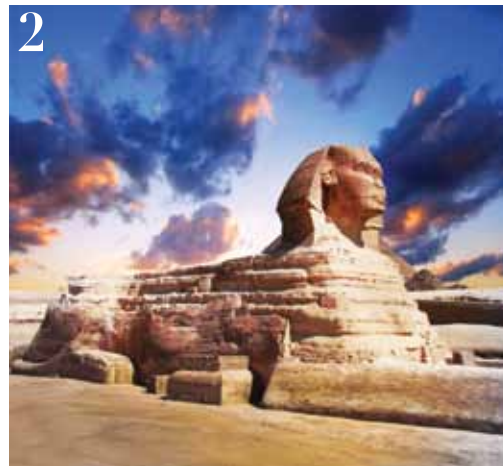


PICTURES: ISTOCK/SERG AURORA/ERMAKOVA ELENA; RAMZHACHICH/O/RIVIERA TRAVEL; RNMITRA; TRAVEL ALBERTA/ROGIER GRUY; G ADVENTURES; TOURISM AUSTRALIA/ELLENOR ARGYROPOULOS; SHUTTERSTOCK/INSIGHT VACATIONS/ISTOCK



12 OF THE Best WINTER TOURS

Stuck for where to go in winter? Katie McGonagle offers inspiration

@katie_mcgonagle

Winter holidays used to be pretty straightforward – choose sun or ski, pack swimwear or salopettes, and bon voyage. But what about the escapes that don't involve skimming down the slopes or sipping cocktails on a sunlounger?

As the British climate cools down, the raft of adventurous options heats up: from sleigh rides in colder climes to flocking south for the southern hemisphere's summer, winter holds no end of possibilities for active escapes.

Whether it's a counterpoint to a lazy summer beach break, or a chance to introduce the whole family to a more adventurous style of travel, these active tours will have no trouble keeping you and your clients going through the winter months.

1 NORTHERN LIGHTS IN ICELAND
Where better to start than with one of the most iconic winter sights, the northern lights? They are at their most visible from October to March, which means they come with the added bonus of exciting winter activities.

"Iceland is an incredible place to visit year-round, but winter is truly magical," says Ruth Hilton, sales and business development director at Trafalgar. "It's also the best time of year to see the northern lights, frozen waterfalls, and access the island's ice caves, plus, the warm geothermal waters of the Blue Lagoon are there to keep visitors cosy!"
Book it: Trafalgar's six-day

tour, Northern Lights of Iceland including the Blue Lagoon, starts at £1,826 including breakfast, three dinners, driver and guide. Flights are extra.
trafalgargar.com/uk

2 CRUISING THE NILE
No less iconic than the northern lights, a voyage along the Nile offers one ancient wonder after another, but try it in the height of summer and it'll be heat, not history, that overpowers all else.

Riviera Travel has a new tour starting in February that swaps the usual Luxor-Aswan cruise for a journey starting in Cairo and ending in Aswan, on the *Mövenpick Darakum*.
Head of agency sales Joseph Grimley says: "You don't want to be held back by the heat, making this the ideal winter break to combine relaxation and exploration – especially when you get the opportunity to disembark at rarely visited sites cruising from Cairo to Aswan."
Book it: Riviera Travel's Wonders of the Nile, led by an Egyptologist, starts at £2,469 for 15 days, including flights from Heathrow.
rivieratravel.co.uk

3 EXPLORING THE EMPIRE IN INDIA
This month marks 70 years since India gained independence from the British Empire, sparking a season of documentaries looking at the history of the Raj. If your clients' interest has been piqued to

explore India up-close, Saga has developed a 19-night tour, starting with monuments built by the British in Kolkata, followed by a sunrise visit to the Taj Mahal and tour of the Lutyens-designed quarter of Delhi. Next, it's the Himalayan Toy Train up to Shimla to see the summer residence of the viceroys, before finishing in Mumbai.

