

SPOTLIGHT



BEST CHRISTMAS MARKETS: EXPLORING EUROPE AS YOU'VE NEVER SEEN IT BEFORE

Forget the harried crowds and joyless chore of holiday shopping at the mall. Instead, revel in all that makes the festive season magical at one of northwestern Europe's Christmas markets. With winter's smaller crowds, lower prices, and merry mood, December can be the best time to travel to Europe, and it's easy to visit the best Christmas market destinations by rail. Just be sure to bring an extra suitcase – you'll need it for all the treasures you'll find.

For centuries, the open-air markets known as Weihnachtsmarkt or Christkindlmarkt have popped up in communities all over Germany during the four weeks of Advent that lead up to Christmas Day. They're usually held in the main town square, where vendors set up stalls to sell handicrafts, ornaments, food and the fragrant hot spiced wine known as glühwein. There's often live entertainment and sometimes a nativity scene, a visit from the Three Wise Men or the arrival of the 'Christkind', played by an angelic-looking local child.

Germany is still home to some of the world's biggest and best Christmas markets. The ones in Nuremberg and Dresden draw about two million visitors a year; the ones in Stuttgart, Frankfurt and Dortmund attract about three million; and the most visited market, which is in Cologne, features hundreds of stalls and is visited by four million people a year. Indeed, the whole city of Cologne becomes a sparkling seasonal spectacle

But the tradition has spread beyond Germany's borders, right across Europe, and a rail pass is a great way to visit the markets or on board AMA Waterways river cruise from Budapest to Vishofen.

[Click here for info on AMA Waterways Christmas on the Danube.](#)



In Budapest, Vörösmarty Square is transformed into a magical winter wonderland, where the façade of the famous Gerbeaud Coffee House is transformed into a giant Advent calendar with a window display opening every day before Christmas Eve. Prague, in the Czech Republic, has two markets just a short stroll from each other, one on Old Town Square and the other in Wenceslas Square, featuring wooden huts selling local crafts and foodstuffs. In Poland, Krakow's market is the place to go for hand-painted ornaments and quirky antiques.



Today, Europe's Christmas markets are more popular than ever.

Whatever faith you follow – even if it's no faith at all – the markets evoke an old-fashioned sense of community, with great food and unique one-of-a-kind gifts. Most of all, they are festively social, with people of all ages and walks of life gathering happily together.

It may be chilly outside, but here at Europe's Christmas markets, the joyful goodwill will keep you warm all over.

