

Tis the season

Why not break with tradition and try a different Christmas this year, asks Aby Dunsby

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Christmas doesn't always have to be about turkey, stockings and squabbles over the last mince pie. For every die-hard traditionalist who starts planning their festivities months in advance, there's another who is happy to break with tradition and try something new.

Contrary to popular belief, a Christmas abroad doesn't need to cost the earth. In fact, thanks to an abundance of package holidays and low-cost flights from regional airports, going on holiday at Christmas is becoming more and more affordable. And the choice is equally impressive, too. Whether clients want to spend Christmas partying on the

beach, whizzing down the slopes, or searching for pandas in China, there are plenty of fun, off-the-wall options that'll ensure this Christmas is extraordinary.

THE BIG CHILL

There's nothing more magical than waking up on Christmas morning and throwing back the curtains to see the flakes falling – but snow is by no means guaranteed in the UK.

Families seeking the white stuff needn't travel for miles, though: a short flight to the Alps will ensure heaps of fresh snow, plus plenty of warming hot chocolate and a festive feeling.

In Tignes, families can choose

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Take time out to breathe in the mountain air and explore Alpine villages en route

to start Christmas with an adrenaline boost by hurtling down the slopes on skis, splashing into freezing water for an ice dive, or sledding through the snow while being drawn along by huskies. Mark Warner works with outdoor specialist

Evolution2 to provide a range of extreme sports activities in Tignes each year.

If grannies and grandpas are also in tow, clients might want to consider something less active but equally unique, such as a train journey through Switzerland aboard the Glacier Express.

Take time out to breathe in the fresh mountain air and explore enchanting Alpine villages en route, and even spend a few days wandering around the Christmas markets at lakeside Lucerne. Newmarket's five-day Glacier Express Winter Wonderland holiday includes a trip from Andermatt to Chur on the Glacier Express, from £749. ➔

TOP TIP

For VAT-free Christmas shopping, Prestige Holidays suggests Jersey as an affordable option

The Icehotel's Art Suite, Sweden

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FAMILY HOLIDAYS QUIRKY CHRISTMAS DESTINATIONS



FAR LEFT:
Glacier
Express

LEFT:
Sleigh ride

BELOW:
Lucerne,
Switzerland

NEW TRADITIONS

Christmas abroad can also be a chance for kids to learn about some new, sometimes weird and wonderful, festive traditions. Just as parents use Santa's 'naughty or nice' list as a way of getting their little ones to behave, in Icelandic folklore, children are watched all year by 13 cheeky 'yule lads', who reward them for being good with presents, but punish those who are badly behaved.

So if families spend their holiday in Iceland, children can do away with their Christmas stocking and copy the locals by putting their shoes out on the window sill on Christmas Eve. They'll be filled with presents if

they've been good, or a rotting potato if they've been naughty.

Regent Holidays offers a four-day Reykjavik Christmas break, which includes trips to see natural landmarks such as the Gullfoss waterfall; erupting hot spring geysers and the Unesco-listed Thingvellir National Park (from £865).

In Sweden, Christmas is celebrated on December 24, and Carrier recommends clients start the day in true Swedish fashion with a morning sauna before gulping down a breakfast of sweet rice porridge and cinnamon – according to tradition, whoever finds the almond that has been hidden in



Clients gather around the fire to listen to tales from a Sami guide about the Arctic Circle ceremony

the porridge will be married by next Christmas, so singletons take note.

Clients staying at the ultra-chic Icehotel can sign up for the hotel's Christmas games, which include unusual events

such as tandem skiing, a forest quiz, making up a fire, and axe-throwing. After dinner, guests all gather in the Icebar for a party and dancing around the Christmas tree, which of course, is fashioned out of ice.

Those who opt for a holiday to Lapland can partake in the age-old tradition of an Arctic Circle ceremony, after which clients will gather around the fire to listen to fascinating tales from a Sami guide about the mysticism surrounding the custom.

Monarch's Ready, Steady Snow itinerary also includes a day of activities in the woodlands such as tobogganing, reindeer sledding and snowmobile



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RIGHT:
Sandy Lane,
Barbados



Over in the Caribbean, unique accommodation options include Sandy Lane in Barbados, where Father Christmas arrives in an innovative manner every year, and a sandcastle-building competition takes up much of Christmas Day. Over in Atlantis Paradise Island in the Bahamas, kids can spend the day splashing around in the resort's water park, or take part in the Battle of the Elves, an obstacle course competition to make the perfect toy on Christmas Eve.

