

DENMARK EXPLAINED

Why are many Danes so comfortable with nudity?

From naked communal showers at the swimming pool, to nude running races and topless sunbathing; Denmark is a country where nudity is commonplace. We take a look at why.

Published: 27 March 2023 16:58 CEST



Naked winter bathers braving the cold sea at Faxe Ladeplads in South Zealand. Photo: Mads Claus Rasmussen/Ritzau Scanpix

One of the most noticeable cultural features of Denmark is at the swimming pool. If you try and enter the pool while looking dry, you will get called up by a pool attendant and told you must shower. And by the way, that's without your costume on.

To those not accustomed to communal naked showering, it can feel very odd. But to Danish people, it is merely functional.

“I definitely think we are aware there is a cultural difference in Denmark,” Danish psychotherapist Nina Reventlow told *The Local*.

“We get it from what the Germans call “*freikörperkultur*“, which means the free body culture. It comes from a health culture long ago that we adapted from the Germans around the 1940s. Then in the 1970s, it became more free-spirited. We are aware that the Danes and Germans have a special culture around this,” Reventlow said.

Denmark has no laws prohibiting nudity. As well as the naked communal showers before swimming, you will find winter bathers taking a dip in the nude, because a freezing wet costume is uncomfortable. Sunbathers often take their tops off, there are the famous naked runs at Roskilde Festival and Aarhus University and at school, pupils often shower naked after sport, in same-sex changing rooms.

“Nudity is allowed everywhere, as long as you don’t violate anyone,” Reventlow commented.

“When you winter bathe, no one feels naked because they are not being looked at. You meet up, jump in, get a towel, dry off and go home.

“If you feel someone is looking at you, then you feel naked. So it’s not showing your body, it’s feeling comfortable about being naked,” she said.

READ ALSO: [Why the shocking cold of winter bathing is a Nordic favourite](#)

Reventlow is keen to point out that nudity in Denmark is nothing about exhibitionism or sexuality.

“They are nothing to do with each other and that’s what I think a lot of foreigners misinterpret. Nudism simply derives from a health culture. It’s about being comfortable with your body. You shouldn’t be ashamed of your body,” she said.

A survey conducted by the University of Zürich in 2016 showed that Denmark had the lowest number of people who suffered from gelotophobia – a fear of ridicule – in any country surveyed. Just 1.62 percent of Danes suffer from this, according to the study, as opposed to 13 percent of British people.

However there has been a shift recently, with the younger generation in Denmark becoming more self-conscious about their bodies.

“You could say the nation is split in two, because most women are not comfortable in their bodies and that’s a huge problem for young girls,” Reventlow told *The Local*.

Whereas the culture of nudity in the 1970s was all about expressing freedom, today Reventlow says it is about reinforcing normal looking bodies to a generation exposed to a world of filters.

“Most Danish girls are not comfortable with taking a naked shower with their classmates at school and a lot refuse to. In fact a lot of young people now think nudity should not be allowed.

“I think it’s a major problem that Instagram and other social media platforms that have nothing to do with reality, show these unattainable bodies. Young people also see a lot of porn and normal bodies don’t look like that.

“So I think the Danish culture of nudism is serving a new purpose now, to show natural bodies. It should never be compromising but to see that we are shaped differently and everything is fine,” Reventlow explained.

It’s something Danish broadcaster DR spread awareness of with its programme “Ultra Strips Down”, launched in 2019.

In the series, five adults stood naked in front of an audience of 11-13 year olds, to show them what bodies look like and gave the children an opportunity to ask questions. The series won an award but was also criticised by some, with right-wing Danish politician Peter Skaarup accusing the programme-makers of choosing a “vulgar way” to educate children.

The same controversy surrounded DR’s programme [John Dillermand](#). Aimed at four to eight year olds, the animation is about a man with the world’s longest penis (*dillermand* literally means “penis-man”) that can do extraordinary things like rescue operations or hoisting a flag.

“We think it’s important to be able to tell stories about bodies,” public broadcaster DR posted on Facebook after the programme’s launch in January 2021.

“In the series, we recognise (young children’s) growing curiosity about their bodies and genitals, as well as embarrassment and pleasure in the body.”

Denmark is certainly a country that has a history of accepting nudity without shame or connotation. But it is also a country that is becoming conflicted in the nature of nakedness.



Emma Firth

news@thelocal.com

@danishgenes