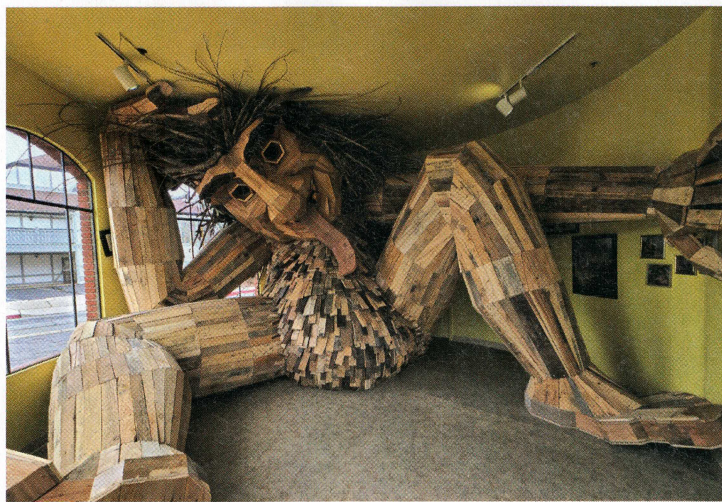




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GETAWAY
sweet solvang

words by SHARON MCDONNELL



Solvang is having a moment. Famous for its Danish architecture and traditions, Santa Barbara County's quirky homage to Scandinavia was named "Best Small Town in the West" by *USA Today* readers earlier this year. Think hygge wedded to a sun-soaked Wine Country vibe. With its quaint half-

timbered buildings and windmills, this Santa Ynez Valley town is stuffed with oversized charm in a pint-sized package.

Founded in 1911 by Danish immigrants, Solvang's month-long Julefest features Christmas festivities like nightly light-and-music shows, craft markets and walking tours with guides in Danish folk costume. There's even a parade and visits with Santa Paws therapy dogs. These holiday happenings were enough to get the town ranked on the "Most Magical Christmas Towns and Villages in the World" list by *Oprah Daily* last December.

Befitting a Scandinavian outpost, Solvang is home to California's first troll by Thomas Dambo, the Danish recycled materials artist who's created over 100 of the giant wooden sculptures in 17 countries (including six displayed at Woodside's Filoli estate this summer). It's perfectly suited to its spot in the **California Nature Art Museum**, which features mosaic landscapes, quilts with

nature designs and photographs. Each Dambo troll is unspeakably quirky and has its own legend. His trolls all live outdoors, with the exception of Solvang's. "Lulu Hyggelig," made from wooden pallets, is squashed inside a room because she got overfed by **Mortensen's Bakery** and can't get out the door.

Arriving in town, I checked in at **The Winston**, a boutique suites-only hotel with a Danish-style half-timbered bell tower that was belied by the bold colors and quirky art within. My living room was 1940s lipstick red, adorned in butterfly prints. A blue suite next door featured armchairs in whimsical dog and monkey patterns, and there was a lovely lounge with an honor bar and library. Its central location facing Solvang Park makes it perfect for exploring.

Eat & Drink

For breakfast, I wanted ebleskivers, the Danish pancake-like balls topped with raspberry jam and powdered sugar, so I ate at **Solvang Restaurant**, where carved wooden booths display the coat-of-arms from different cities in Denmark, like Odense



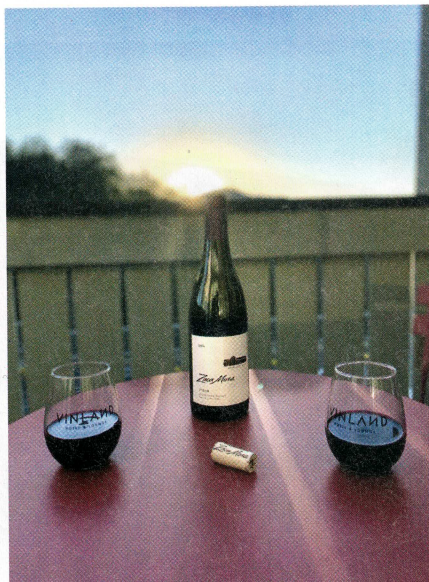
(the birthplace of fairytale writer Hans Christian Andersen) and Helsingør, home of the castle that inspired *Hamlet*. Surrounded by murals from *The Ugly Duckling* and other Andersen tales, I sat in a booth where a plaque noted a scene from the movie *Sideways*, which was filmed here in 2003.

