

Winter Wonderlands

Tis the season to indulge in seasonal treats, beautiful settings, and the joyful sense of community of a winter festive market



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DESTINATION

With their beautiful glowing lights, fairytale feel, delicious food and drink, and holiday cheer, festive markets can be one of the most special ways to celebrate the winter season. Here are some incredible options to check out around the world.

Dresden, Germany

It's often said that the world's first Christmas markets came from Germany, with some dating as far back as the Middle Ages. But it was Dresden's Striezelmarkt – originally a one-day occasion held to provide the city's citizens with a sale on meat for their festive meal, after their traditional Advent fast – that is claimed to be the first genuine Christmas market. Named after a traditional festive cake – the Strüzel, also known as the Stoczel or Stollen – it was first held in 1434, and has since transformed into an enormous event with 240+ stands, a 25m-high fir tree decorated with a 2,900m-long string of lights, 16,200 sparkling LEDs, and the XXL Herrnhut star at the top. This year's market began on 27 November and will continue until 24 December, with crafts, food and drink, jaw-dropping décor, a full calendar of live entertainment, and even a Christmas carol singing competition. In this beautiful Saxon city in eastern Germany, which is full of castles and fairytale-worthy architecture, it's sure to be a magical experience.

Vienna, Austria

Austria's capital has an impressive amount of Christmas markets to choose from, with each one an unforgettable arena of sparkling lights, spiced holiday punch, and gifts and treats galore. Take a photo under the candlelit archway at the entrance of the Viennese Christmas Market on City Hall Square, then head to the Vienna Ice World at the Christmas Market to show off your ice skating skills. If you have kids in tow, take them to the 12m-high multi-level carousel in the park, where you'll also find a reindeer train, nativity scene trail, children's chalet, and specialised skating ring. Visiting with a partner? Declare your love at the tree of hearts. If it's music your after, make your way to the Am Hof Christmas Market for 4pm onwards – or opt for a baroque, imperial setting at Schönbrunn Palace, Belvedere Palace, or Liechtenstein Garden Palace.

Yerevan, Armenia

This year, Armenia's biggest-ever Christmas market will run from December 20 to 24 at the Karen Demirchyan sports complex in the capital. There will be games, a chance to meet Santa, watch movies and live performances, shop for gifts, and of course, sample plenty of food and drink – and for those who can't get enough of the fun, there's also a free bus service running every hour, that will take visitors to and from another of the city's famous holiday markets in Republic Square. At the latter, the municipality-run market boasts an enormous sparkling tree, alongside Santa meet-and-greets, photobooths, and plenty of spots in



which to cozy up with loved ones over warm drinks and tasty treats. It's open daily from 19 December until 6 January, 2025.

Strasbourg, France

For people who love tradition, spending part of the winter holiday season at Strasbourg's Christkindelsmärk market – the oldest Christmas market in France – is an unforgettable way to celebrate the end of the year. Held in 2024 from 27 November to 27 December, this market attracts around two million people per year – and

FROM TOP: A festive Christmas market in Vienna; Yerevan's Cascade Complex is a short distance from Republic Square; Strasbourg's Christmas markets are so popular, hotels book up a year in advance

OPPOSITE PAGE: The Christmas market in Dresden, Germany

with accessibility increasing during the past decade (such as with the introduction of the TGV service to the city in 2007), this number is growing. In fact, it's so popular that those keen on visiting overnight can actually book a hotel up to a year in advance. It even has its own dedicated website – noel.strasbourg.eu – complete with a special Christmas guide and map. Considering the city is estimated to make at least €16 million from it each year (and some of the hotels here making 15-17 per cent of their yearly income from its visitors), it's little wonder that it is such a joyous cause for celebration. →

New York City, USA

Rockefeller Centre – with its ginormous tree and ice skating rink – and the iconic Plaza Hotel are among the most famous places to experience the Christmas spirit in the Big Apple, and not just thanks to the *Home Alone* movies. In fact, brunch at the Plaza – a Fairmont-managed hotel – is so iconic that there was even once an excellent BBC documentary on it (titled *Christmas In New York: Inside the Plaza*), and the property even offers a *Home Alone*-themed stay. This year's involves a two-night stay with VIP tickets to "A Nostalgic Night with Macaulay Culkin", featuring a special screening of *Home Alone* at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, which includes a moderated interview, Q&A, and photo-op moment with Culkin himself. Guests will be driven to and from the event in a stretch limo, which will come complete with an extra-large cheese pizza and ice-cold Coca-Cola – just like Kevin McCallister's favourite. Once back in the room, they can indulge in a truly decadent ice cream sundae through in-room dining, involving 16 scoops of assorted ice cream, whipped cream, maraschino cherries, M&M's, brownie bits, chocolate, caramel, and raspberry sauce. If that's a dream that'll have to wait until a future year, however, you can still find wonderful festive markets all over town, including the Bryan Park Winter Village by Bank of America, the Urbanspace holiday markets at Union Square and Columbus Circle, and at the Macy's Herald Square flagship store.

