



The 12 stays of CHRISTMAS

Who needs lords-a-leaping or maids-a-milking when you can get a fast festive fix at one of these destinations?

Lapland, Finland

It's the home of Santa Claus, and if you've ever wanted to meet the man himself you must visit the Santa Claus Village and Santapark in Rovaniemi in the Arctic Circle, where the Christmas spirit is rumoured to be present all year round. Small-scale sledding over hills will keep little ones happy, lit-up ice sculptures add an atmospheric twist and souvenir shops provide a great place to find stocking-stuffers. There's even a Santa Claus post office where you can send things off with a special stamp before learning to decorate your own gingerbread, take sleigh rides, visit Santa's workshop and mingle with the elves. Don't forget to check out Arctice's large icy igloo, where you can drink out of glasses made of ice. It isn't all about magic though – Rovaniemi is also home to Arktikum, one of the best museums and science centres in Finland where you can learn about life there and the arctic region through the ages. Animal lovers should pay a visit to the Sirmakko

reindeer farm, where they can view indigenous reindeer and enjoy traditional Lappish food, and visit the nearby Ranua Wildlife Park, which hosts about 60 species of arctic and northern wild animals such as polar bears, wolverine and moose. The Lampiyaara Amethyst mine also promises a thrilling excursion as you get to dig for your own lucky gemstone. When you're all tucked out, lay back and prepare for a breathtaking natural phenomenon as you watch the auroras take over the night sky in a rainbow of sparkling colours.

Where to stay: Hotel Santa Claus (hotelsantaclaus.fi). Where better to spend Christmas than in a hotel named after the man in the red suit himself? Located in the heart of Rovaniemi, the rooms are snugly and spacious and some even come with a personal sauna. One of the hotel's three restaurants also specialises in Lappish dishes, ensuring you can absorb the culture both inside and out.

How to get there: Aeroflot flies to Helsinki from Dhs2,503 return. From Helsinki, Finnair flies to Rovaniemi in Lapland from Dhs853 return.

Prague's streets
light up for the
festive season



Prague, Czech Republic

Prague is the birthplace of the man who inspired the famous Christmas carol *Good King Wenceslas*, and a Prague Christmas is really quite special. The centre of the Old Town fills with festive markets selling everything from candlesticks and ceramics to doughnuts and warm drinks, a concert stage and an enormous tree, while as Christmas Eve approaches the streets fill up with vendors selling fried carp, a traditional meal to be eaten on December 24. In Prague, Father Christmas is known as Mikulas and he's usually flanked by two characters: the devilish Cert and an angel. If a Czech child has been naughty rather than nice, Cert can scare them into choosing to take the right path and the child is given a piece of coal along with a small present – so you're likely to see scores of well-behaved kids in town. Christmas sweets are a huge deal in Prague, and sweet-making competitions are taken very seriously so trying some home-made seasonal desserts and eggnog is a must-do. At midnight, head to the Prague Cathedral to see it lit up for midnight mass before looking to the night sky to wish on a star.

Where to stay: Hotel Cerný Slon (hotelcernyslon.cz). The Cerný Slon, otherwise known as the Black Elephant, is smack in the middle of town right off of the Old Town Square and is a hop and a skip away from the Astronomical Clock and the Charles Bridge. Beautiful wooden beams and dainty mouldings add an elegant feel, while the quaint, old-world exterior fits right in on the cobblestoned street. Designed in a historical gothic style, the house itself is one of the oldest in Prague and the Czech Republic and is even listed on the UNESCO world heritage list.

How to get there: Austrian Airlines flies to Prague via Vienna from Dhs2,324 return.

3 Faraya Mzaar, Lebanon

The Faraya Mzaar Kfardebian ski area of Lebanon was one of the first places to develop chalets and a ski resort in the region. With 42 slopes and 80 kilometres of tracks, it's ideal for winter sport buffs who crave a *whoosh* down the slopes.

