

12 days of Christmas

Get ahead of the game with Laura French's guide to the best Christmas markets

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It might not be the season to be jolly - Christmas is probably as far from your mind as Santa is from South America - but if clients fancy a festive break, they need to act fast.

Christmas markets holidays are notorious for getting booked up early, so don't let your clients be disappointed. Check out our guide to 12 of the best and secure yourself some festive bookings before summer has even arrived.

► STRASBOURG, FRANCE

Think Christmas markets, think Strasbourg: handmade toys, local handicrafts, Alsace delicacies, towering trees - you name it, this place has it, with stalls in 11 locations and attracting more than two million visitors every year.

The city's long-standing reputation for all things festive dates back to 1570, when it welcomed in what's widely considered as France's first ever yuletide market. Today the Notre Dame Cathedral festivities are among the biggest, with cute chalets offering everything you can think of - including an array of local wines and Alsatian produce like baeckeoffe stew, a hearty, three-meat dish ideal for warming cold hands.

"For families there's also The Children's Village, where visitors will find storytelling, workshops and various other entertainment," says Ashley Dellow, head of retail sales at Leger Holidays. At the centre of it all stands the giant Christmas tree on Place Kléber, part of a centuries-old tradition.

► AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS

If Amsterdam's labyrinthine canals, quaint cafes and diverse museums aren't enough to entice your clients, its Christmas celebrations might be. Museumplein is transformed into a Christmas village each December with Dutch delicacies served from festive wooden chalets around a central ice rink, while the annual Light Festival illuminates the Canal Ring and beyond with mesmerising light sculptures. Fred Holidays recommends exploring it on the Illuminade walking route, or on an evening cruise along the canals.

Just outside the city there's more going on; recommend the Keukenhof Christmas fair for Christmas stalls, chalets and a

Winter Wonderland on the castle grounds, or suggest Alkmaar and Haarlem for traditional markets in picturesque surroundings.

► BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

If it's a sprawling plaza your clients are after, suggest Vörösmarty Square, located in the heart of Budapest and one of the biggest on the Continent with performances, workshops, Santa visits and plenty more alongside the usual array of gifts, ceramics and other local wares.

The real draw here lies in its culinary offering, according to Gabrielle Alam, head of UK sales for CroisiEurope. "The best thing is the food and drink. The people of Hungary pride themselves on their great cuisine, and it is easy to see why." →

Strasbourg Christmas market

3 TOP TIPS

Lawrence Peachey, UK sales manager for Fred Holidays, offers advice for visiting Germany's Christmas markets:

1. Most cities have markets with different themes, so plan to see the ones of interest – whether it's a kids' market, a medieval-themed one or a winter festival.
2. Consider taking in two cities. Düsseldorf has several good markets nearby, in Bonn, Cologne, Essen, Dortmund and Wuppertal, while Frankfurt has Mainz and Wiesbaden.
3. Try various types of glühwein, or non-alcoholic kinderpunsch, and sample the local food – my favourite is kartoffelpuffer (potato pancakes) with apple sauce.

→ It's especially worth recommending to experimental types, with everything from 'roasted chimney cake' and 'rooster testicle stew' on offer – when in Budapest and all that.

▶ SALZBURG, AUSTRIA

When it comes to Christmas markets, Austria is up there with the best, and it's not all about Vienna. Salzburg has its own distinct offering with a historic market, which dates back to the 15th century, making it one of the oldest in Europe. "It's located in the heart of the old town and often has a sprinkling of snow during the Christmas season, making it full of festive cheer," says Louise Heatley, head of product and contracting at Great Rail Journeys, which stops here on its Christmas on the Danube cruise.

There's a handful of other markets in the city too, including Hellbrunn Advent Magic, held in the palace's courtyard and a popular spot for locals with folk musicians and a giant advent calendar on display. It also has an excellent family offering thanks to a children's programme featuring craft-making, baking, a petting zoo, pony rides and a Christmas post office where little ones can post letters to Santa.

▶ ZAGREB, CROATIA

Croatia's vibrant capital has earned itself a spot on the festive map since its advent fair launched: Shearings Holidays' two new Christmas market



Salzburg market is in the heart of the old town and often has a sprinkling of snow at Christmas, making it full of festive cheer

tours feature the city, and it's regularly voted one of the most popular Christmas market destinations by consumers.

Recommend it to those keen on the entertainment side of things as well as the shopping; there's a host of events and exhibitions across the city, with themed tours, brass band

fanfares, concerts and an ice sculpture festival all offering appeal beyond the stalls themselves. Not that they should be overlooked; traditional Croatian gifts can be found around the Jelacic Square, and mulled wine lovers will find local tipples served warm and infused with cinnamon.

▶ KRAKOW, POLAND

Medieval Krakow is at its best in the Christmas season, when Rynek Główny – the city's main square, in the heart of the Old Town – becomes the setting for an annual yuletide market filled with twinkling lights, carol singers and folk dancing.

"The market has a genuinely authentic feel with a wide range of stalls," says Alan Cross, head of trade at Jet2holidays. It's especially good for picking up traditional toys and handicrafts, with colourful glass baubles, Baltic jewellery, village pottery and embroidered tablecloths offering a slice of quintessential Poland, and there's an array of gingerbread treats available for the sweet-toothed.

Beyond the market itself, suggest a visit to the Wieliczka Mine, an intricate underground salt cave where jewellery and souvenirs make for unique gifts.

