



Great Escapes HOLIDAY TRAVEL

15 of the best places to spend Christmas

By Roseann Lake and Laura Ma, for CNN Updated 10:14 AM ET, Mon December 7, 2015



15 photos: The world's most Christmassy places of 2015

Honolulu, Hawaii – "Mele Kalikimaka" is the Hawaiian Christmas greeting made famous by Bing Crosby's hit song of 1950. What the Aloha State lacks in snow it more than makes up for with festive vibes of peace and goodwill.

Story highlights

Visiting presepeju, or nativity scenes, is an integral part of Christmas in Malta

The Arctic Snow Hotel in Finland is made entirely of snow and ice, but equipped with saunas and hot tubs

(CNN)—Any old city can string up a few lights downtown and call it a holiday celebration.

From Mexico to Malta, northern lights to sunny skies, these places are doing Christmas better than the rest this year.

Christmas is a year-round occasion in Santa Claus, Indiana, a town of fewer than 3,000 residents



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Malta

Visiting presepeju, or nativity scenes, is an integral part of Christmas in Malta.

Every year, residents proudly open their shutters, and sometimes even their garage doors, to display their holy crib confections to the public.

On a grander scale, the [Bethlehem f' Ghajnsielem](#) is a life-size nativity experience spread over 20,000 square meters of formerly abandoned fields.

Inhabited and animated by more than 150 actors, including entire families, the village takes visitors back in time to Judea of 2,000 years ago, complete with oil lamps, turn mills, grazing animals, crafts areas teaching traditional skills and folklore, a tavern, and of course a grotto housing baby Jesus.

Downtown Valletta is also home to a lively Christmas spirit, with carolers singing outside the Baroque St. John's Co-Cathedral during Advent, and a dizzying display of Christmas lights on Republic Street.

The [Manoel Theater](#) is well known for its annual Christmas pantomime -- this year it's a folk tale mash-up titled "Robin Hood and the Babes in the Wood."

A visit to the privately owned [Museum of Toys](#), featuring dolls, soldiers, train sets, and clockwork tin trinkets dating as far back as the 1790s, is a heartwarming homage to childhood.

[Manoel Theatre](#), Old Theatre Street, Valletta, Island of Malta Malta;

[Toy Museum Valletta](#), 222 Republic Street, Valletta, Island of Malta Malta;

New York

Rockefeller Center lies at the core of the New York Christmas.

Its famed [ice rink](#) has been around for 79 years; the decorated [tree](#) is an 84-year-old tradition.

Across the street, [Radio City](#) hosts the annual Christmas Spectacular, starring the Rockettes.

On the southwest corner of Central Park, [Columbus Circle](#) hosts more than 100 vendors selling clothes, gifts, snacks and drinks at the Holiday Market.

Central Park has two ponds for skating and horse-drawn carriage rides.

Fashion's biggest names join in the festivities, setting up impressive Christmas window displays.

The most glamorous cases, at the Fifth Avenue flagships and department stores like Saks and Bergdorf, are impressive enough to melt the heart of Anna Wintour.

[The Rink at Rockefeller Center](#), 1 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City, NY 10020;

[Radio City Music Hall](#), 1260 6th Avenue (Avenue of the Americas) Between 50th and 51st Streets, New York City, NY 10020;

Bath, England

There are few cities in the world where you can celebrate the birth of Jesus and the birth of Jane Austen with the same amount of fanfare, but Bath happens to be one of them.

December 16 marks what would have been the much-loved writer's 240th birthday, and while the main Austen love-in is during the festival in September, the [Jane Austen Centre](#) -- and on-site Regency Tearoom -- is the best place to learn about the city's most famous resident.

The [Theatre Royal](#), which Austen mentions in "Northanger Abbey" and "Persuasion," has a varied program of holiday drama, musicals, opera and concerts, including "Jack and the Beanstalk" and French farce "The One that Got Away."

A seasonal favorite, the 18-day Bath Christmas Market has more than 170 wooden chalets selling distinctively British handmade crafts in a quaint Georgian setting.

Straddled between the imposing Bath Abbey and the venerable Roman Baths, the market offers a festive way to discover the character of Bath, which is the only entire city in the UK to have been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

[Bath on Ice](#) is a great excuse to bundle up and lace up skates, while the [Thermae Bath Spa](#) is the perfect reason to strip down and savor the steam emanating from the thermal mineral-rich waters of an open-air rooftop pool with spectacular views over the city.

