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PHOTOS: KULTURNATTEN.DK, VISITCOPENHAGEN.DK

NIGHT BIRDS: About 300 venues including cafes (left) and the zoo (above) are turned into unlikely arts venues. The owl (below) has become the mascot for Denmark's Kulturnatten. A poster (bottom left) advertising one of many performances.

When art comes alive at night

It's a tried-and-tested formula, so, like the Danes, we should celebrate culture by moonlight



culturevulture
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YOU can't help but feel that Singapore should take a leaf out of Denmark's book.

The temperature might dip below 10 deg C at 10pm and an occasional gust of wind chills the bones, but spirits are very high in Copenhagen one Friday night.

Merrymakers – old and young – are out in full force.

A hip Mum dressed in a bonnet and period costume waits to board a bus with two cute charges similarly togged out.

Youths dressed up as boisterous Vikings stand guard at the entrance to a recreated commune in Slotsholmen or Castle Island, which is lined with torches flickering orange and reflected on the canal waters.

A cosy poetry reading is going on inside a glass bridge linking the modern building Bibliotek or Royal Library to the other side of the road.

Is it part of Christmas celebrations or Denmark's Independence Day?

No, it's actually Kulturnatten or Night of Culture, an annual autumnal event that has taken place in October for the past 15 years.

According to a press release on www.kulturnatten.dk, the aim is "to temporarily change the ambience and cultural landscape" of the entire city for a night.

Members of the public are allowed to explore unexpected sides of the city through a series of events that include theatre, music, experimental arts, city walks, lectures and installations at about 300 venues.

The venues include various public spaces and almost all the major museums and exhibition halls, churches, libraries, schools, organisations and various venues which are normally not open to the public.

All you need is a so-called Culture Pass, a simple funky badge designed with a blue owl and which can be bought for an affordable 75 Danish kroner (S\$20.90). It provides you access to transportation within the city centre.

I was in the Danish capital last week with some Singapore writers for a reading and some R&R, but little did we expect the infectious atmosphere and bonhomie.

You get an electrifying sense that anything can happen – you wouldn't mind getting lost.

Indeed, there's a lesson here for Singapore in rallying all demographics to get interested and involved in the arts.

In terms of engaging everyone on one particular night, there's nothing quite like the way the Danes do it.

The sheer coordination across about 300 venues, including shops and design houses, in one night is awe-inspiring; made all the more remarkable by the casual, easy, grassroots vibe that permeates the city.

Sure, in recent years, Singapore has stepped up in its drive to become a world-class arts hub, particularly with its Singapore Biennale last year, and its participation for the second time in International Museum Day (IMD) this year.

Sure, in absolute numbers, the Singapore events were even bigger draws when compared to the one-night Kulturnatten, which has almost 100,000 visitors annually.

In comparison, the first Singapore Biennale held at 19 exhibition sites for more than two months late last year attracted over 883,000 visitors.

And according to Mr Walter Lim, the acting director of corporate communications and industry promotions at the National Heritage Board, the second IMD festival,

which lasted 10 days in May this year, attracted about 100,000 people to more than 80 workshops and activities in 24 museums.

Just last weekend, the National Museum celebrated its 120th year with two performances called 120 by TheatreWorks.

"Due to overwhelming response, we increased the capacity for both nights and we attracted more than 700 people," says Mr Tan Boon Hui, acting deputy director of programmes at the National Museum.

As laudable as these events are in themselves, they were still relatively piecemeal, institution-based initiatives.

In any case, they did not have the visibility and citywide spirit of fun and discovery as evidenced at Kulturnatten.

Danish poet Ulrikka Gernes, who lives in the heart of the town, tells Life! via e-mail that the event is getting more popular every year, with other towns in Denmark also starting their own versions.

"I live in the centre of town and therefore I really notice how people are just streaming in from all over, mostly the suburbs. I personally find it wonderful to see how people enjoy their town."

It is heartening to know there are similar, albeit smaller-scale plans being mooted here.

Mr Tan from the National Museum says it is thinking of staging an outdoor night festival in the arts and civic district in Bras Basah over two weekends.

"The idea is to expand the idea of nightlife beyond shopping and dining," he says. "We are precisely inspired by the concept of night festivals and street festivals all over Europe."

NHB's Mr Lim also concurs and says it is open to the idea of having a similar Night of Culture for Singapore.

He cites the example of Rome, which has its own version called Notte Bianca or White Night.



It is an extravaganza of visual arts, music, dance and theatre events throughout the night, with shops and eateries staying open all night.

The event also has a social function – city shelters offer dinner to the homeless and underprivileged and fund-collecting is arranged in every venue involved.

The concept is so successful, it has also been embraced by other European cities such as Paris, Riga, Brussels, Madrid and Bucharest, which are staging their own White Nights, with unique programming and artistic exchanges.

So why not Singapore? It can start a similar Kulturnatten or White Night of its own, which reaches to both arty types as well as yuppies and the blue-collared crowd.

As Gernes says: "It's fun and interesting to have museums open at night, fun to experience the night time at places otherwise only devoted to daytime. But it can be really difficult to catch all the interesting events and readings as the programme is so full of great stuff."

She has one grouse though: "I've done readings during Kulturnatten at around midnight in bookshops, and it wasn't so nice as people were passing through. It was difficult to keep the concentration."

"But hell, I'll do it again."

That's the spirit Singaporeans need, and are ready for.

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