



# Tourism and the Transformation of Freetown Christiania: From anarchist utopia to sustainable neighbourhood

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## Abstract

*Freetown Christiania is arguably one of the world's most famous communes with anarchist elements. It is also an internationally renowned tourist attraction of Copenhagen. This study analyses 58 international news articles on tourism in Christiania. Thematic analysis demonstrates a complex role of tourism in Christiania. Christiania may be viewed as a provocation for tourists to reflect upon social structures, an example of community-driven sustainable initiatives, a quirky and creative neighbourhood, a controversial squatter area in long-term battles with the state, a drug haven, and an unsafe hideout for crime. Interestingly, tourism may be both a boon and a bane for Christiania. Its value as a famous tourist attraction provides Christiania with some protection from being reintegrated into the rest of Copenhagen. However, too much tourism commodifies the neighbourhood defeating its founding principles. The paper argues that future research should explore how tourism governance, tourist motivations and experiences, and broader scenarios of Christiania's development intersect to shape its ongoing transformation.*

## Key Words

*Christiania, sustainability, content analysis, commodification*

## Track

*Ethically Driven Innovations*

## Focus of the Paper

*Theoretical/Academic*

## Type of Submission

*Paper*

## Introduction

Ethical and sustainable tourism discourse has its beginnings in the ideas of alternative tourism that is opposed to mass tourism and generally presents more community-based and eco-friendly modes of travel (Britton & Clarke, 1987). While community-based tourism has gained researchers' attention especially in rural areas and developing countries, engagement with understanding paths to sustainable tourism through engagement with alternative social organisations, such as communes, has been rare. One notable example is the ethnographic exploration of tourism

in Exarcheia (Chatzidakis & Maclaran, 2023). Tolkach (2025) calls for further engagement with politically-driven forms of tourism in order to explore potential innovations in the tourism system that will bring about sustainable outcomes. Thus, this study focuses on Freetown Christiania. It discusses tourism development in the commune via a content analysis of news media and proposes several areas for further research.

## Overview of Christiania

Freetown Christiania is located in the centre of Copenhagen in an area of former military barracks. It started in 1971 as a squat for a hippy community. The community's founding principles are based on ideas of cultural revolution of 1960s, including anarchism and social activism. These include self-governance, self-reliance, direct democracy, collective management of social services, eco-consciousness, tolerance and activism in its many forms. While Christiania has embedded various eco-friendly initiatives, its approach to sustainability comes from respecting community and nature and is focused on the present rather than more conventional long-term planning approach with emphasis on carbon neutrality (Winter, 2016). Over decades co-existence of Christiania with the Danish state has been challenging (Vanolo, 2013). Hall (2012) describes Christiania as a countercultural space, an outdoor museum for the culture of 1960's and 70's and a social experiment central to Danish discourse on democracy and freedom.

Residents of Christiania, known as Christianites, did not own the land they occupied for many years. Initially the landowner, the Ministry of Defence, pushed to clear the squat. However, in later 1970s it recognised the commune agreeing that Christianites can use it on a fee for use basis. Nevertheless, the government has had different attempts to "normalise" Christiania over time. Depending on the government in power, the relationship with the commune varied from re-integrate it into Copenhagen to allowing it to function rather autonomously due to its cultural value (Amouroux, 2009). This often resulted in tense negotiations between the governments and the Freetown's population. One of such milestones has been reached in 1990s, when construction of new houses became prohibited. This resulted in stagnation of population growth in Christiania at around 900-1,000 residents (Vanolo, 2015). During 2000s various courts upheld the government right of ownership over Christiania's land, suggesting the state has a legal right to clear the area. However, by 2012 the land ownership was transferred to a new foundation, the Foundation Freetown Christiania, making Christianites legal landowners (Coppola & Vanolo, 2015; Vanolo, 2013).

