

Møn

Dark side of Møn

There are fewer and fewer dark skies on Earth, and many people have never even seen a star-filled night sky. A group of passionate enthusiasts on the Danish island of Møn decided to do something about the problem by creating the first Dark Sky Park in Scandinavia.

By IZABELLA ROSENGREN
Photos by PETER WESTRUP



Møn

It's difficult to describe in words the starlit sky above me. Every attempt sounds like a cliché. Perhaps the closest description of the star-filled sky above Møn, an island in southeastern Denmark, would be "the world's largest cathedral" – where the feeling of being the tiniest thing on Earth quite naturally coincides with a sense of everything being possible.

Møns Klint, an area where sheer white chalk cliffs drop precipitously into a turquoise sea, is an incredible sight in daylight, but if anything, you could argue it's even more stunning after dark. I've never seen such a dark sky and so many stars in my life. And since 2017, it's been easier than ever to see them. That was the year the International Dark Sky Association, IDA, named Møn the first, and to date, only certified International Dark Park in the Nordic region, which means that the area is protected from light pollution to preserve the darkness.

"Møn is one of the darkest places in Denmark. In a large town you can see 500 stars, here, it's closer to 10,000. The sky looks like an incredible vaulted ceiling," says Ole Eskling, manager of Camping Møn Klint and one of the people behind the Dark Sky Møn initiative.

DARK LOCATIONS ARE becoming increasingly rare. One third of the world's population has never seen a star-studded sky, due to artificial light swamping the stars. Light pollution comes from street lamps, advertising signs and road lighting, which from a distance seem to collectively form a dome above our cities.

Scandinavia is one of the few places where you can still catch a glimpse of the Milky Way – if you're in the far north and a few hours out in the wilderness at least. Denmark lacks such distances, but Møn is like a tiny dark oasis in a sea of light.

Eskling says that the certification literally arrived at a light bulb moment in time. He believes that transforming an entire area into a dark park would never have been possible 15 years ago.

"We've succeeded now because the time is right. When we started working on Dark Sky Møn in 2013, darkness was something that was thought to be overcome by light – now it's the other way around. People are interested in darkness today, not just to see the stars but also to become more aware of how important nature is for us. Darkness is psychologically important."

INGER MARIE SCAVENIUS, who runs the newly-opened designer hotel Klintholm Gods Lake Apartments in the heart of Møn, agrees. She says that as one in three hotel bookings is related to star watching they've made Dark Sky a central theme, incorporating panoramic windows with unrestricted sky views and stargazing telescopes in the rooms.

"People need the dark. We've navigated by the stars



Ole Eskling, manager of Camping Møn Klint and one of the people behind the Dark Sky Møn initiative.

and moon for as long as we've existed on Earth. It's deeply rooted in our DNA and we invite visitors to enter a world that has lost its way a little bit."

In addition to stargazing, they also arrange dark walks, where visitors learn about the importance of darkness to wildlife and the benefits of using all your senses.

"What happens at night is important for us during the day," she says, alluding to the sheer weight of research arguing that light pollution has serious consequences for human health.

For example, too much light – and the wrong kind of light – can interfere with sleep and lead to heart diseases. Artificial light can also have devastating effects on the behavior of mammals, birds and insects, for instance.

There are 103 IDA protected areas in the world today. However, Dark Sky Møn is the first location in the world →



WHERE TO SEE STARS

→ According to a scientific paper from 2016, Singapore is the most illuminated country in the world, in relation to its area. Light pollution was also high in Italy and South Korea. The least light-polluted were Chad, the Central African Republic and Madagascar. In Europe, Sweden, Norway and Scotland still offer decent opportunities for stargazing – in specific places.



Inger Marie Scavenius runs the designer hotel Klimtholm Gods Lake Apartments.

‘When people experience Dark Sky, I think they become more curious about the universe’

INTERNATIONAL DARK SKY ASSOCIATION (IDA)

→ The IDA is a US non-governmental organization established in 1988 to protect night skies for present and future generations. They aim to increase awareness of the value of darkness and star-filled nights and to encourage protection and restoration via education.

Anyone can apply to have their town, park or area certified as a good place for stargazing. A number of different criteria must be satisfied to become certified and the process often takes several years.

to be certified as both a Dark Sky Park and a Dark Sky Community.

“Any area where it’s dark and where there are no people, such as a nature reserve, could become a dark park. But to become a Dark Sky Community, that’s to say a place where people live, you need commitment,” Eskling says.

Other than local residents not being allowed to have lights shining outwards or upwards, no special demands are imposed on the people living there. Even so, Eskling says that getting them to understand that darkness is something positive has been a challenge. Like most people, they initially thought that darkness should be overcome by light, and it took a great deal of work to change that mindset. It was only when financial benefits started to appear that resistance began to melt away.

“If you tell people that if they replace their light bulbs, they’ll be Dark Sky certified, they wonder what’s so good about that and argue that it will just cost money. But if I tell them instead that by replacing their light bulbs, they can make an energy saving of some 20% and reduce their electricity bills accordingly, they quickly come around,” Eskling adds.

Someone who didn’t need persuading of the benefits →



of Dark Sky is Birgitte Steen Jørgensen who’s lived on the east side of the island since 1970. There are only five street lights in her village.

“For those of us who live here, the star-filled sky is a beautiful part of life and Dark Sky has really put the focus on the pleasure of experiencing nature during night hours,” she says, adding that she usually enjoys the night sky together with her dog.

The increasing number of tourists doesn’t bother her at all. Quite the opposite, in fact, as she’s delighted that more and more people are finding enjoyment in gazing at the sky.

“When people experience Dark Sky, I think they become more curious about the universe,” Jørgensen says.

AT FIRST, ESKLING was slightly unsure about the best method of lighting the way to the camp site. But when they gained Dark Sky certification, he simply decided to turn off the lights altogether. The camp site slogan is now “Half the park is after dark,” and the walls in the reception area are decorated with magnified newspaper cuttings about Dark Sky. Eskling is understandably proud of what he and his fellow enthusiasts have achieved. Now, their task is not simply to preserve the darkness but also to spread the message to other communities.

“It’s about believing in a long-term development with people and nature at the center. We’re incredibly proud to be ambassadors for the dark.” o

IDA-CERTIFIED SPACES

20 DARK SKY COMMUNITIES

→ Communities and towns that adopt quality outdoor lighting ordinances and educate residents about the importance of dark skies.

62 DARK SKY PARKS

→ Publicly or privately-owned spaces protected for conservation that implement special outdoor lighting and provide dark sky programs for visitors.

13 DARK SKY RESERVES

→ Consist of a dark “core” zone surrounded by a populated periphery, where policy controls are enacted to protect the darkness of the core.

FOUR DARK SKY SANCTUARIES

→ The most remote (and often darkest) places in the world whose conservation state is most fragile.

FOUR DARK SKY-FRIENDLY DEVELOPMENTS OF DISTINCTION

→ That recognize communities, neighborhoods and townships whose planning actively promotes a more natural night sky, but doesn’t qualify them for the International Dark Sky Community designation.

Source: IDA and F&F



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