Varying well-groomed runs make it suitable for both beginners and experts, while snowmobiling, climbing, hiking and ATV riding will mean you never get bored. The picturesque mountain range is reminiscent of the Alps, and has some interesting historical sites within reasonable distance including rock tombs, ruins and the stunning Jeita Grotto – a finalist in the New7Wonders of Nature initiative. Lebanese hospitality is prevalent here, where village-inspired mountain cuisine and music can be enjoyed in front of a fireplace for a taste of local culture.

Where to stay: InterContinental Mzaar Mountain Resort & Spa (ichotelsgroup.com). Chalet-inspired architecture nestled amid the peaks of Mount Lebanon ensures a cosy yet luxurious getaway after your action-packed excursions. Authentic French, Italian, Lebanese and International restaurants serve up comforting fondue and raclette alongside wood-fire baked pizzas, keeping your energy up for your days on the slopes. Afterwards, the Thermes du Mzaar Spa is an ideal space in which to unwind as you melt away your aches with a soothing hydro-massage.

How to get there: FlyDubai flies to Beirut from Dhs1,043 return.

The beautiful
Faraya Mzaar
mountains



4 Salzburg, Austria

Horse-drawn sleigh rides, a *Sound of Music* tour, outdoor concerts, ice skating, cute cafés and Christmas markets: these are a few of our favourite things when it comes to the winter holidays, and Salzburg has them all. Mozart's birthplace is just as beautiful as his music, and is awash with tradition. Breathe in the enticing aromas of sweet roasted almonds, hot chestnuts, sausages, gingerbread and spiced beverages while perusing stalls selling hand-made crafts, toys, clothes and local specialties all the way from Dom Square to Residenz Square. Carolers and choirs will even serenade you while you browse, and you don't want to miss out on the oversized advent calendar at Hellbrunn Castle, where the 24 windows on the castle's facade make for a spectacular display as reindeer, sheep and goats add to the magical exhibition. Wander the Getreidegasse, a bustling, medieval lane filled with unique shops and cafés with character, then head over to the famous Café Winkler to check out the spectacular view. Of course, after all that you'll need some sustenance, so tuck in to Christmas treats like Lebkuchen and Glühwein; eat, drink and be merry!

Where to stay: Hotel Sacher Salzburg (sacher.com). Set on the banks of the River Salzach, it's easy to see why this majestic hotel can count aristocrats among its guests. A stunning view, lush gardens, five-star comfort and proximity to the Old Town make it an ideal place to stay, and it's hard to resist trying the famous Sacher Torte dessert from the hotel brand that invented it. They've even got a special Christmas Package on from December 23 to 28 that includes welcome and farewell gifts, a festive dinner, and tickets for a concert at Hohensalzburg Castle. They've also got a great offer on for New Years Eve.

How to get there: Austrian Airlines flies to Salzburg via Vienna from Dhs2,721 return.

Sunset at Emirates Palace



Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

If there's one place you don't want to miss the Christmas tree at in Abu Dhabi, it's Emirates Palace. Last year, their extravagant 13-foot tall tree was bedecked with dazzling lights, bows and real jewels making it worth an estimated \$11 million. For those who love Christmas shopping, check out the traditional Swiss Christmas Market at the Beach Rotana Abu Dhabi from December 9-11. Thanks to a collaboration with the Swiss Business Council, the hotel's courtyard will be transformed into a traditional Swiss village complete with wooden chalets, Swiss chocolate goodies from Lindt & Sprüngli, a live chocolate kitchen, Swiss fondue and some oh-so-delicious raclette. The tasty treats will be a welcome comfort after exploring the chalets for decorations, handicrafts, culinary delicacies and gifts, and there'll even be seasonal music courtesy of various school choirs and a genuine Swiss folklore band.