Ebelskivers are usually sold in restaurants, not bakeries, but the **Danish Mill Bakery**, founded in 1960 by a baker for King Christian X, serves them with lingonberry sauce. This bakery is one of five in Solvang certified by the Danish Baking Guild. At the oldest and biggest, **Birkholm's Bakery & Café** founded in 1951, a staffer explained how 27 layers of pastry dough make treats like kringle—pretzel-shaped pastries—so fluffy and moist. I'm told the four favorite flavors are almond, cinnamon, custard and raspberry. At **Ingeborg's Danish Chocolates**, founded in 1961, I saw over 70 types of chocolates, many filled with marzipan, some with nuts, plum or cognac. My favorite: flodeboller, an enchanting Mallomar-like sweet, only taller and with more chocolate.

What I didn't expect to find was a Michelin Bib Gourmand restaurant like Peasants Feast in Solvang. My spicy soft-shell crab sandwich, doused in Calabrian chili oil with pickled red onions, was fantastic, like a crustacean version of Nashville Hot Chicken.

At The Gathering Table, known for innovative Asian-French fusion, my hamachi was "new style" (a hot soy-yuzu vinaigrette lent the sushi a slight sear) and my duck breast had a hoisin-calamansi glaze and a ginger-scallion sauce.

As befits a town with a starring role in *Sideways* (filmed here and in nearby Buellton), the movie that skyrocketed Pinot Noir sales nationwide, Solvang has many wine tasting rooms. Venture outside of city limits to **Roblar Winery**, a 10-minute drive, for the scenic patio with couches next to its lovely garden. Its farmhouse is a five-bedroom vacation rental with an infinity pool and hot tub. **V Lounge**, at **Vinland Hotel & Lounge**, offers creative cocktails like a Key Lime Pie martini concocted with coconut cream, lime juice, pineapple juice, rum, vodka and a graham cracker crust rim. It also boasts a late-night happy hour. **The Vinland**, a boutique hotel with a half-timbered façade, outdoor pool and hot tub, has five suites sponsored by local wineries like **Alma Rosa**, which provide the bottles and tasting vouchers found inside.



Top Shops

Copenhagen House stocks an array of Danish brands ranging from George Jensen silverware, shoes and wood animal-shaped toys to watches and jewelry. “Danish design is modern, sleek, clean lines, but not industrial, and always brings an element of nature in from outdoors,” says Kirsten Klitgaard, my guide from the **Solvang Visitor Center**. Copenhagen House also has a **Viking**

Museum, which displays a replica of a circa-900 Viking ship, rebuilt by Denmark’s Roskilde Boatyard in 2022 using ancient techniques. Check out its exhibits on Viking history, plus costumes from the Netflix series *Vikings: Valhalla*.

Gerda’s Iron Art Gift Shop sells Danish glassware and blue-and-white dishware, tablecloths, Norwegian rosemaling-painted items, German cuckoo clocks, souvenirs—and even some items made of iron. The eclectic collection at **The Home Connection** features colorful hand-painted pottery from Poland (the Danish owner’s husband is Polish), hand-made Amish furniture, beds with hand-forged iron designs and artisan glassware. For locally-grown lavender items like candles, bath products and essential oils, head to **Lavender Societe**.

If outdoor adventure is what you crave, catch a bird’s-eye view of the Santa Ynez Valley with a ride on the longest and fastest zipline in California at

Highline Adventures in Buellton. After you’re unharnessed, take a leisurely hike through its eight acres of protea flowers. To see the world’s biggest birds, over 150 ostriches and emus await at **OstrichLand USA**.

I asked Kirsten to explain the concept of hygge to me. It’s “a way of life, enjoying the simple things like family and friends and good food,” she says. “You use your Royal Copenhagen China even if it’s not a special day, and don’t take work home with you.”

While the holiday season is heavenly, you can enjoy hygge year-round at Solvang’s frequent events, from **Danish Days** in September—with a wine and bee garden, people in folk costumes and concerts—to summer concerts in **Solvang Park** to a classic car show in October. **P**

hygge haven

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