

# THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME DUKIES GO TO DENMARK!



**“You should go to Denmark, they are innovative when it comes to independent living.”**

So went the conversation with Peter, a mentor at Muscular Dystrophy NSW (MDNSW). He suggested that I should see how the Danes handle disability, after he heard how I was living at university. I have Spinal Muscular Atrophy type II. My Mum and I were driving the three-hour trip to Bathurst each week, so I could attend classes and experience university life. Mum became very learned on the life of an average university student, as she lived amongst six others while caring for me. However grateful I was, this was not an ideal situation for either Mum or my party life.



*Braving the freezing cold at the beach*

To be honest, I thought Peter was joking. I thought he was suggesting Denmark due to his heritage and that I would get a kick out of the idea of travelling to Scandinavia without my parents. He was serious.

Soon the Muscular Dystrophy NSW team was on board. Then, Philip, Peter's son who has Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy and Calum, a participant in the Working Wheels program, joined the team and gave momentum to the Denmark Project.

Even though Philip, Calum and I are at different stages in our lives (i.e. students at school and university) each of us have a neuromuscular condition and the want to be independent in the future. Thus, a project initiative was founded: research what is possible in independent living for people with a disability, in Denmark.

We planned to talk to people with a disability, establishments and behold the new modifications Denmark is using, to understand the social impact of independent living and what equipment can make life easier to live and easier to enjoy.

Next, came the strategizing, but how could we make this idea materialise?



*Ready to Go!*

Fortunately, we were given the heads up on the government run organisation, My Choice Matters' application to complete a project that increases your "choice, voice and control". An application was submitted and the waiting game began.

Each of us signed up for our Gold Duke of Edinburgh Awards and completed the trip as the Adventurous Journey. Travelling with two wheelchairs made it extra adventurous. The forms required for the Muscular Dystrophy NSW Duke of Edinburgh program, allowed us to cover all necessities for travelling overseas.

Finding carers was next on the list. Luckily, Karen, a family friend of Philip's and Demi, a carer from MDNSW camps volunteered their time to put up with us and help us on this adventure. And so, Team Denmark was founded.

After all the paperwork and Skype meetings every Wednesday night, we learnt that our My Choice Matters application was successful.

We got in touch with Muskelvinfonden, the Danish version of Muscular Dystrophy NSW. Jens, our main contact, organised our accommodation, meetings with people and organisations.

Reality and excitement set in, we were on our way.

**Katie Thomas**



*The fabulous slide was fully accessible!*

It was a very exciting trip and we learnt a whole heap about the living system for people living with a neuromuscular condition over in Denmark. The first place we stayed at was Musholm Bugt Feriecenter which is an absolutely amazing holiday centre completely disability friendly. The only thing that compares slightly to this awesome place would be Bear Cottage down in Manly. One of the activities I participated in and thoroughly enjoyed was El Hockey which is Electric wheelchair hockey which uses specialised hockey chairs. El hockey is very similar to wheelchair hockey in Australia but uses their own type of wheelchair with a hockey T attached to the front and they go a speedy 14km/h.

However, despite its brilliance and the seemingly difficult standard to top, we were blown away when we arrived at a folk high school known as Egmont Hojskole. Folk high schools are very unique and are not like normal high schools we know in Australia. In order to be able to apply to attend a folk school you must be 18 years of age. It is a school where you can go and study for a minimum of 4 months up to whole year and longer. However unlike schools where you must study in order to pass a test, these schools have no academic requirements for admittance and don't have



*Enjoying the night life in Denmark*

the pressure of exams, marks or grades. At these schools you can challenge yourself and choose any subject that interests you or that you excel in, for example mathematics, social studies, sports, woodwork, cooking, etc. During your studies at a folk high school you get to sleep, eat, and spend your spare time at the school and you receive a diploma as a proof of your attendance.

The folk high school we attended was specially designed to be fully equipped for disabled students and included an indoor heated swimming pool with waterslide, a gym, giant sports hall and fully equipped student dorms. We had a lot of fun at the folk high school making a lot of new friends and participating in a lot of different activities. Some of these included going down a giant water slide (using a hoist to get in and out) and swimming in 7 degree Celsius water in a dry-suit and the outside temperature being 5 degrees Celsius.

Denmark has a fantastic system of care put in place for people with disabilities. People living with a disability can apply for 24 hours of care 7 days a week if this is required. This is due to the fact that there is a 40% tax in place. As a result, the different communities are able to pay for



*Experiencing School life in Denmark*

the services the person with a disability may require for example assistive technology, house modifications, a carer, etc. At the folk high school, anyone is allowed to apply including people with disabilities, people who may have been involved in a car accident and people without any form of disability. There is a system in place so they can apply for a carer and the other students can apply for a carer position.

Once they have applied, they must then go through a selection process where the students submit a resume with all their interests, details and qualifications. The person who requires the support then reads through all the resumes and then selects a few people they would like to interview further. After interviewing them, their options are then narrowed down further and then interviewed again before making a decision. The carer then takes care of them during the breaks before dispersing to their allocated classes where the students in that class help each other out. There is also a rule that the carer may not take care of them on school nights as they must both be well rested for another day of learning and instead there is a night shift that helps anyone who may need it. However, on Fridays and the weekend the carers are then allowed to help.

Overall, this trip has been a huge success and we have collected a lot of useful information. Our next step is to create some articles and 2 documentaries which we will then present to both non-government and government organisations. We already have an idea of a housing design which we plan to incorporate some of the Danish social ideas into. With this idea, we will then demonstrate the effectiveness by building the first one and living in it.

**Philip Hojgaard-Olsen**



*Even the Gym was fully accessible!*