▶ BRUGES, BELGIUM

The cobbled streets, quaint canals and horse-drawn carriages of Bruges make a pretty idyllic setting for a festive break, and its plethora of stalls offer everything you might expect from a country known for its gastronomy – not least a pleasing array of chocolate and warm, doughy waffles.

There's also an annual Snow and Ice Sculpture Festival with an array



PICTURE: JET2HOLIDAYS; STAD BRUGGE

LEFT: Rynek Główny, Krakow

ABOVE: Zagreb, Croatia



RIGHT:
Bruges

FAR RIGHT:
Stollen,
Germany

BELOW:
Prague



AmaWaterways has a seven-night Christmas Markets on the Danube cruise taking in Nuremberg, Passau, Vienna, Budapest and more, with an optional excursion to Salzburg, from £2,177 cruise-only, departing November 22. amawaterways.co.uk

SuperBreak offers a three-night package to Prague, departing December 9 and staying at the four-star Hotel Casa Marcello on a B&B basis, from £226, including return flights from Stansted. superbreak.com/agents

of intricate creations, alongside an ice rink at the Grote Markt, where the best part of the Christmassy action takes place. Shearings and Newmarket Holidays offer seasonal coach tours taking in Bruges and beyond – worth recommending for clients wanting to see some other Belgian yuletide highlights without the hassle of organising it themselves.

DRESDEN, GERMANY

Bratwurst, glühwein, lebkuchen, stollen – no one does Christmas markets quite like Germany. For a taste of the traditional, Titan recommends Unesco-listed Dresden, known as ‘Florence on the Elbe’.

“It’s perfect for visitors who want an authentic German Christmas and are looking to pick up hand-made wooden carvings from the nearby Erzgebirge Mountains, or ceramic wares from Lusatia,” says product manager Sophie O’Neill.

The city is home to one of Germany’s oldest Christmas markets,



The historic town of Rudesheim is worth a visit year round for its quaint shops, tavernas and medieval castle

the Striezelmarkt, which sees a giant stollen cut in front of the crowds and shared out on the second Sunday of the advent season. It’s now one of more than 10 markets that make up the Christmas Mile, a solid stretch of festive cheer on both sides of the river that takes in the ornate Lutheran church, Frauenkirche, and the Residenzschloss, where stalls are found in the stable yards of the castle.

PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC

For food lovers, SuperBreak suggests Prague; giant hams roasted on spits, barbecued klobása sausages and

hot, sugar-coated pastries known as trdelník line the stalls, while Czech beers and mulled wines are on hand to wash it all down.

Most iconic is the market on the Old Town Square, dominated by a giant, sparkling Christmas tree complete with an animal stable with sheep, goats and a donkey – ideal for kids. Nativity scenes, choirs dressed in classic Czech costume and Christmas concerts in the surrounding venues mean it’s a good suggestion for traditionalists too, and the city’s compactness makes it easy to hop between the markets – beyond the Old Town Square, Prague Castle and Wenceslas Square are highlights.

RÜDESHEIM, GERMANY

The historic, wine-making town of Rudesheim, set on the banks of the Rhine, is worth a visit year-round for its quaint shops, tavernas and medieval castle. It’s especially magical in the lead-up to the big day though, with a unique Christmas Market of Nations set-up inspired by



PICTURES: GERMANY NATIONAL TOURIST BOARD; PRAGUE CITY TOURISM; RICHARD HORAK/PRAGUE CITY TOURISM; ANDERS BOGILD; VISIT COPENHAGEN

→ countries from around the world. Think 120 stalls representing everywhere from Finland to the Far East, scattered across the iconic Drosselgasse lane.

Live demonstrations, performances and Europe's biggest nativity scene are all here, and visitors can't leave without trying a Rudesheim coffee - a rich, indulgent drink made with locally distilled brandy and whipped cream. Suggest clients combine Rudesheim with another city on the Rhine, if time allows; for older couples, Saga's Festive Markets: The Rhineland to Heidelberg river cruise is a worthy suggestion.

► **TROMSØ, NORWAY**

For a Christmas market break with added adventure, Osprey Holidays recommends Tromsø. The polar night, heavy snowfall and a pleasingly high chance of spotting the northern lights give

this Norwegian city appeal in the run-up to Santa's big day, with whale watching safaris and Sami experiences offering something for every age - more than enough to offset the relatively high cost of shopping here.

Throughout December, markets offers sweets and souvenirs, and crowsberry cordials to warm up visitors, while cathedrals play host to festive concerts. Osprey suggests visiting in the second weekend of the month, when locals gather for carol singing, and sampling lefse (a type of flatbread) and coffee brewed over an open fire.

► **COPENHAGEN, DENMARK**

Take atmospheric Christmas markets complete with fairy-lit Alpine chalets, snow-covered trees and ample amounts of Gløgg (Scandinavia's answer to mulled wine), and you have Copenhagen - specifically Tivoli

RIGHT:
Tivoli
Gardens,
Denmark



Gardens. "It's the centrepiece of the festive celebrations and is transformed each December into a winter wonderland," says Patrick Millar, marketing manager at Kirker Holidays.

Tivoli is especially ideal for families, with Santa, reindeer and fairground rides to keep kids occupied, but it's not the only one worth checking out.

Elsewhere there's the cosy Nyhavn market, where wafts of cinnamon and nutmeg fill the air and stalls selling Danish specialities such as apple dumplings line the historic harbour. Less conventional is the Christmas market in Freetown Christiania, an oriental-inspired, bohemian affair selling hand-crafted gifts, jewellery and clothes - one for the free-spirited. **TW**

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