

WEEKENDER

# DANISH LAKES

From the 19th-century mill town of Silkeborg, the lakelands of the Jutland peninsula unfurl like giant droplets in a region ripe for kayaking, wild swimming and languid summer walks. Words: Anna Melville-James

For travellers, Denmark's Jutland peninsula is often shorthand for Legoland in the town of Billund or, at a push, the lively city of Aarhus. However, Danes know that the farm, forest and fen of this region are the real treats — especially the Lake District Søhøjlandet in the centre.

In 85sq miles of forest are some 50 freshwater lakes, many strung along the Gudenå River that cuts through the area. Jutland's largest lake, Mos, is here, along with Julsø, Brassø and Borresø on the central 18-mile stretch that runs from the historic

watermill at Klostermølle to Silkeborg town, Denmark's so-called 'outdoor capital'.

While officially Denmark's highest region, this area is still remarkably untroubled by gradients, with flat horizons in every direction and an active, easy living vibe. The airports at Aarhus and Billund, both around an hour from Silkeborg, mean you can leave the UK and be here in under three hours. From June to August, the town is an ideal base for exploration, with a lively harbour full of music and open-air cafes, surrounded by water and forests of pine and beech.



Traditional smørrebrød open sandwich of cream cheese, spinach and smoked salmon  
Left: Kayaking and swimming are popular in the lakelands

## TOP FIVE Hygge local dining spots

### BRANDT BRØD

Start the day at this modern waterside cafe in Silkeborg with crisp white, blue and red decor — tables go fast and by 10am, they're full. Order a cinnamon *snurre* pastry or warm rolls and butter, and get inspired to join the bakery's sourdough bread-making courses in the adjoining workshop. [brandtbroed.dk](http://brandtbroed.dk)

### DREWSSENS SPISEHUS

This buzzy cafe in Silkeborg's old Town Hall has a breakfast and brunch menu serving everything from poke bowls to charcuterie and rye-bread toasties. From June to August, nab a table outside to watch jazz bands perform in the town square. [spisehus.drewsens.com](http://spisehus.drewsens.com)

### NY HATTENÆS

This lake house hotel on the edge of Silkeborg offers views of Brassø, as well as breakfast spreads that include cheese platters and homemade pastries. Even if you're not staying, enjoy stylish modern Danish cuisine in the candlelit restaurant or on the outdoor terrace — book well ahead. [nyhattenaes.com](http://nyhattenaes.com)

### SVOSTRUP KRO

On the Gudenå River north of Silkeborg, there's been a waterside restaurant at this spot for 200 years. It offers hearty dishes in tiny dining rooms around a cobbled courtyard; if you've kayaked from town, try the hearty bargeman's stew of pork, bacon and sausage. There are also 16 bedrooms upstairs. [svostrup-kro.dk](http://svostrup-kro.dk)

### ORANGERIET

Try eclectic, often experimental Danish cooking in this dining room of large windows and relaxed vibes. The frequently changing menu offers tasting plates, and the food showcases seasonal ingredients, pepped up with piquant local forest tastes of woodruff and wild garlic. [orangeriet.dk](http://orangeriet.dk)

## DAY ONE KAYAKING & CRAFT BEER

### Morning

From the heart of Silkeborg, originally an industrial 19th-century paper mill town and now an outdoors hub, the Gudenå River winds south, connecting many of the region's biggest lakes. Hire a kayak from the Silkeborg Kanocenter and start from the town centre or pick up boats and standup paddleboards at the self-service Kayakomat at the Ly Outdoor campground a 25-minute walk away. An hour's paddle from Silkeborg brings you to the first big lake, Brassø, where you glide along through air scented with pine and petrichor. There are plenty of places along the riverbank to pull up at on the way there — grab salads and wraps from Green Habits in Silkeborg before you set off. [oplevelvgudenaa.dk](http://oplevelvgudenaa.dk) [greenhabits.dk](http://greenhabits.dk)