Where to stay: Emirates Palace Hotel (emiratespalace.com). Opulent, glamorous and expensive, this hotel is a palace in every sense of the word. Boasting 15 gourmet dining options, two swimming pools, an exceptional spa, gold and marble-bedecked suites, an exclusive beach, tennis courts, rugby and soccer pitches, its own marina and a helipad, it's got it all going on. Go there and spoil yourself rotten for a Christmas present to you, from you.

Lighting the way to the Edinburgh Eye



6 Edinburgh, Scotland

When it comes to festival seasons, Edinburgh knows how to throw a good party and Christmas is no different. From November 25 to December 25, the city is flooded with holiday spirit as the streets are lit up all the way from George Street to the Edinburgh Eye. Princes Street Gardens is transformed with fairy lights twinkling, an ice rink and a fun-fair, as well as a Traditional Highland Village and a German Christmas Market with wooden stalls provided from stallholders in Frankfurt itself. Buy woolly hats, jewellery, Scottish teddy bears and candles while munching on venison burgers, potato cakes, German sausages and crêpes before slurping down some seasonal drinks to warm you up when it's chilly outside. Over on Charles Street you'll find The Ethical Christmas Fair, which is the place to find goodies from fair trade, ethical and environmental businesses. The festive celebrations last for six whole weeks, and there's even a city-wide treasure hunt hosted by Edinburgh Sparkles every week. Just solve the clues posted through their Twitter account and discover where the thousands of pounds worth of prizes are hidden within the city-centre – among the prizes are a Michelin star cooking session, diamond jewellery, free flights and a VIP tour of Edinburgh Castle. 'Tis the season of giving, after all!

Where to stay: The Balmoral (thebalmoralhotel.com). So grand it even has its own clock tower, this hotel is not only footsteps from Edinburgh's main sights, it's also becoming quite a landmark itself. The Balmoral is arguably the most luxurious place to stay in one of the best locations in town, with some of its rooms offering spectacular views of the castle and the old town. Delicious fare can be found in its five-star restaurants, and the spa boasts a swimming pool, steam room and gym.

How to get there: KLM flies to Edinburgh from Dhs4,419 return.

Salzburg, pretty as a postcard





Forget your flip-flops when you head to France

Val d'Iserre, France

This charming, snowy setting is so picturesque it looks like it was lifted off a postcard. From December 10-11, races from the skiing world cup circuit will take place right in the heart of Val d'Iserre, pushing you to try and perfect your own skills on the slopes. And that's something you'll definitely want to do out here – heaps of wonderfully fresh snow and stunning mountains make it not only one of the best but also one of the most beautiful ski destinations in the world. Varying slopes mean both novice and expert skiers and snowboarders will find their niche, and fans of tricky off-piste runs can get their heart racing with dramatic routes in the Espace Killy. Giant floodlit snow sculptures are placed all around the resort, setting a unique backdrop for a varied entertainment programme including concerts, performances, torchlit descents and firework displays. Father and Mother Christmas and their merry fairytale helpers also make an appearance throughout the season, while every Thursday the village is transformed into a pedestrian zone awash with colourful lights. After working up all that adrenaline going for a quiet steam may not be enough, so it's a good thing Val d'Iserre has some of the best après-ski nightlife in the Alps. From rowdy pubs and bustling bars to intimate cafes there's something for everyone.

Where to stay: Hotel Avenue Lodge (hotelavenuelodge.com). This hotel's interior was inspired by the mountains; think chic furniture, exposed wood and nooky fireplaces. Plus there's a spa.

How to get there: Qatar Airways flies to Geneva via Doha from Dhs2,465 return. Geneva International Airport runs frequent ski transfer shuttles directly to Val d'Iserre, which cost from Dhs450 return.