Book it: Saga's Echoes of the Empire has 14 departures, plus two solo departures starting in October, from £2,899 including flights from Heathrow, chauffeur pick-up, most meals and travel insurance.
travel.saga.co.uk

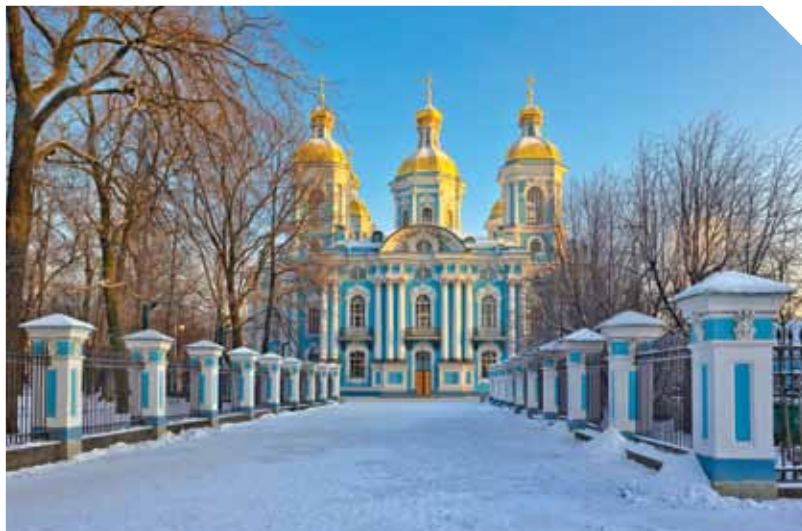
4 WINTER IN THE ROCKIES
Nowhere does winter like Canada, but even within this impossibly beautiful country, the Rockies are at their most majestic when covered by a few feet of snow. Warn clients they'll have to wear more layers than they ever thought possible, but the below-zero temperatures will be the last thing on their minds when they see what Collette's Winter Wonderland tour has in store.

This trip goes to town on wintry activities: snowshoeing in Jasper, traversing the Icefields Parkway, riding a horse-drawn sleigh and roasting marshmallows by the fire, to name but a few. Add waking up to the view from the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise and Fairmont Banff Springs, and an authentic First Nations dinner, and it's easy to

see why Collette already has 2018-19 departures on sale.
Book it: Canada's Winter Wonderland starts at £1,279 for seven days, not including flights, with luxury accommodation, breakfast and a tour guide.
gocollette.com

5 THAILAND FLING
"For those looking to escape the British winter – and the dishes – this Christmas Day, southeast Asia is a great choice for a family adventure," says Brian Young, managing director at G Adventures. "It's a great time to travel and this trip will really bring the family together with cooking classes, boat trips and beach breaks."

Unlike the long summer holidays, time is tight at Christmas, so the benefits of a family tour are clear: packing in plenty of activities, keeping the Christmas magic alive with the company of other kids, and letting parents take a break too.
This family tour from G Adventures offers a well-rounded introduction to Thailand, visiting the bridge over the River Kwai and meeting a hill tribe community, taking an overnight train to Chiang Mai for a cooking class, and finishing on the beaches of Koh Chang.
Book it: G Adventures' Thailand Family Adventure costs £899 per adult and £839 per child land-only from Bangkok, departing December 18 and 29. Minimum age six.
gadventures.co.uk

LEFT:
Memphis,
USRIGHT: St
Petersburg,
RussiaBELOW:
The Ghan,
Australia

6 CHRISTMAS IN GRACELAND

For some, Christmas isn't complete without festive fairy lights, and for that, there's Graceland, home of Elvis and – come November – the most over-the-top display of decorations.

Janet Parton, UK head of sales for Cosmos, says: "Christmas was Elvis's favourite time of year, and he kept his decorations up from Thanksgiving until his birthday on January 8. During the annual lighting ceremony, hundreds gather to witness Graceland come alive with twinkling lights, Santa and his reindeer, and a huge nativity scene."

The tour takes in more musical highlights – Memphis, Sun Studio and the Country Music Hall of Fame, plus a private performance by Johnny Cash's son – and the incredible ice sculptures of Nashville's Ice Exhibition.

Book it: Elvis & the Southern Sounds – Christmas Lighting Ceremony at Graceland starts at



For some, Christmas isn't complete without fairy lights – and Graceland has an over-the-top display

£1,776 with Cosmos, for nine days including flights from Heathrow on November 14, home pick-up, transfers and excursions.

cosmos.co.uk

7 CHRISTMAS MARKETS IN RUSSIA

While Christmas markets remain all the rage in Europe, there are alternatives for clients who want all the fun of the fair, with an extra twist. The markets of Moscow and St Petersburg are certainly highlights of Insight Vacations' newest Russia tour, but with eight days to explore, guests also get a

local's lowdown on the Hermitage Museum and St Catherine's Palace in St Petersburg, and a tour of Red Square, St Basil's Cathedral and the Kremlin Fortress in the capital.