[The Jane Austen Centre](#), 40 Gay Street, Bath BA1 2NT England;

[Thermae Bath Spa](#), Hetling Pump Room Hot Bath Street, Bath BA1 1SJ England;

Barcelona, Spain



Barcelona's Copa Nadal is a 200-meter swimming competition across the harbor on Christmas Day.

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Anyone who can manage to extend your Christmas holiday until Three King's Day (January 5), can catch up with Melchior, Gaspar and Balthazar than Barcelona.

On the evening of January 4, they arrive at the city's port on the Santa Eulalia -- their very own ship - in bearded and velvet-robed splendor.

Canons are fired, fireworks are set off, and as the mayor hands them the keys to the city, the magic of the Magi officially commences.

They parade through the streets in a magnificent cavalcade of floats that includes camels, elephants, giraffes and dazzling costumes.

Rovaniemi, Lapland, Finland

While legends dating as far back as the 1820s cite the North Pole as the official home of Santa Claus and his jolly missus, the Finns would have us believe otherwise.

For them, [Rovaniemi](#), Lapland, located just north of the Arctic Circle, is Christmas HQ.

Here, children make gingerbread cookies with Mrs. Claus, enroll in Elf School or take a calligraphy class and compose their Christmas wish lists with a traditional quill.

Other area attractions include the [Ranua Zoo](#), home to baby polar bears, wolverines and moose, and the [Arktikum](#), a science center where the mystery of the northern lights is revealed.

Those in search of a truly frosty experience can stay in the [Arctic Snow Hotel](#), made entirely of snow and ice, but equipped with saunas and hot tubs in which to thaw.

[Arctic Snow Hotel & Glass Igloos](#), Lehtoahontie 27, Sinetta 97220 Finland;

Nuremberg, Germany

The [Nuremberg Christmas market](#) (Nurnberger Christkindlesmarkt) is a German institution, pulling in more than 2 million visitors each year.

Highlights include a giant carved wooden Ferris wheel, old-fashioned carousel and a steam train.

Unlike all those "fake" Christmas markets that have been popping up in the region, Nuremberg's Christmas Market Council is serious about making sure only traditional handmade toys and holiday goods are sold.

No mass-produced plastic garlands here.

The market's 200 select vendors also put up fantastic displays as they compete for the Most Beautiful Stall Design award.

The top three walk away with a gold, silver or bronze "Plum People" awards.

Adults can enjoy Nuremberg spicy gingerbread and mugs of mulled wine.

For kids, there's the Toy Museum, while the German Railway Museum is a hit with everyone.

[DB Museum](#), Lessingstrasse 6, 90443 Nuremberg, Bavaria Germany;

Honolulu, Hawaii

Santa Claus dons his beach wear for the Christmas celebrations in Hawaii.

What the Aloha State lacks in snow it more than makes up for in festive vibes of peace and goodwill.

The celebrations center around [Honolulu City Lights](#), a month-long Christmas display with an opening parade, live music and a 15-meter Christmas tree.

The 6-meter-tall Shaka Santa -- Mr Claus dressed down in red shorts and open shirt -- takes pride of place downtown, seated next to his mu'umu'u-wearing wife Tutu Mele.

Quebec City, Canada



Quebec brings ye olde European Christmas charm to 21st century North America.

For those who like to celebrate Christmas around a tree made from recycled sheet metal, with lights powered by the pedaling of nearby cyclists, Quebec is the destination.

A haven for environmentally friendly, outdoor enthusiasts, the city bustles with activity, offering holiday programs for all tastes.

Old Quebec is turned into a Christmas village straight out of a story by Charles Dickens, while modern-day Victorians can learn about the period and enjoy plum pudding tastings at [Maison Alphonse-Desjardins](#).

Sausage and roast chestnut lovers can browse the wares at the German Christmas market.

The more religiously inclined can wander an exposition of nativity scenes from around the world.

The nearby [Sentier des Caps de Charlevoix](#) offers family-friendly hiking, snowshoeing and skiing, while speed devils can zoom around in a snowmobile from [Nord Expe](#).

Maison Alphonse-Desjardins, 6, rue du Mont-Marie, Levis, Quebec G6V 1V9 Canada;

Nord Expe, 996. Avenue Sainte-Brigitte, Sainte Brigitte de Laval, Quebec G0A 3K0 Canada;

Reykjavik, Iceland

When it comes to [Christmas celebrations](#), Iceland has a few peculiarities.