Woltmann (2016) argues Christiania is neither a utopia nor dystopia, but a complex and heterogenous community not without its problems and contradictions. The most contentious issue over the decades has been the drug trade and organised crime. The commune is famous for open drug sales on Pusher street and various attempts of organised crime to take over this trade. This has resulted in several instances of deaths including of police officers, and subsequent police interventions in Christiania. Generally, Christianites' recognised drug trade problem in the instances where it would take over other aspects of the Freetown's life and the residents would cooperate with curbing the drug trade (Amouroux, 2009; Ntounis & Kanellopoulou, 2017). The latest instance occurred in 2023 resulting deadly shooting. Subsequently, the Pusher street has been permanently closed for drug trade (Murray, 2024).

## Tourism in Christiania

Christiania is not only a unique social experiment, but also a popular tourist attraction. It reportedly attracts about half-a-million visitors per annum (Birkebaek, 2023). It is number 13 in the TripAdvisor's list of Things To do in Copenhagen Christiania is summarised by TripAdvisor (2025) as follows:

*This hippy enclave and alternative community in the heart of Copenhagen is home to many artists and artisans. Here, you can wonder at colorful street art all around, and stop by cozy cafes for some top-notch craft beers. Enjoy the area's bohemian vibes as you hunt for offbeat handicrafts, and go for a walk around the lake or stroll down the infamous Pusher Street—where you'll be required to put your camera away. During warmer months, this neighborhood is a great spot for some outdoor, waterside fun. Christiania is more welcoming to travelers during the day.*

VisitDenmark, the country's official tourism organisation, (somewhat ironically) promotes Christiania by highlighting its creativity as follows: "A lot of the people living in Christiania built their homes themselves, giving

*the area an extremely interesting architectural feel. And you will find a variety of eco-restaurants, workshops, galleries and music venues offering all sorts of cultural experiences.*” It also highlights that the area is now safe “since the community and authorities” shut the open drug market, and conflicts between the community and the state declined after the transfer of ownership to Foundation Freetown Christiania in 2012 (VisitDenmark, 2025).

Academic research on tourism in Christiania is limited. Woltmann (2016) in their study of Christiania’s model states that Christiania attracts international visitors and is one of the main attractions in Denmark because it is a recognised brand of a “real living alternative society”. Woltmann (2016) then focuses on discussing Christiania as an integrated avant-garde utopia that continues to function, because its residents are of different backgrounds, views and values, but they have chosen to live there, and need to compromise to make collective decisions. Jarvis (2018) believes that contradictions within Christiania make it even more attractive to visitors, also noting the educational tourism value of the Freetown. Amouroux (2009) focuses on the state’s attempt to normalise Christiania. With regards to tourism, they note that Pusher street and the drug sales attracted visitors not only to Christiania, but to Denmark overall, thus providing economic value. Visitors to Christiania have been a source of income to some of community’s residents and also businesses located nearby from Christiania. Similarly, Hall (2012) suggests Christiania would cease to exist in its current form without tourism, as it is largely dependent on income from tourists. Also, through accepting visitors, it garners public support that is politically vital. Hall (2012) suggests tourists are often seen by Christianites as ‘undesirables’ that are reluctantly welcomed due to need for economic support. Conversely, Vanolo (2013) argues that tourists also play an important role in sharing Christiania’s vision of an alternative community with the broader world.

Somewhat reconciling the above mentioned studies Ntounis & Kanellopoulou (2017) note that normalisation of Christiania has helped to promote its brand. The brand of Christiania also aligns with the official Wonderful Copenhagen campaign that focuses on the city being open, creative and sustainable. Ntounis & Kanellopoulou (2017) suggest that tourism appropriates and commodifies Christiania and thus helps realise conservative government approach to the Freetown since 2012: rather than unsuccessfully trying to take over Christiania, capitalising on it. Similarly, Coppola & Vanolo (2015) suggest that Copenhagen policy-makers attempt to broaden the spectrum of potential tourists to Christiania by further commodifying and promoting it as a “hippie Disneyland”. Thus, tourism, through the threat of ‘disneyfication’, i.e. commodification of Christiania as a marketable tourist product, contributes to tension between Christiania’s desire to be distinct, autonomous, creative and open, and the pressure to adapt to visitors. Despite the above studies mentioning tourism and its impacts on Christiania, to the authors’ knowledge, no studies have specifically focused on the role of tourism in shaping places such as Christiania, nor how tourism in such places may affect the rest of society..