UK sales director Paul Melinis says: "The Russian Orthodox Christmas festivities are spectacular, and guests can enjoy events such as the annual International Winter Festival in St Petersburg and the Christmas markets in Moscow, where street shows, stalls selling handcrafted treasures, and festive tastes bring the city to life."

Book it: Insight Vacations' new Easy Pace Russia with Christmas Markets starts at £1,526 for seven nights' luxury B&B, dining experiences and door-to-door transfers in the UK.

insightvacations.com/uk



8 SUMMER DOWN UNDER

While the northern hemisphere feels the chill, the reverse is true in the

antipodes, so why not inject a little of the Australian summer to brighten things up? Extended trips are perennially popular as clients maximise value for money and time spent travelling, and that's where an escorted tour comes into its own, taking care of the logistics of a relatively long and complex itinerary.

Trainspotter or not, Great Rail Journeys' Australia & The Ghan itinerary can't fail to captivate. It brings together journeys on The Ghan from Alice Springs to Adelaide, plus the Kuranda Scenic Railway and the Puffing Billy. Tag on the Great Barrier Reef, a wine tour in the Barossa Valley, the Great Ocean Road, and the misty Blue Mountains and visitors will know they've seen Australia at its best.

Book it: Great Rail Journeys' 23-day tour, Australia & The Ghan 2018, starts at £6,695, including flights from Heathrow, departing January 30 and February 21.

greatrail.com





Lush green in winter, crisp white in summer, there's no such thing as a bad view from the Swiss Alps' Glacier Express



9 GLACIER EXPRESS IN WINTER

Europe also boasts its share of iconic rail journeys, and these are at their scenic best come winter. The Glacier Express climbs through the heart of the Swiss Alps, affording views of snowy mountains, steep-sided valleys and chocolate-box villages along the way. Lush green in summer, crisp white in winter, there's no such thing as a bad view, but a tour lets passengers sit back and soak it in while someone else does all the hard work.

Arena Rail's winter tour is based in Interlaken, and also includes a journey on the Golden Pass Line to Lucerne, a trip along a cogwheel railway up Mount Rigi, and visits to Bern and Lake Thun.

Book it: Arena Rail's Glacier Express Winter Magic is priced from £879, departing February 16. The price includes return Eurostar to Paris, onward rail to Interlaken, four nights' B&B accommodation and excursions. arenatravel.com

10 WALKING IN THE CANARIES

Active holidays are often at their best outside peak season, when temperatures are better suited to building up a sweat. In the Med, that usually means spring or autumn, but head as far south as the Canary Islands, and you've got to wait until winter to tap that active market.

Headwater's new winter collection includes La Gomera, taking in coastal walks with breathtaking views and the Unesco-listed subtropical forest

of Garajonay National Park.

Senior programme manager Charlotte McCutcheon says: "La Gomera is perfect in winter – temperatures are still good with an average of 18C and six hours of sunshine a day. It's the second-smallest of the Canary Islands and a great place for walking."

Book it: Walking on La Gomera starts at £1,519 with Headwater from October to April. The price includes guided walks, seven nights' accommodation and meals with wine. headwater.com

11 RED HOT CHILE

With the attention focused on the new British Airways flight to Santiago this year, it should be no surprise that sales to this South American spot are soaring. Cox & Kings has seen passenger numbers to Chile rise by 66% year on year, so now's the time to strike while the iron's hot, and suggest a group tour.

Cox & Kings' Splendours of Chile has a December 15 departure that means spending Christmas Day in Torres del Paine National Park. Customers will also watch the sun set over the Atacama Desert, take a private boat trip on Lake Todos los Santos and get the inside track on a traditional estancia (ranch) in Patagonia.

Book it: Cox & Kings' 15-day Splendours of Chile group tour starts at £3,545, including flights. coxandkings.co.uk

ABOVE: The Dolomites, Italy

BELOW: Torres del Paine National Park, Chile

12 DOLOMITES DELIGHTS

"Nothing conjures up images of Christmas quite like snow-capped mountains and the scent of warmed mulled wine," says Titan agency sales manager Edwina Coppock. Spending Christmas Eve across the border in Innsbruck enjoying a guided tour and Christmas market visit (look out for the tree decorated with thousands of Swarovski crystals), then Christmas Day in fairy-tale Rodengo, is the perfect escape for those who want a festive feel while discovering a new destination.

Book it: Titan offers Christmas in the Dolomites from £1,199, based on a December 23 departure. The price includes flights, five hotel nights, 11 meals, excursions and door-to-door pick-ups. titantravel.co.uk 



PICTURE SHUTTERSTOCK