If your clients have done the Caribbean before, suggest a complete culture change with a trip to China, where clients can take in sights including the Great Wall of China, the Forbidden City and the Terracotta Warriors, eat delicious food and even meet China's famous giant pandas – a surefire hit with animal-loving little ones. Wendy Wu Tours offers a departure of its In Pursuit of Pandas trip over Christmas. It includes a walk along the Great Wall on Christmas Day and New Year in Chengdu, home to the magnificent giant panda. **TW**



Wendy Wu Tours offers an 11-day In Pursuit of Pandas – Christmas Special departing December 23 from £2,745 including return flights from Heathrow (regional departures also available), accommodation, meals and entrance fees. wendywutours.co.uk

Mark Warner offers seven nights' chalet-board accommodation at Chalet Hotel Aiguille Percee in Tignes from £1,179 per adult and £1,149 per child including flights, transfers, and evening childcare. markwarner.co.uk

→ rides, plus a trip to Santa's post office, where children can meet Santa and the elves, see the sorting office and take part in cookie decorating at the Elf Bakery (from £889).

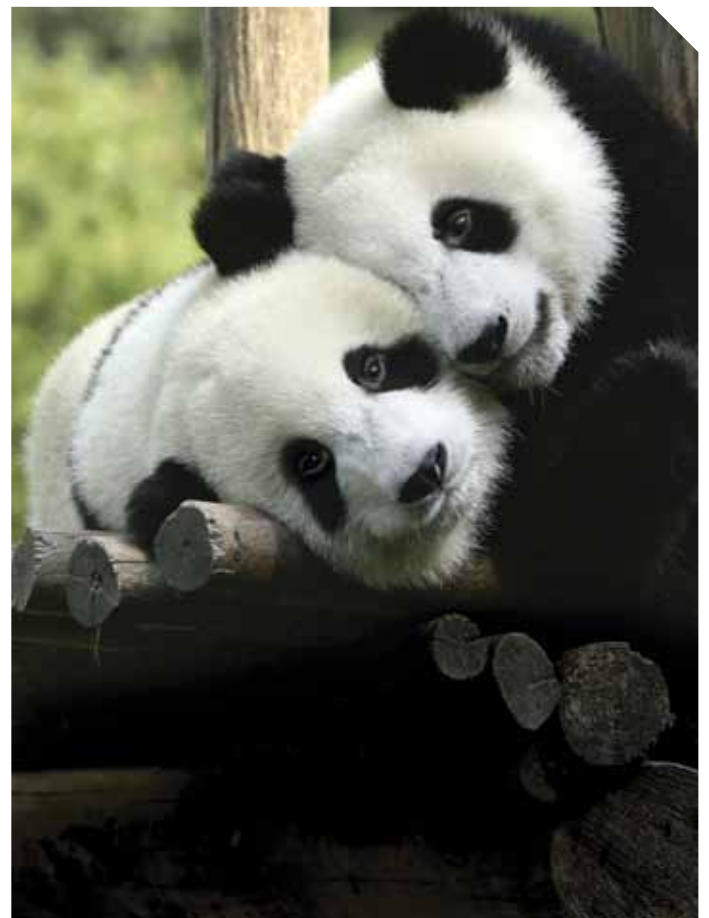
▶ FEEL THE HEAT

For many clients, a Christmas break often means a chance to top up their tans with a spot of winter sun. Dubai is a great family-friendly option, with plenty of theme parks, shopping malls and beaches to keep the kids happy, and average temperatures of 26C in December. But if Christmas just isn't Christmas without a chill in the air, there's still hope. Joanne Lowery, product manager for the Middle East at Gold Medal, says: "If you are missing the cold or snow then you can always pay a visit to Dubai Mall, which has a 22,500sq metre indoor ski area and an 85-metre-high indoor mountain with five slopes of varying difficulty."

Adjoining the slopes is a Snow Park made up of an ice cave, icy body slide and sled and toboggan runs, and every day the resident penguins are let out of their enclosures to roam around the park. Clients can also book one-on-one time with the penguins, making for a memorable experience for little ones.

Equally sun-soaked is a trip to Florida, where clients can head to Key West to celebrate Christmas in style. Rebecca Evans, senior marketing executive at Funway Holidays, says: "Key West at Christmas is all about twinkling palm trees, sailing boats lit up with colourful Christmas lights, and Conch cottages with festive displays."

Liven it up even more with the annual Lighted Boat Parade, which sees boats sail through the harbour with festive lights strung along their sails, masts and hulls; or the Old Town Trolley Tour, which passes by beautiful pastel-painted mansions with twinkling lights and quirky decorations.



RIGHT:
Giant pandas