## **Methods**

The aim of this study is to investigate Christiania as a tourist attraction including, how it is represented, the role tourism plays in the community, and Christiania’s contribution to a wider society.

This exploratory study relies on content analysis of news articles. 58 English-language articles have formed the sample of this study. The articles have been selected through the search for “Christiania”, “Copenhagen” and “Tourism”. English-language non-Danish publications were selected to represent the “tourist-perspective” that is the international outsider view on Christiania. News media have been frequently used in academic research to explore specific topics and understand trends (Schmidt et al., 2013; Tolkach et al., 2016). Leximancer software was used to undertake the content analysis. The analysis generally followed Cheng & Edwards (2019) approach. First text from the news articles was cleaned from irrelevant information. Where an article provided information about multiple locations, only the section that included Copenhagen and Christiania was included in the analysis. Then a concept map was generated. Thesaurus automatically generated by Leximancer was revised to ensure that concepts important for the study’s objectives were included, while terms that did not contribute to understanding research-relevant themes were excluded, and synonyms were merged into a single term. These were general terms that did not convey specific meaning, but appeared frequently in the text. Subsequently, frequencies, co-occurrences and relationships between emerging terms were further analysed to formulate broader emerging themes.





**Table 1. Frequency of themes appearing in text according to general analysis and analysis by year of publication.**

General analysis		Analysis by year of publication	
Theme	Frequency	Theme	Frequency
Danish	664	Copenhagen	638
Copenhagen	631	Danish	631
Christiania	450	Christiania	505
world	416	people	336
areas	340	restaurants	333
residents	296	centre	329
cafes	280	place	322
place	279	housing	314
Danes	271	drugs	228
restaurants	250	parks	219
Pusher Street	237	Tivoli Gardens	214
Tivoli Gardens	203	kroner	189
island	174	community	145
kroner	138	different	140
rest	136	front	115
travel	123	island	106
coffee	85	winter	100
winter	59	Noma	92
violence	52	crime	84
pounds	52	rent	72
entrance	35	pounds	54
booths	30	murals	25
stay	30	stay	25
quiet	29	closed	16
plan	25	mayor	11

***Next to Tivoli Gardens, Nyhavn and the Little Mermaid: a “normalised” Christiania on the list of Denmark’s attractions***

Within the sampled articles, 38 were not exclusively about Christiania, but covered broader topics related to travel to Copenhagen, Denmark or Scandinavia, or discussed thematic travels to “non-existing” or “micro-“countries, travel to communes or travel to experience drug-related activities. Even the articles that focused on Christiania often began with a broader overview of Denmark or Copenhagen, including other major attractions. Thus, Copenhagen and Denmark themes appear central as they tie Freetown Christiania and themes more specific to the commune with broader topics. Somewhat paradoxically, Christiania can be found in lists of attractions between Frederiksberg Gardens and Copenhagen Opera House and just below other major attractions of Tivoli Gardens, Nyhavn and The Little Mermaid (Shaw, 2024). In these articles Christiania is presented as one of the places for tourist consumption, as exemplified by the following quote:

*The Danish capital is a city of tip-top design, plentiful parkland and people with a passion for "hygge" (cosiness). It's also eco-friendly, child-friendly and once you get chatting to the locals,*

*just plain friendly. From classy Frederiksberg to funky Christiania, this city ticks all the boxes* (The Nation, 2017).

As evidenced by themes appearing in the upper bubbles on Fig.1 and Fig 2. quite a lot of text in the sampled articles, especially those from early 2000s, provide tourist information with regards to how to experience Denmark or Copenhagen including where to eat, where to stay, how to navigate the city and how much it might cost.