Riga, Latvia

If you've never been to this beautiful Baltic destination in northeastern Europe, this is a perfect excuse to go – and if you've been before, it's a great reason to return. In 2024, Riga's Old Town Christmas Market will open in early December 2024 at Doma Square, until the first week of January 2025, and will offer a smorgasbord of delicious holiday treats. Nibble on gingerbread, roasted



ABOVE: New York City is an iconic place to spend the winter holidays

BELOW: Riga, Latvia, boasts a wonderful Christmas market in its Old Town area

almonds, and smoked meats, and sip on Christmas tea and coffee, before exploring the many stalls chock full of beautiful Latvian handicrafts (from patterned mittens to candlesticks), edible gifts (don't miss the local honey), jewellery, eco-friendly wooden toys, and more. Visit Santa's house, send him letters to Lapland, and enjoy the sounds of local musicians and choirs in this resplendent snowy setting, where the streets are scented with cinnamon, ginger, and punch throughout the season.

Mahe, Seychelles

If the cold, wintery vibe of Christmas isn't what you're after and you'd prefer something more warm and sunny, why not consider a festive visit to the Seychelles? In this beautiful island country, hot chocolate and mulled wine are typically replaced with a different kind of punch, while the roast dinner near the fireplace is swapped for barbecues on the beach. Many of the hotels in the country also take the festive season seriously, offering creative ways to celebrate for both guests and residents alike. One such brand is Hilton Hotels & Resorts – with at least seven properties in various parts of the Seychelles among the Hilton portfolio, each one offering their own take on festive celebrations, there's plenty of holiday spirit to be found. In 2023, the Labriz Gastrolounge, Bel Ombre, and DoubleTree by Hilton Seychelles Allamanda Resort & Spa held a joint Christmas celebration, with a Holiday Bazaar featuring crafts made by local artisans, products from local businesses, and local delicacies to eat and drink, bolstered by live entertainment and activities for the whole family.

Baku, Azerbaijan

Although Azerbaijan is a predominantly Muslim country, many of its residents still enjoy celebrating the festive season through a Christmas market. One of the most atmospheric is the one that takes place inside the Icherisheher, or Old City, each year. What it lacks in size it makes up for in festive spirit, and there is something special about being able to walk through the medieval



TOP: Baku lights up with festive decor during the winter season and holidays

ABOVE: Basel is home to one of the biggest and most beautiful Christmas markets in Switzerland

old town before coming to the series of gingerbread house-shaped stalls serving hot chocolate and other heart-warming drinks, amidst handicrafts, games for kids, gifts, and more. If you'd like to soak in the atmosphere for longer, you can enjoy dinner at one of the nearby restaurants. In the more modern part of the city, you'll find stunning Christmas-themed light displays throughout town, from giant reindeer pulling sleighs to trees and more, that makes for a truly spectacular display. The market near Fountain Square is known for its motto of "Cold Hands, Warm Heart", and it boasts a charitable element for extra feel-good vibes. Wherever you are, one great holiday activity to do in the city is to book a Christmas walking tour, where local guides will regale you with ancient legends and stories about this special time of year.

Basel, Switzerland

This beautiful Swiss destination is now an easy flight away from Dubai thanks to a new route from flydubai, and from 28 November to 23 December 2024, it's also home to one of the most beautiful and largest Christmas markets in the country. The Basel Christmas market on Barfüsserplatz and Münsterplatz are a delight to stroll through with a mulled drink in hand, before enjoying stunning views of the Rhine with the glowing festive lights in the background. In fact, this glow is a central attraction – called the "Sea of Lights", the view from Basel Cathedral is epic. Don't miss the chance to head to City Hall to write your wishes in its Wish Book, tuck into holiday-themed food at the Christmas food mile in Kleinbasel, or marvel at the 13m-tall Christmas pyramid on Barfüsserplatz. **BT**



Winter in the Desert

Think you can't find a true festive market feel in the GCC? Think again! These UAE picks tick many boxes, even without the snow.

Madinat Jumeirah Festive Market

One of the most beloved, long-standing winter holiday markets in the UAE, this takes place from 6 to 31 December 2024 at Fort Island. From 3pm to late on Monday to Thursday, and 12pm to late on Friday to Sunday, 1750sqm of the beautiful souk and waterway-filled setting will offer delicious food, cool crafts, a snow fight zone, a North Pole train ride, a Venetian carousel, a 36-foot Christmas tree, and more.



Winter City at Expo City

From 6 to 31 December, Expo City's Al Wasl Plaza will transform into a wonderland with its own magical toy factory, created in partnership with Toys R Us. Inside, family fun includes the chance to meet Santa Claus, join his elves in a workshop, explore the North Pole market, and listen to the all-women Al Firdaus orchestra perform heart-warming holiday tunes. Entry is Dhs40 per person; free for kids under five.



Winter Garden at Habtoor Grand

This popular festive market in the heart of the city promises fun for all ages through all of December – and until 31 January 2025! You'll definitely want to extend the feeling of holiday fun through this outdoor market serving up excellent food and drink, live entertainment, and plenty of good vibes for catching up with friends and family alike.

