluate up to 37 factors, including both emotional and practical aspects of expat life – from job satisfaction and healthcare to friendliness and cultural ease – using a 7-point scale based on personal satisfaction.

In expats' eyes, Denmark is one of the *best countries* in the world to raise a family, offering excellent childcare options, a high level of safety, strong digital infrastructure, and

an impressive balance between work and leisure. These strengths are reflected in Denmark's consistent top-tier performance in Work & Leisure, Digital Life, and Safety.

The 2025 report places Denmark in the global top three for Digital Life (1st), Work Culture & Satisfaction (2nd), Safety & Security (3rd), and Work & Leisure (3rd). Expats point to the high degree of workplace autonomy and flexibility.

However, according to the same reports, expats also rank Denmark among the worst countries in the world for personal happiness, feeling at home, friendliness, and making friends. Overall, it scores as one of the hardest places for expats to settle. This trend is consistent across all surveyed years and locations within Denmark, including Copenhagen.

In 2025, Denmark landed in the bottom six globally for Finding Friends (43rd), Ease of Settling In (40th), Culture & Welcome (40th), Leisure Options (37th), Local Friendliness (35th).

This is an obvious contradiction – how is it possible for expats to report low levels of happiness, difficulties making friends and settle in the world's happiest and most prosperous country?! After all, over the years, with some variation, the picture has remained strikingly similar in all 12 Expat Insider Reports.

Oxford Research Reports, 2010, 2014, 2020

The Oxford Research series – published in 2010, 2014, and 2020 – offers a consistent and data-driven insights into how expats perceive life and work in Denmark. Each report is based on surveys of approximately 1,900 highly skilled international professionals and is often commissioned by institutions such as the Confederation of Danish Industry (DI), the Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration (SIRI), and Copenhagen Capacity (3).

The most recent edition in 2020 reveals that nine out of 10 expats are happy with their lives in Denmark, and eight out of 10 are satisfied with their jobs. A good work-life balance is the number one reason they choose Denmark, followed by stable governance, access to healthcare, and democratic values. For non-EU nationals, human rights protection was cited as an especially significant motivator for relocating to Denmark – whereas EU citizens were more likely to prioritize income and career opportunities.

The survey also highlights the continued importance of personal and professional networks in finding employment, often more so than traditional job listings. While most expats arrive for work-related reasons, factors like interesting job content, career development, and manageable working hours remain central to their decision to stay.

In terms of daily life, expats report a generally high level of satisfaction with living in Denmark. The country is widely

viewed as a safe, well-functioning society with a high quality of life.

However, many also express difficulties building local friendships. In 2020, 40 percent reported rarely socializing with Danes – a number that has remained consistent over the years. Language barriers and cultural distance are commonly cited as key challenges to social integration.

When it comes to retention, the reports consistently show that expats would stay longer in Denmark if they had closer ties with locals and stronger Danish language skills. The 2020 study notes that 39 percent of respondents planned to remain permanently – yet those who struggled to connect socially were more likely to leave early. Career prospects, family wellbeing, and feeling part of a community all play a role in these long-term decisions.

Finally, Danish work culture receives strong praise. Across all three reports, expats describe the professional environment as collaborative, flexible, and respectful of personal time – leading many to describe Denmark as one of the best places in the world to work. Despite this, finding a job remains a hurdle for many, and concerns persist over limited opportunities for accompanying partners and navigating the Danish job market as a newcomer.

The Expat Survey, Copenhagen Capacity, 2025

The 2025 Expat Survey by Copenhagen Capacity – an official organization for attracting international companies

and investments to Eastern Denmark and professional talents to Danish businesses – has released the most up-to-date expat report in Denmark based on 2160 respondents (4).

The report reveals that many expats residing in Denmark are pleased with job security and stable employment, which stands out as the most decisive factor for those choosing to extend their stay.

Expats also mention the happiness and wellbeing of their children as a central reason for remaining in the country, emphasizing the importance of family life in relocation choices. A sense of inclusion at the workplace – feeling welcomed and respected as an international employee – also plays a major role in making expats feel rooted and committed.

Furthermore, opportunities for professional development and employers' support in helping individuals reach their potential are seen as strong contributors to long-term satisfaction.

The survey finds broad contentment with Denmark's social system – known as “The Danish Model” – which encompasses healthcare, democracy, welfare, and security. While most expats did not choose Denmark to escape problems at home, many were pleasantly surprised by the quality of life they discovered after relocating. These findings suggest that, although many expat stays are not permanent, those

who do remain are doing so because Denmark largely meets or exceeds the expectations that motivated their move.

Although Denmark is rated positively in many areas, the same report reveals several persistent challenges that lead some internationals to cut their stay short. At the top of the list is the absence of workplace inclusion. Expats who do not feel acknowledged or integrated at work often struggle with isolation and disconnection – experiences made worse by cultural and language barriers. This lack of inclusion emerges as the most cited reason for choosing to leave Denmark earlier than planned. Closely following is the difficulty in securing employment. Despite Denmark's strong job market, many expats encounter significant barriers when trying to find suitable work, which can quickly become a dealbreaker for staying.

Social challenges outside the workplace also weigh heavily. Many expats find it hard to build friendships with Danes, which contributes to feelings of loneliness and exclusion. Other sources of dissatisfaction include limited financial incentives, inadequate housing options, and poor career opportunities for accompanying spouses or partners.

Families, too, may face difficulties if children are unhappy or if cultural and leisure activities do not provide enough of a social anchor. Administrative hurdles – such as delays or complications with work permits – can further push expats to move on. These issues suggest that while Denmark offers much to admire, it still has important gaps

to address if it hopes to retain and fully integrate its international residents.

“Vores Livskvalitet” Report, 2025

This report focuses on “immigrants” rather than expats. We believe it contains important data that deepens the understanding of people living in Denmark who come from a different origin.

The largest study on *quality of life* in Denmark, and probably in the world (5), with over 122,000 respondents – Vores Livskvalitet 2025 – challenges the popular belief that immigrants (the term used in the report) feel significantly less content in their new home. Instead, it reveals an interesting, if not the most compelling, picture to date. Immigrants are nearly as happy as the ethnic Danes but twice as lonely.



The scale ranges from 0 to 10, where 10 represents the highest quality of life. H. Mahncke & M. Wiking, Vores Livskvalitet, Realдания, 2025