

Irish Examiner

Walking in winter wonderlands



By Pól Ó Conghaile

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Munich, Germany

Munich's Christmas markets are true European originals. As far back as 1642, town records were mentioning a 'Nicholas Market' near the Frauenkirche, with gingerbread, nativity figurines and chimney sweeps made of plums and almonds amongst the fancies on display. Today, the annual markets are held in Marienplatz and organised by the Munich Tourist Office, but the old atmosphere remains. A 100-foot Christmas tree, festive music from the town hall balcony, Bavarian singing lessons and a special Christkindl post office add to the charm. Joe Walsh Tours (joewalshstours.ie) has two night packages from e349pp plus tax.

Details: meunchen.de; Nov 26 - Dec 24.

Copenhagen, Denmark

If you think Christmas starts early in Ireland, spare a thought for the Danish capital. Copenhagen's Christmas lights were turned on Nov 17, but even before that, the scent of roasted almonds was wafting along Strøget, the main shopping street. The markets in Tivoli Gardens are the main event, with a pop-up Russian basilica surrounded by food and craft stalls and 28 rides (you'll find Santa in the 140-year-old Pantomime Theatre). For something different, however, try the artsy district of Christiania, where the annual yuletide fair is more reminiscent of an oriental bazaar. It runs Dec 7-10 (free). Gohop.ie has flights plus three

nights at the 4-star Quality Airport Hotel from e358pp for travel this Monday.

Details: visitcopenhagen.com; Nov 16-Dec. 30

Rome, Italy

Think of Christmas markets, and Rome doesn't exactly spring to mind. Although the Italian capital doesn't get the snowfalls of its European siblings, however, Romans cherish Christmas traditions just as much, and Mercatini di Natale are popular with locals and visitors alike. The best is found on Piazza Navona, with stalls selling decorations, souvenirs, statuettes, cribs, 'Befana' (Good Witch) stockings and tasty Italian treats in an outdoor arena framed by fabulous fountains and baroque urban architecture. Camino Ways has flights and accommodation to Rome from e575pp for six nights this December.

Details: on CaminoWays.com (<http://ow.ly/fzo5w>); Nov 26-Jan 8.

A Christmas Market Cruise

Can't decide which Christmas market to visit? Then why not book a trip that takes in several. Insight Vacations has an eight-day cruise departing Dec 16, taking in a host of markets along Germany's Main River. Its luxury river cruise ship market-hops from Nuremburg to Frankfurt, with flights from Dublin, transfers, meals, drinks, English-speaking staff and a lecture on German Christmas traditions priced from e1,740pp. Meanwhile, Sunway has an all-inclusive seven-night cruise from Amsterdam to Basel from e1,249pp. It departs Dec 6.

Details: insightvacations.com; sunway.ie.

Prague, Czech Republic

Prague is another of those brilliantly atmospheric Imperial cities that could have been built with Christmas markets in mind. Its two main markets are located at Old Town Square and Wenceslas Square (actually a street, despite the name), and positively ooze good cheer. As well as the usual gifts, bites and trinkets, watch out for local specialities like Bohemian crystal, traditionally dressed puppets, traditional Czech pastries and enormous hams roasting on spits. If you've got kids along, don't miss the real-life crib on Old Town Square. Going to press, Ebookers.ie had two-night midweek packages to Prague from e192pp.

Details: praguewelcome.cz/en; Dec 1- Jan 13

Vienna, Austria

Vienna is a classy city, and it does a classy line in Christmas markets. From mid-November onwards, twinkling squares transform themselves into winter wonderlands, and the pong of hot punch infuses the early-evening darkness. Some 150 chalets populate the Rathausplatz, selling decorations, gifts and sweets beneath a 12-metre Advent wreath, there's a Christmas village on Maria-Theresien-Platz (the place to go for handicrafts), and you'll also find a Cultural & Christmas Market in front of the dramatic Schönbrunn Palace. Joe Walsh Tours (joewalshstours.ie) has a two-night break from e325pp plus tax.

Details: wien.info; Nov 17-Dec 24.

London, UK

You don't have to travel to continental Europe to find the festive spirit, you know. London's Hyde Park Winter Wonderland runs to Jan 6, with Christmas markets joined by Zippo's Circus, a Bavarian village and the Magical Ice Kingdom — an ice and snow sculpture experience crafted from over 200 tonnes of ice. There are Christmas markets along the Southbank and at Greenwich Market too, but if you'd prefer a private space in which to celebrate, then head for the London Eye. There, you can enjoy the city lights from a dizzying height by booking the Mulled Wine and Mince Pie Private Capsule for an equally dizzying £500/e625.

Aer Lingus (aerlingus.com) and Ryanair (Ryanair.com) both fly from Cork to London, and you can find seasonal accommodation specials on visitlondon.com.

Details: hydeparkwinterwonderland.com; londoneye.com; Nov 23-Jan 6.

Budapest, Hungary

Budapest's Christmas Fair sees some 100 stalls congregating in Vörösmarty Square, with everything from 'chimney cakes' (sugar-coated pastries wrapped around wooden spools and roasted over an open fire) to freshly-baked waffles on offer... even the mulled wine is served in specially commissioned mugs. Best of all is the giant Advent Calendar in the 18th century Gerbeaud House, one of whose windows is uncovered each day from Dec 1 to 24 to reveal a contemporary painting. The Travel Department (thetraveldepartment.ie) has a three-night trip with four-star accommodation departing Dec 3 from e369pp.

Details: visit-hungary.com; Nov 18-Dec 30.

Gothenburg, Sweden

"There's good value in Sweden if you know where to look," says Lonely Planet, placing Gothenburg second on its Top 10 Best Value Destinations for 2013. If you don't, however, "even popping out for a pizza and beer can make for a pricey night..." So where to look? Well, Gothenburg's Lane of Light, a 3km trail of festive lights connecting the port to Avenyn, the main shopping drag, and the Liseberg Christmas markets is free to visit. You'll find all manner of gifts and glögg (mulled wine) here and, afterwards, explore the traditional markets in Haga, Nordstan and the old city hall. There are no direct flights from Ireland to Gothenburg, but Inntravel (inntravel.co.uk) has three nights' B&B with flights from £498pp/e623.

Details: Goteborg.com/en; Nov 16-Dec 23.

Bruges, Belgium

"Maybe that's what hell is, the entire rest of eternity spent in f***ing Bruges." So says Colin Farrell's character, Ray, in a movie the local tourist board must rue to this day: In Bruges. The Belgium city prefers to think of itself as the Venice of the North, of course, and it certainly does a mean impression during the glittering Christmas season. Throughout December, you'll find an ice rink and dozens of stalls on Market Square, beautifully

illuminated architecture and canals, and that's not even starting on the beer. The Travel Department has a three-night trip departing Dec 9, including a half-day walking tour and four-star B&B, from e399pp.

Details: thetraveldepartment.ie; Nov 25- Jan 3.

* NB: All prices and availability correct going to press, but subject to change.