



Colmar, France
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The 9 most magical Christmas cities in Europe

By Lottie Gross November 16, 2018 | 1:55pm

As the holiday season approaches, many European cities transform into fairy-tale winter wonderlands. Snow blankets the rooftops of Prague, a giant Christmas tree sprouts by Vienna's Schönbrunn Palace and market stalls spread out along the streets of Frankfurt. But those headliners draw huge, bustling crowds. For a more intimate holiday experience, explore one of these charming destinations — without the masses.



Winchester, UK
Courtesy of Visit Winchester

Winchester, UK

The ninth-century capital of England is bewitching any time of year, but December in Winchester is especially beautiful. This peaceful market town lights up with a delightful Christmas market and an ice-skating rink in the shadow of the medieval Winchester Cathedral, where Christmas hymns echo through the longest nave in Europe. Don't miss a ride on the Watercress Line steam train, which runs special excursions serving mince pies and wine for the adults and gingerbread for the kids.

Vilnius, Lithuania

One of Europe's most underrated cities, Lithuania's capital offers a feast of baroque architecture and a fascinating medieval old town. Snow frequently settles on the streets December, when the city also boasts not one, but nine Christmas markets. You'll find mulled wine, pastries and other traditional fare in Cathedral Square, plus plenty of gifts and festive decorations in Town Hall Square. Time your visit with the International Christmas Charity Bazaar on Dec. 1 to snag holiday goods from around the world. Or head to the Design Square (Dec. 18 to 23) for unique finds by Lithuanian designers.

Coburg, Germany

The cobbled squares, historic homes and an enormous, imposing castle in this gorgeous Bavarian town are a Christmas fantasy come true. A market features handicrafts by Bavarian artisans, while spectacular lighting displays illuminate the city. There's organ music by candlelight, horse-and-cart rides through picturesque streets and plenty of Glühwein to go around. Don't miss the statue of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, who famously brought the Christmas tree to England in the 1840s.

Aarhus, Denmark

Hunt down some holiday hygge in Denmark's second city this Christmas — Aarhus has small-town charm and festive cheer aplenty. Wander its pretty streets strung with Christmas lights, ducking in and out of quaint boutiques and cafes, before settling down in a cozy bar. Or feast on traditional Christmas treats such as gingersnaps and marzipan in the Kødbyens Food Market. For kids (or the young at heart), the Tivoli Friheden amusement park is completely transformed for the holiday season, making for a magical way to spend a day.

Vilnius, Lithuania

Courtesy of Go Vilnius

Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy

This tiny Italian town of just 6,000 people sits between the peaks of the mighty Dolomites. A ski resort, it's doused in powdery snow for most of the winter, making it a picture-perfect holiday destination. Wander the town with an Italian wine in hand after a traditional snack of roasted chestnuts. Take to the slopes by day, and spend your evenings thawing out in one of the town's superb pizzerias.

Antwerp, Belgium

This lesser-visited Belgian city is ideal for a festive break, thanks to its dimly lit pubs featuring cozy roaring fires and superb traditional beers. Families should head to the Groenplaats for fairground rides to entertain the kids — the excellent Mercado food hall with its global cuisine and gin bar will keep the parents happy. In the evening, stroll through Grote Markt (stocked with more than 100 stalls full of local crafts), where the Town Hall sparkles with pretty lights and the historic homes that fringe the square are illuminated dark. Indulge in a Belgian waffle, then retire to a table at Elfde Gebod, a traditional pub where hundreds of statues of the Virgin Mary watch over revelers.

Colmar, France

The canals and cobblestone streets of this small town in northeastern France exude romance year-round, but they're even more beguiling during the holidays. On Wednesdays and Saturdays throughout the season, children's choirs float on illuminated boats, singing carols to passers-by. Kids will adore Place Rapp, with its ice rink, roller coaster and carousel. Grown-ups can venture underground and into the city's Alsatian wine cellars — such as Maison Martin Jund or Domaine Karcher et Fils — where December is toasted with folk celebrations, events and, of course, tastings.

Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Germany

Once Germany's second-largest city, Rothenburg ob der Tauber is now one of its best-preserved walled medieval towns. It's the ultimate Bavarian fairy tale — all turrets and timber and clock towers — and is a famous stop on the Romantic Road, a route that connects a series of quintessentially German towns. Take the Night Watchman Tour to get insight into the gritty life here during the Middle Ages, then head to the main Christmas event: the Reiterlesmarkt. It's all you could want in a German Christmas market — get a bird's-eye view of the festivities from the top of the Town Hall tower, open until 8 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays.

Zagreb, Croatia

Croatia isn't an obvious winter destination, and the city of Zagreb is all the better for it. Its traditional market has been serving up sausages and mulled wine for years, but the recent addition of rakija bars and outdoor concerts has made it an even more exciting Christmas stop. Do your holiday shopping in the Design District — the Croatian Design Superstore has books, furniture, jewelry and many more Croatian-made goods — before heading to the "New Advent" celebrations at the Museum of Contemporary Art, where DJs spin tunes and up-and-coming artists and designers showcase their work.

Coburg, Germany
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