In somewhat contradictory article titled “How to Eat Like an Anarchist in Copenhagen”, Eriksen (2015) begins with the following introduction:

*The old military base—which was squatted in 1971 and proclaimed an autonomous enclave within the city—is one of Copenhagen’s biggest tourist attractions, known for its ingenious DIY houses, cargo bikes, weed stalls, police raids, and the ongoing bid to “normalise” a place that is like kryptonite to normality. But you should also know Christiania for its food, for glorious vegetarian cooking, “dream cake”, open-faced sandwiches at the boozier, and 3 AM falafel.*

The article then reviews various eateries in Christiania with highlights of their menus and prices. This suggests that not only Christiania can be commodified by tourism, but the idea of an anarchist commune overall can become a unique selling point for tourist destinations. Several articles note that Noma, one of the world’s best restaurants, is located near Christiania, contributing to the area being trendy (Price, 2017).

The issue of commodification and gentrification through tourism is acutely presented as follows:

*Today, Christiania is home to some elegant restaurants and a popular stop on Copenhagen’s tourist trail, billed to visitors via bus advertisements as a must-see attraction alongside the Little Mermaid statue. This gentrification has driven up rent further* (Calderon, 2019).

Calderon (2019) provides the following quote describing the negative impact of Christiania’s popularity amongst tourists:

*Tourism is killing Christiania,” says Emmerik Warburg, a 44-year resident of Christiania, who runs the Christiania Researcher in Residence project. “The sheer amount of tourism and not wanting to learn but instead only needing to have a different background for your selfie kills the surroundings.*

These results confirm previous analysis from Coppola & Vanolo (2015) and Ntounis & Kanellopoulou (2017) that tourism commodifies Christiania. The countercultural ideas of Christiania combined with art, quirky designs, good food and cozy cafes make a desirable and unique tourist attraction that supports Copenhagen’s positioning as an open and creative city.

### ***Crime and punishment of Pusher Street***

Pusher street is the area of Christiania that was lined up with drug dealing booths until it was permanently closed in 2024 in a consensus between Christianites and the government that the open drug dealing has led to organised criminal activities endangering Christiania and Copenhagen. Pusher street is ubiquitously mentioned in the articles since it is a tangible representation of Christiania’s self-governance and confrontation with Danish authorities. Drug dealing and use is also a socially controversial issue that is of public interest. While some articles mention the drug dealing as one of the features of Christiania, mostly Pusher street and drugs are mentioned in publications directly in response to outbreaks of violence and major confrontations between gangs and law enforcement. This is most common in recent articles from 2023 to 2024, but also from previous confrontations, especially in 2004. Interestingly, one article that specifically focuses on “Danish ghettos” (i.e. Christiania and

Nørrebro), drug use, and crime is titled “*Tourists warned over European capital's 'No-Go Zone', but it's cleaner than UK cities*” (Moran, 2024).

In the articles that cover the closure of Pusher street the agency appear to be with the residents more than the authorities. Christianites are presented as traditionally tolerating illegal trade agreeing to crackdowns on drug dealing to avoid a broader state intervention into Christiania. It is also seen as Christianites’ decision that Pusher street needs to be closed down that has led to its closure rather than the wish of the official. In terms of tourism representation, Pusher street appears to be of more interest externally than to Christiania’s residents. Drug dealing is not what residents want to see defining their place brand. One resident is quoted as saying: “*We are very tired of people saying Pusher Street is Christiania. It is not.*” Another resident stated:

*To me, Pusher Street is actually the least unique, right? It is what I associate with violence, gangs, murder, threats, and everything which are actually antonyms to what Christiania is.*

This is a topic worth further investigation as place branding and desired destination image of Christiania have not been discussed sufficiently in the literature.