Among these, 13 "Yuletide Lads" (scruffy Santas) are said to bring gifts to nice children for the 13 nights leading to Christmas.

Rows of small, beautiful huts make up the Yule Town Christmas market on Ingolfstorg.

Here, visitors can pick up colorful Christmas gifts, decorations and treats.

The shopping differs day to day as some craftsmen and designers set up stalls for only one day.

Beaming down onto a city covered in snow and Christmas lights, northern lights displays add to Reykjavik's festival feel.

San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

Pinatas, posadas and ponche sum up the festivities in this colorful Mexican city, where Christmas is both a solemn and celebratory affair.

Leading up to December 24, visitors are likely to stumble upon Mary and Joseph strolling the streets, as locals make pilgrimages from home to home, singing to "ask for posada" or "beg for shelter" as they reenact the journey to Bethlehem.

Pinatas and ponche (a mulled fruit drink) cap a long evening of peregrinations around this cobblestoned city, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its wealth of grand churches, well-preserved architecture and grand zocalos.

Salzburg, Austria

Birthplace of Mozart and filming location for "The Sound of Music" (50 years old this year), Salzburg is chocolate-box perfect. Think snow-capped mountains, Baroque architecture and traditional [Christmas markets](#).

It's even the home of "Silent Night" -- the popular hymn was performed for the first time in nearby [Oberndorf](#) on Christmas Eve 1918.

The town also plays host to a more unusual Yuletide tradition.

Across Austria and Bavaria, in December people dress up as terrifying Alpine beasts known as krampuses and rampage through the streets in search of naughty children in need of punishment.

The last [Krampus Run](#) in Salzburg this year is on the winter solstice, December 21.

Santa Claus, Indiana



The town of Santa Claus was originally called Santa Fe, but that's not half as much fun.

Christmas is a year-round occasion in this town of fewer than 3,000 residents.

[Santa Claus, Indiana](#), receives thousands of letters a year from children trying to reach St. Nick himself.

A group of volunteers called Santa's Elves was set up in the mid-1930s to reply to each letter.

The Land of Lights display is a 1.2-mile drive around the Lake Rudolph Campground & RV Resort.

Among various Christmas-themed events, Santa hosts buffet dinners at [Santa's Lodge](#) the first three weekends in December.

[Lake Rudolph Campground & RV Resort](#), 78 N. Holiday Blvd., Santa Claus, IN 47579;

[Santa's Lodge](#), 91 W. Christmas Blvd., Santa Claus, IN 47579;

Strasbourg, France

Strasbourg's series of themed Christmas villages morph the city into a visual and gastronomic wonderland.

300 stalls are spread out over 12 locations, with Luxembourg being honored this year with its own dedicated village.

Visitors can feast on Luxembourg-style gromperkichelcher (potato cakes) and boxemannercher (brioche men), washed down with gluhwain (mulled wine).

Alongside the traditional market, there's the new [OFF](#) alternative Christmas fair, featuring live music and a street art trail.

Queenstown, New Zealand

The traditional Christmas colors of red, green and white take on an entirely new meaning in New Zealand, where red represents the "pohutukawa" (New Zealand's ruby-red flowering Christmas tree), white represents the pristine sandy beaches, and green? The kiwi, of course!

Sun-lovers who want to join Santa in his surf shorts should definitely head to [Queenstown](#), where warm summer temperatures mean folks can jetboat, river surf, or paraglide on Lake Wakatipu, or simply set up camp along the lakefront and enjoy a hearty Christmas meal of lamb, seafood, and chicken on the barbie.

Valkenburg, The Netherlands

This small town is the Dutch center for Christmas festivities.

Valkenburg's Velvet Cave is transformed into a Christmas Market and the residence of Santa, where visitors can see his room of presents and reindeer sleigh.

The cavern houses sculptures and an 18th-century chapel, as well as preserved mural drawings that date to Roman times.

Gifts, luxuries, culinary treats and traditional crafts can be found at [Valkenburg's Christmas markets](#).

The annual sand sculpture festival takes "A Christmas Story" as its theme this year.

Best way to reach the Christmas town? A [Christmas Express](#) train that runs regularly between Simpelveld and Valkenburg.

Castle Ruins & Velvet Cave, Daalhemerweg 27, 6301 BJ Valkenburg The Netherlands;

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