8 Reyjavik, Iceland

If you're dreaming of a white Christmas, Reyjavik should be top on your travel list. While you can still see the stunning Blue Lagoon and Golden Circle, Christmas is a very special time of the year to the Icelanders and the city transforms into a festive wonderland. The dark winter days are illuminated by lights all along the city streets, complementing the sparkling tree in Austurvöllur Square. Live music such as choirs and yuletide bands surround the market in Hafnarfjörður village, where you can buy unique gifts such as lava stone jewellery, fish skin slippers, organic cosmetics and hand-knitted woollen products. Sample some Christmas cookies and laufbrauð (leaf bread), but be sure to leave room for the traditional dinner of Hangikjöt, hot lamb served with potatoes, greens and béchamel sauce. If you're still craving more, try some reindeer pâté, smoked puffin, Rjúpa (a delicious roasted game bird) or for the adventurous, putrefied skate. Next, lean back next to a roaring fireplace and follow Icelandic tradition by hanging a shoe by the window for one of the 13 Yuletide Lads, Iceland's Santas or Jólasveinn, who will fill it with a present by the next morning. It doesn't end there – Iceland's belief in elves means that during the Twelfth Night celebrations, shortly after Christmas, the elves and trolls come out to dance with the normal folk. What could be more magical than that?

Where to stay: Hotel Borg (hotelborg.is). This classic yet sophisticated hotel boasts comfy beds and a great view.

How to get there: KLM flies to Reyjavik from Dhs2,040 return.

A white Christmas

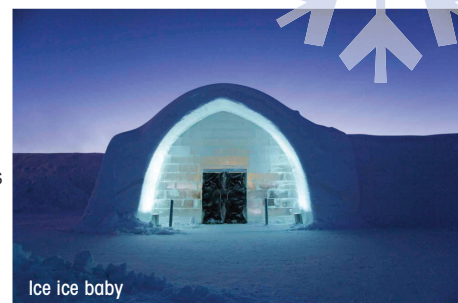


Jukkasjärvi, Sweden

While the village of Jukkasjärvi has its fair share of sights such as the nearby Torne river, the ICEHOTEL remains one of the main attractions. The hotel is an art project built of ice and snow born out of an igloo. Each spring, thousands of tonnes of ice is harvested from the frozen Torne River for use in ice sculpting classes and to build the hotel every winter. The completed structure includes a reception and main hall, church, bar, rooms and suites, and furniture made of ice. As the winter sun casts a sparkling glow over the land, visiting the ice factory is an illuminating experience. When you're ready to get your heart racing, snowmobiling, skiing, dog sledding and ATV drives are great ways to get your body temperature up before you head off to explore the Arctic Circle and search for the breathtaking Northern Lights.

Where to stay: ICEHOTEL (icehotel.com) is a truly unforgettable place to stay. Since it's rebuilt each winter, each suite is completely unique and the hotel's architecture always changes. It offers space for over 100 guests, with warm rooms and chalets available next to the ice suites, and they recommend spending a few nights in the warm section for each night in the cold. You're provided with winter wear, thermal underwear, a hat and a sleeping bag to lay over the reindeer skins on your ice bed, and woken up with hot lingonberry juice by your bedside. It's open from December until April, when it melts away back into nature until the next winter.

How to get there: Turkish Airlines flies to Stockholm from Dhs2,636 return. From Stockholm, SAS flies to Kiruna from Dhs1,260 return, from which you can take a taxi to Jukkasjärvi.



Ice ice baby

10 Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Believe it or not, our desert home is a wonderfully festive place to spend the winter holidays. Shopping malls hoist up lavish Christmas trees, carollers entertain us at special events and there's plenty of cheer all around. If you want to don your fuzziest boots don't let the fact that you live in a desert country stop you – just wander down to Ski Dubai, where you can roam the snow park or hit the slopes. If it's a less active environment you crave, head to the Chill Out Lounge at Times Square Centre where you can sip on a mocktail in an ice glass or a steaming mug of hot chocolate while nibbling on cheese boards and slurping down hot soups. Once that's whetted your appetite, make a pitstop at Mall of the Emirates for the sixth annual Stollen charity cake sale, where chefs from the Kempinski will be baking metres of the delicious loaf-like dessert to raise money for the Dubai Centre for Special Needs. Meanwhile, fun can be found for the whole family at Santa's Grotto at Wafi Mall, where the winter wonderland will include exciting events and treats and a lavishly decorated 40-foot tree.