### Afternoon

Return your watercraft and head out to nearby Almindsø, one of Denmark's cleanest lakes. Here, the curved floating walkways of the Østre Søbad swimming area offer a protected spot for a dip that changes with the seasons. From autumn to spring, hardy Danes come to slip into mirror-like water so cold it steals your breath. In summer, it's easy to while away the afternoon here, sunbathing on the small sand beach and enjoying refreshing swims against a lush forest backdrop, followed by Danish Kastbergs Gourmet ice cream from the kiosk. If the weather is chilly, warm up in the mixed lakeside sauna after a swim; book in advance on the Visit Aarhus website, and be prepared to forgo your costume. [visitaarhus.com](http://visitaarhus.com)

### Evening

The Lake District is home to one of the country's oldest microbreweries, Grauballe Bryghus, which has been brewing unfiltered and unpasteurised hoppy beers since 2002. Buy signature brews such as Honey Gold and Enebær Stout to enjoy by the waterside — the shop on Hagemannsvej in Silkeborg is open on Fridays or by appointment. Newer breweries include Virklund Bryghus, also in Silkeborg, and Bøllingsø Bryghus in nearby Engesvang, a 12-minute train ride away. At the latter, order smørrebrød, open rye-bread sandwiches, or the pork roast with potatoes and parsley sauce to go with your beers. [grauballe-bryghus.dk](http://grauballe-bryghus.dk) [virklundbryghus.dk](http://virklundbryghus.dk) [boellingsoebryghus.dk](http://boellingsoebryghus.dk)

IMAGES: ALAMY; GETTY

Below: Silkeborg museum during a sunny day in Denmark

## DAY TWO FORESTS & FAIRYTALES

### Morning

Exploring on two wheels is easy here, with extensive bike lanes and flat trails – hire wheels from Silkeborg Sø camping (from DKK125/£14 per day) and pedal the 7.5-mile Silk Route around the town centre – or out to Himmelbjeret, ‘Sky Mountain’. This hyperbolically named hill, gently rising to 482ft in the pancake-flat landscape, was a favourite thinking place of Hans Christian Andersen, who once lived in the area. It’s a 50-minute bike ride to the base from Silkeborg, then a 15-minute hike. Alternatively, travel on *Hjejlen*, the Golden Plover, one of the world’s oldest coal-fired steamers still in operation, which runs from Silkeborg to Sky Mountain down the Gudenå River in 75 minutes from May to September. You can hop on and off en route – hoist the pennant on the steamer jetties to stop the ferry as it passes. [seacamp.dk](http://seacamp.dk) [hjejleselskabet.dk](http://hjejleselskabet.dk)

### Afternoon

The Lake District’s dark forests inspired many of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairytales, some of which were first printed at Silkeborg’s paper factory. To follow in the writer’s footsteps, stride out through Douglas firs in the forest bordering the town to the south, breathing in the fresh air and listening out for trolls. For a more structured exploration, join a ranger at Silkeborg’s Aqua Aquarium & Wildlife Park for a foraging tour. The park is a snapshot of the local ecosystem, home to cheeky otters, sharp-toothed pike and industrious beavers, the woods around it carpeted in blueberries, ground elder, nettles and wild garlic in summer. Collect your bounty, then return to Aqua to make homemade pizzas using the park’s open-air oven, or traditional twisted bread to toast on a stick over the firepit. [visitaqua.dk](http://visitaqua.dk)

### Evening

Experiencing the forest in the deepest dark reveals a whole new side to it, with a natural nocturnal performance of different sights and sounds starting up when the sun goes down. How close you want to get to nature here depends on your adventure levels – the Danish Nature Agency allows wild sleeping on the forest floor on a mat, under a tarpaulin or in a hammock in specific areas, which is an experience known as *fri teltning* or ‘free tenting’. If you aren’t feeling quite so hardy, you can always spend the night in a cabin in one of the campsites dotted throughout the Lake District instead. Facilities are basic, but there are often firepits for roasting marshmallows, which can be enjoyed alongside the unseen, but often heard, arboreal companions. [eng.naturstyrelsen.dk](http://eng.naturstyrelsen.dk) [udinaturen.dk](http://udinaturen.dk)

