

KRONBORG CASTLE

“To be or not to be, that’s the question”

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SO SAID HAMLET, THE PRINCE of Denmark, to himself in Shakespeare’s play *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, while thinking of life and death, in his castle Elsinore in Denmark. The plot of the play was, of course, fiction and the castle — a figment of Shakespeare’s fertile imagination. Or was it?

Once, when we had planned to travel to Denmark, we shared our itinerary with our Danish friends. They suggested that we include a visit to the Kronborg castle in our itinerary and that we would enjoy it immensely. We had never heard of this castle before and so we ran a quick research and found what our friends said was absolutely right. We were going to have an awesome time there!

Kronborg Castle is often fondly called Hamlet’s Castle and is located in the town of Helsingør, about an hour north from Copenhagen — a small town made famous by the Bard of the Avon.

We were out of the station and walked along the waterfront towards the castle about a kilometre away. Even at this distance, we could discern the magnificence of the Kronborg Castle with its imposing towers against white clouds. The fun had begun! We talked about Hamlet while we walked for about 15 minutes and entered the main gates.

Just then a gentleman in princely regalia asked: “What is your affair in Elsinore?” We thought the question was directed to us and we started explaining that we were visitors and stopped when a voice from behind said: “My lord, I came to see your father’s funeral”. Then it struck us. Ha! That must be Horatio and the one in front of me was surely Hamlet. We were in the middle of the play!



Most Shakespearean scholars believe that Elsinore was derived from Helsingør and was probably an anglicised version of the name.

Every year in the month of August, Helsingør town organizes a Shakespeare Festival in the Kronborg Castle. Even otherwise, local groups perform plays on the central courtyard on most of the summer days.

The original Kronborg Castle, called Krogen. It was built by King Erik of Pomerania, in the year 1420 CE on a low ridge at a point where Øresund, the sound between Zealand, Denmark and Scania, Sweden was narrowest. This was a strategic move by the King to make this region

rich. He could now control the merchant shipping on the sound. The sound allowed a shortcut for ships travelling south to Denmark and other countries on the Baltic Sea and the king charged exorbitant taxes called the “Sound dues” based on the value of the cargo. To dissuade the merchants from undervaluing their cargo, he adopted a simple technique. If the king felt it was undervalued, he had the right to buy the cargo at that price.

The castle as it appears now was rebuilt in 1629 when the original castle was destroyed in a fire. It was also the home of the royalty till the late 18th century. The collection of tolls continued right until 1857 when the then King abolished the unpopular tax.



INSIDE THE CASTLE

After shaking off Hamlet and Horatio we entered the main courtyard and were at once transported back a few centuries. The Renaissance architecture of the towers and the buildings and the outfits of the people (actors) made sure of that. The centre of the courtyard served as the stage for the play. Soon Hamlet too arrived and exclaimed “To be, or not to be, that’s the question”, and the multi-act play continued in the centre of the courtyard.

The stairs of one of the corner towers of the courtyard took us to the living quarters of the Royal family. Every room was ornately decorated with artefacts of the Royalty as well as his army. The castle also included a private chapel, which was beautifully embellished with religious objects.

While the floor was occupied by the finest wood furniture, the ceiling was adorned with expensive chandeliers. The beautiful paintings and tapestries on the walls was an indication of the immense wealth of the king. The ballroom walls would have heard the finest music while the well-dressed gentry danced or developed sinister plans, like Polonius and Claudius. Did we see someone behind the Arras (a type of tapestry)? Is that you, Polonius?

As we returned to the courtyard, someone tapped me on the shoulder and asked us if



we wanted to see the Ghost of the King of Denmark. It was Horatio, and we were game.

Like all medieval castles, Kronborg has its own share of mystery. The secrets of the castle casemates were about to be revealed. We followed Horatio and Hamlet into the clammy casemates of the castle on a wet and slippery floor. Soon a translucent apparition of the king appeared and said: “I am thy father’s spirit”. The ghost then went on to recount the tragic and horrible story of how his wife, the Queen and his brother Claudius hatched a plot to kill him, the King of Denmark, while we watched spellbound in the eerie surrounding. His screechy and spooky voice echoing on the walls of casemates made sure we got goosebumps.

We also saw a statue of the sleeping Holger the Dane, the legendary knight. It is said that if ever Denmark ever faced danger, he would wake up and protect it!

UNESCO declared Kronborg Castle as a world heritage site in 2000. This stunning castle, which has stood the test of time and the vagaries of weather, is certainly worth a visit on your next trip to Denmark, at least to experience the play in its original settings.

It was time for us to bid goodbye to the castle and all the actors of the play and visit other attractions like the National Maritime Museum of Denmark, the shining statue of a merman (as opposed to the little mermaid in Copenhagen), St. Olaf’s Church among many others, which were all quite close to each other. This trip was definitely an awesome teleportation to the olden days. **📌**