The topic of Pusher street also introduces the other issue of tension between Christiania and the state: land tenure and urban development. This topic introduces readers to the origin of Christiania as a squat, the long-standing conflict between Christiania and the state that resulted in the creation of a Foundation that allowed Christiania to purchase the land and become owners of the area. Existing academic literature has covered these issues in more depth (Amouroux, 2009). However, the closure of Pusher street and the current apparently less confrontational relationship between Christianites and the Danish authorities raises questions on what the scenarios are for long-term future of Christiania and how tourism fits within those scenarios. To authors’ best knowledge there is no existing academic studies on this topic.

### ***From an anarchist utopia to a sustainable neighbourhood***

Six articles within the sample largely focus on sustainability issues. However, mostly sustainability is included via the following topics:

- organic and vegan food;
- low-carbon transport options, e.g. cycling, walking, trains;
- general lifestyle and wellbeing in Denmark; and
- Danish social welfare state system.

Interestingly, while Christiania is introduced as an idea of an anarchist utopia, its consensus-based direct democracy, as well as various examples of environmental and social activism barely gains coverage. The disconnect is visible in Fig. 1 and 2, where terms related to utopia, social experiment, communal organisation appear close to the bottom of the graph and close to topics of crime. Meanwhile, terms related to more mainstream sustainable consumption and lifestyle appear towards the top of the graphs. One article that mentions Copenhagen’s aim to become a carbon-neutral city only mentions Christiania as a place to cycle through (Carey, 2022).

Some articles also suggest that Christiania’s communal future may be at risk and maybe its ideas belong to the past. This is evidenced by the following quote:

*Stepping into the community-led utopia feels as though you've time-travelled back to the counterculture of the 1960s; colourful street art, peace signs and yin and yang symbols decorate the exteriors of many homes, and there are art galleries, workshops, communal gardens and organic cafes aplenty (Bale, 2017).*

This contrasts with the academic literature which explores Christiania’s model more in-depth (e.g. Amouroux, 2009; Coppola & Vanolo, 2015; Woltman, 2016). Winter (2016) has discussed the disconnect between Christiania’s approach to sustainability and the conventional narrative. She noted that Christiania is focused on communal decision-making, collective ownership and the present, as opposed to conventional approaches with focus on

future generations. One of the stated purposes of welcoming visitors to Christiania is educating them about communal living. However, this educational element seems lacking within the selected news articles. This appears to be a missed opportunity, as alternative approaches to sustainability via communal social organisation has potential to provide lessons on achieving broader sustainability.

## Conclusion

This study has explored tourism in Freetown Christiania, Denmark. A content analysis of news media was undertaken and emerging themes were grouped into broader themes. The analysis reveals that Christiania, despite its countercultural roots, is undergoing a transition which is underscored by tourism development towards becoming a sustainable neighbourhood, which acts as a key attraction for tourists. This is evidenced by the fact that Christiania is featured on mainstream lists of Copenhagen's tourist attractions. Thus, while the studied articles highlight Christiania's unique food scene and creative atmosphere, they also reveal tensions: tourism's commodification of the commune, the overshadowing of its political ideals by commercialised images, and the prominence of Pusher Street's drug trade in external representations. Sustainability and communal governance, which are arguably the pillars of Christiania's internal identity, are only acknowledged sporadically. This suggests a gap between Christiania's self-defined narrative and its portrayal in tourism discourse, raising critical questions about the role of tourism in shaping its future.

Based on this we conclude that further research is required into understanding Christiania's complex relationship with tourism. If tourism is a prerequisite for the survival of the freetown, then how can tourism be developed that does not jeopardise or eradicate its foundational values? An important part of this is understanding the tourists visiting Christiania, because their motives, experiences and outcomes from visiting may affect its development. For example, it is relevant to know the extent to which their visit resembles a voyeuristic experience versus an educational one. Furthermore, governance and management of tourism in Christiania merits further examination as it can serve as a basis for more democratic and participatory models of sustainable tourism development elsewhere. Lastly, future scenarios for Christiania and the role of tourism in those scenarios would be beneficial: will tourism help commodify and gentrify Christiania, or will it help sustain the Freetown's autonomy.

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