Where to stay: The Kempinski Hotel Mall of the Emirates (kempinski.com/Dubai). Connected to Ski Dubai, you can pretend you're near a mountain in the Alps without ever leaving town. This year, the hotel will also be hosting a special Festive Season Desk where staff can assist you with everything from takeaway meals to reservations for their Santa's brunch, festive teas and Christmas dinners, to the backdrop of the Kempinski Choir's live carolling.



Ski Dubai

11 Bethlehem, Palestine

As the town where Christmas celebrations first began, it's only natural that Bethlehem goes wild with holiday season festivities. Gather in Manger Square near the Church

of the Nativity, one of the town's main attractions and one of the oldest churches in the world. At the Shepherd's Fields, you'll find open excavations of an old Byzantine church, while the beautiful Mosque of Omar is in active use. The stone-carved reservoirs at Solomon's Pools are located in a pine tree forest and are sure to take your breath away. Next, wander over to King David's Wells to see the three Great Cisterns excavated from the rock. Souvenir-hunters will delight in the Old City, while culture vultures will go nuts for the graffiti along the Bethlehem wall drawn by famous British artist Banksy. Lastly, settle down and tuck in to some moreish Palestinian cuisine, which brings together cheese, nuts, bread, meat, seafood, chillis and fruits to create an explosive range of flavours.

Where to stay: InterContinental Jacir Palace (ichotelsgroup.com). A converted palace, this stylish hotel blends modernity and tradition. Gourmet dining, a handsome spa and an infinity pool are juxtaposed against the stately exterior, an elegant courtyard and brick walls.

How to get there: FlyDubai flies to Amman from Dhs895 return. From central Amman, a taxi to King Hussein Bridge should take approximately 30 minutes, while a second taxi ride from the bridge to Bethlehem should take approximately 45 minutes.



Oh little town of Bethlehem

FEATURE BY YHANA HANNA. PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHUTTERSTOCK

Berlin, Germany

Christmas Markets are popular all over the world, particularly German ones, and Berlin has the mother of them all. The city has more than 50 each year, all coming together to create a festive season so merry it might even leave you slightly overwhelmed. Stalls spread over the large boulevards and squares and even seep into the small side streets and some museums, leaving you with little choice but to just give in to the market mania. Charlottenburg Castle and Gendarmenmarkt Christmas Markets are two of the most beautiful, and both sell everything from traditional handicrafts and embroidery to artists' wares and culinary delicacies. They put on a spectacular show too – we're talking jugglers, fire artists, acrobats, choirs and jazz ensembles. Winter World, alongside Alte Potsdamer Straße, has an enormous toboggan run and an open-air ice rink to keep sportive types happy. Meanwhile, near the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church Christmas Market, set up around a historical church, the air is thick with the smell of roasted almonds, hot chocolate, glazed fruit, grilled sausages and spiced drinks. The market between Staatsoper and Opernpalais takes things to a whole other level with a crib of real, live animals and a wooden horse carousel. There really is a market with something for everyone (literally), and capping off your days of stall-trawling with a horse-drawn carriage ride through the historical city centre is an ideal way to rest your weary legs.

Where to stay: The Regent Berlin (regenthotels.com). Stately, über comfortable and with impeccable service: it's easy to see why this



Market mania in Berlin

hotel is a celebrity favourite when it comes to bedding down in Berlin. Condé Nast Traveler once deemed it one of the best places to stay in the world, and with its five-star facilities, large bathrooms and comfortable beds, they may be right. The hotel's fine dining is complemented by Fischers Fritz, a Two Michelin star restaurant that foodies will adore, while busy business types will be grateful for the free high-speed internet access available in every room.

How to get there: Qatar Airways flies to Berlin via Doha from Dhs2,935 return. ●