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December 15, 2011

Six Christmas Traditions From Around the World

By JANE MARGOLIES

Christmas trees, Santa Claus and gingerbread lattes are all well and good. But with the homogenizing creep of Yuletide customs, travelers might well worry they'll go to the trouble of getting somewhere new over the holidays only to find it's just like everywhere else. Not the six places here. Each has its own way of celebrating Christmas, and with the festivities unfolding in plazas, parks and other public places, travelers are free to join right in.

Castleton, England

This pretty English village in Derbyshire's Peak District is known for its walking paths and, high on a hill, the picturesque ruins of a Norman castle. It's also home to four spectacular caverns bristling with stalagmites and stalactites. On weekends leading up to Christmas two of the caves offer caroling sing-alongs. At [Peak Cavern's evening songfests](#) participants sit inside the yawning entrance to the lead cave — which has great acoustics — to belt out “We Three Kings” and “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” [Treak Cliff Cavern](#), which holds its candlelit caroling in the afternoon, is where semiprecious Blue John stone, a translucent purple-banded gem, is still mined. Peruse specimens in the gift shop after the singing is over.

Jerusalem

In most parts of [Israel](#), where Christians make up about 2 percent of the population, it's business as usual on Dec. 24 and 25. But in this city where Jesus lived and died, Christmas is joyously celebrated in the Christian quarter of the Old City. Churches decorated with trees conduct nonstop services in many languages (see cicts.org for listings of services), with Jews and Muslims often sitting in. From Jerusalem, many people make the pilgrimage six miles south to Bethlehem, in a West Bank area under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority (Israel and the Palestinian Authority facilitate border passage at this time of year, with passports still required). Marching bands and bagpipers led by Arabian horses weave through the narrow streets to Manger Square, the plaza outside the Basilica of the Nativity, which stands on the grotto where Jesus was born.

Oaxaca, Mexico

Posadas — door-to-door processions that re-enact Mary and Joseph’s search for shelter — and a parade with candlelit paper lanterns fill the streets of this city in southwestern Mexico. And then there is the tradition of the “breaking of the plates,” whereby people buy crispy buñuelos, topped with sugar or syrup, from stands near the cathedral and then smash the ceramic plates to the ground to signify the end of the old year. But the most awe-inspiring custom is the century-old competition known as the Noche de Rábanos (Night of the Radishes) on the evening of Dec. 23. In the zócalo, the city’s central square, under a canopy of lights, farmers display elaborate sculptures — nativity scenes, robed kings, musicians — all carved out of the giant radishes grown locally. After the judges name the winner of the sculpture contest, the sky explodes with fireworks.

Quebec City

You would think temperatures in the teens and wind whipping off the St. Lawrence River would drive everyone indoors. But the 403-year-old capital of Quebec province revels in the outdoors at Christmastime, when stone buildings sparkle with lights. Fortify yourself with maple sugar pie from the Ferme Line & Steve Morency stand at Le Marché de Noël in the farmers’ market in the Old Port area. Then toboggan down the steep wooden tracks of the Duggerin Terrace Slides in front of the castle-like [Fairmont le Château Frontenac](#), cross-country ski on the Plains of Abraham, skate at the Place d’Youville rink or, just 15 minutes from town, try dog sledding at [Chenil La Poursuite](#).

Rome

Although the larger-than-life nativity scene in St. Peter’s Square is under wraps until Dec. 24, when this year’s still-top-secret version will be unveiled just in time for the Pope’s midnight Mass, you can feast your eyes on the remarkably detailed 18th-century Neapolitan carved-wood crib at the Church of SS. Cosma and Damiano by the main entrance to the Roman Forum, and visit the annual “100 Presepi” exhibition at the Sale del Bramante, Piazza del Popolo, to see crib elements made of everything from coral to chocolate. Or just duck into any church or cathedral you happen by. Want to set up a crèche of your own? Pick up nativity figures at the Piazza Navona Christmas market — along with burlap-and-straw depictions of the Italian witch called La Befana, said to fly around on a broomstick at Epiphany, dropping down chimneys to leave candy or lumps of coal.

Taos, N.M.

Bonfires blaze nightly in the plazas, bringing a block-party vibe to this [New Mexico](#) town.

Farolitos (brown paper bags lighted with votive candles) line streets, snaking past galleries and art studios. When the Spanish came here in the 17th century, they brought their culture, and today celebrations blend Catholic and Native American traditions. Posadas led by locals playing Mary and Joseph launch from [San Francisco de Asis Church](#), the Mission-style historic landmark memorialized by Ansel Adams and Georgia O’Keeffe. At [Taos Pueblo](#), a thousand-year-old adobe settlement, there’s a Christmas Eve procession at dusk, and on Christmas Day afternoon, women wearing mantas and men in deerhide capes perform harvest and hunt dances in the center plaza.



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