

## **Nordhavn: The Danish 'city' that's been designed for an easy life**

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**Copenhagen's once-industrial port has been planned to make everything – from schools and play areas to businesses and recreational spaces – accessible within five minutes.**

While cruising the [canals of Copenhagen](#) in the summer of 2023, my guide pointed out [Nordhavn](#), the city's once-industrial neighbourhood, excitedly claiming it would become the coolest new city in Europe. From the boat, I couldn't see much beyond a few residential buildings and lots of giant construction machinery, but, as an architect, I was interested to know more.

So, 12 months later, I returned to Copenhagen and headed back to Nordhavn, just a 15-minute metro ride from Copenhagen's central station.

This time, standing at Århusgadekvarteret, the core of the new development, I could see gleaming apartment buildings, high-end office spaces and a cafe-lined boardwalk along the previously industrial harbour. Dozens of people were lying on colourful beach towels spread across the waterfront, all soaking in the Scandinavian summer sun. It was a peaceful, serene scene, with none of the morning commuter chaos I was used to seeing in cities around the world.

And that's because Nordhavn has been specifically designed to make life easier.

"Although it looks like any modern district, it's the world's first five-minute city," explained my guide, Bente Hoffman from immersive cultural tour company [Slow Tours](#). "When the project is complete, everything you need will be within a 400m walk."

Commuting is one of the biggest challenges of modern life as it adds so much time into the daily routine. Nordhavn (officially a district of Copenhagen, but described as [a city](#) due to its scale and scope) has been designed to make everything – from schools and play areas to businesses and recreational spaces – accessible within five minutes. It is setting a blueprint for a world where residents can fit in a morning workout before strolling to the office, grab lunch at a cute cafe, have a quick swim at the harbour and still make it home in time to take your kids to the playground – all before enjoying a cosy candlelit dinner at home.

*Although it looks like any modern district, it's the world's first five-minute city - Bente Hoffman*

Imagine doing all of this without driving from one point to another, without feeling exhausted, and being able to repeat it every day while staying carbon neutral.

"We are creating a neighbourhood that meets everyday needs and special occasions," explained Peter Bur Andersen, an architect from BRIQ Studios that played a crucial role in zoning Nordhavn. "Everything is within walking or biking distance, minimising the need for commuting. The area also promotes a mostly car-free lifestyle, connected by cycle paths and the metro."

## **Green Getaways**

*[Green Getaways](#) is a BBC Travel series that helps travellers experience a greener, cleaner approach to getting out and seeing the world.*

Copenhagen is currently the [Unesco World's Architecture Capital](#) (until 2026) and innovative solutions for smart living have been brewing across the Danish capital: from [Paper Island](#), designed to focus on public spaces and housing for all income groups; to [Carlsberg City District](#) that's built on four pillars of beer production: science, innovation, art and culture.

However, Nordhavn's [five-minute](#) city concept is unique. While there are a few 10-minute cities being developed around the world, including one in [Seoul, South Korea](#), Nordhavn's one-of-a-kind concept is [the most ambitious urban development project](#) in Scandinavia. It is also the only new urban district anywhere in the world to receive a gold certification for sustainability from the German Sustainable Building Council, or [DGNB](#) (the largest network for sustainable building in Europe), according to Andersen.

In Nordhavn, sustainability is about more than reducing energy consumption. Every building constructed must consider its social, economic and environmental impact. For example, the [Big Bio Cinema](#) – the city's newest theatre – is constructed from recyclable materials such as aluminium in case the building ever needs to be demolished.

Top tips:

**When to go:** June-August for warmer weather.

**What to do:** Take a [guided walking tour](#). Explore the design shops in the harbour area. Head to [Konditaget Lüders](#), a carpark rooftop that serves as an open-air public gym. Watch a movie at [Big Bio Cinema](#).

**Where to stay:** [Audo House](#), a former warehouse transformed into a boutique hotel with a café and concept store.

**Where to eat:**

- Located on the 17th floor of a former grain silo, [Restaurant Silo](#) has impressive views and a seasonal menu.

- Headed by Rosio Sanchez, a former dessert chef from Noma, [Hija de Sanchez Cantina](#) is a two-minute walk from the Sandkaj Harbour.

- [Palmarès Bike Café](#) is a unique spot for cyclists, offering coffee, croissants and a bike workshop, with bike parts as décor.

And, according to Anderson, social and economic inclusion has been at the core of all planning. "It is important to bring back what worked well in history," he said. "We used to have the butcher, craftsman, baker and cheese shop – that diversity in everyday encounters. The future city should mix recreational, cultural and commercial spaces, all easily accessible within the neighbourhood."

But until relatively recently, no one would have considered living in this once-industrial district. Irshia Nasreen, an engineer born and raised in central Copenhagen, says, "While I was trying to find a new neighbourhood to move out of the city centre, I never thought I'd move here."

Bente adds, "I didn't think I would do tourist walks in Nordhavn. There was nothing to see."

After all, for centuries Nordhavn was a free port filled with cargo ships, grain silos and metal containers. The buildings that existed were warehouses and industrial shipping structures. Then, in 2008, a competition was held to create a sustainable neighbourhood for Copenhagen's future: 179 proposals were submitted and a group of four architectural firms, COBE Architects, Sleth, Rambøll and Polyform were winners.

They designed an urban area of "[soft mobility](#)", where it is easier to walk, bike or use public transport than it is to drive; and put the idea of hybrid spaces – something that "avoids creating lifeless spaces and fosters community among residents, employees and visitors", according to Andersen – at its heart. For example, in Nordhavn, a multi-storey car park might have a gym on its roof; an apartment building could include a public restaurant; and a hotel could house a concept store.

Although the entire Nordhavn project won't be finished until 2060, it is being developed in islets (small islands), with key areas such as Nordø and Århusgadekvarteret, already complete and full of life, brimming with locals and tourists. A metro extension to Nordhavn and Orientkaj opened in 2020, providing easy access from the city centre.