### TOP THREE Lake District museums

#### SILKEBORG MUSEUM

This 18th-century mansion museum is full of history, but the Tollund Man is the big draw. The perfectly preserved Iron Age corpse was found in the Bjældskovdal bog just outside Silkeborg in 1950. It feels almost intrusive to gaze at Tollund Man’s inadvertent time travel, but nevertheless, you’ll find it hard to look away. [museumsilkeborg.dk](http://museumsilkeborg.dk)

#### JORN MUSEUM

Expressionist Asger Jorn left 5,000 works to his home town of Silkeborg, with pieces from bold abstract paintings to tapestry housed in this modern space. Jorn believed everyone could make art and a lively programme of art workshops pays homage to his wishes. [museumjorn.dk](http://museumjorn.dk)

#### MEMPHIS MUSEUM

This replica Graceland in the fjord city of Randers is a homage to Elvis by superfan Henrick Knudsen, who’s collected memorabilia since childhood. Spot him amid what is now one of the world’s largest private collections, talking to Presley pilgrims – who have previously included Elvis Costello and Van Morrison. [memphismansion.dk](http://memphismansion.dk)





### Jazz bash

Syncopated beats fill Silkeborg at the end of June when the annual Riverboat Jazz Festival comes to town. The five-day celebration is one of northern Europe's largest classic jazz festivals. It offers music cruises, outdoor 'jazz gardens', children's events and myriad performances in spaces from restaurants and bars to churches and museums; most are free. [riverboat.dk](http://riverboat.dk)

Left: The paddle steamer SS Hjejlen, built in 1861 and still operational, in the Lake District Søhøjlandet

## THREE MORE SWIMMING LAKES

### Schoubyes

While not exactly balmy, the lower water levels of this aquamarine bathing lake in the woods to the east of Silkeborg mean it's a bit warmer than most others in the region. Excavated in the 1960s, Schoubyes is an artificial lake, although you'd never guess it, cradled as it is in thick foliage that hides the outside world, with lots of small sandy beaches on which to throw down a blanket. It's a good spot for wild-swimming novices and also one of the cleanest lakes in Denmark, making it popular with families and a busy destination in the summer.

### Lyngsø

Formed from an Ice Age depression, Lyngsø (not to be confused with the larger Langsø, sprawling through the town) touches Silkeborg's north edge and Kobskov forest on its southern side. It only takes around 20 minutes to walk to this urban body of water from Silkeborg. While it's not the most beautiful lake in the region, it's a convenient spot for a quick dip in the warmer months and there are plenty of cafes nearby to visit afterwards. There's also a 1.5-mile Lyngsø Loop walking trail, which circles the lake and takes around half an hour if you're ambling.

### Slåensø

South of Borresø in the Sønderkov wood, this wild lake is located in some of Denmark's hilliest landscapes and has water so clean you can drink it. Between the 269ft-high viewpoint of Kongestolen, ('King's seat') to the south and the Nordic region's tallest tree, a 170ft Oregon pine, it's a wild little 'valley' of natural beauty. There's a red swamp on its south side, coloured by the natural ochre in the spring water that runs into the lake. Even in high summer, it's fairly easy to find a private sandy spot, with only dragonflies and brown trout for company. □

### HOW TO DO IT

Aarhus and Billund international airports are both around an hour's drive from Silkeborg. British Airways flies to Billund from Heathrow and Manchester. Ryanair flies to Billund from Edinburgh, Manchester and Stansted, and to Aarhus from Stansted. Average flight time: 1h35m. [ba.com](http://ba.com) [ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)  
The direct 113 bus service from Aarhus to Silkeborg takes an hour. One-way tickets cost DKK75 (£8.60). [midttrafik.dk](http://midttrafik.dk)  
Stay at the boutique lakeside Ny Hattenæs on the outskirts of town overlooking Brassø. From DKK1,695 (£195), B&B. [nyhattenaes.com](http://nyhattenaes.com)

### MORE INFO

[visitaarhus.com](http://visitaarhus.com)  
[visitdenmark.com](http://visitdenmark.com)