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DECEMBER 2023

# WHAT'S UP

WHAT TO SEE | WHAT TO DO

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HISTORY IN THE  
*Heart of Bulgaria*

EDITOR'S PICKS

10 CHRISTMAS MARKETS  
ACROSS THE WORLD

& MUCH MORE



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# WHAT'S UP

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# December Events

By Tamala Malerk

# EDITOR'S PICKS

For things to do between Christmas markets, we've got eight events occurring across Germany this winter. From ballet to car shows, comedy nights, toy cons and more, there is something on this list for everyone.



Grand Classic Ballet presents "Swan Lake" and "The Nutcracker" **Nov. 26, 2023-Jan. 15, 2024**

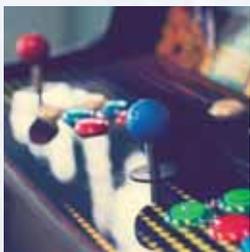
Across Berlin, celebrate craft beer with Catch these two classic ballet performances no matter where you live in Germany. Performances include Munich, Berlin, Stuttgart, Mannheim, Hamburg, Oberhausen and more. For more locations and dates go to [mc-ballet.de/kalender](http://mc-ballet.de/kalender).



Essen Motor Show **Dec. 1-12, Essen**

For automobile lovers everywhere, enjoy classic cars, motorsports and discussions on tuning and lifestyle at "Europe's leading trade fair for sporty vehicles." Celebrate the end of the 2023 Formula One season and get geared up for the 2024 season.

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Retro Games Con + Classic Toys Con **Dec. 2, Dresden**

Relive your childhood and soak up all the nostalgia at this convention. Bring euros to buy all the things you couldn't when you were a kid. Make sure to check out this month's Con Together at [stripeseurope.com](http://stripeseurope.com) for more cons across Germany.



Candlelight: 100 Years of Warner Bros. **Dec. 8, Dortmund**

Relax in the candlelight and enjoy the orchestral music from movies and television programs such as "The Wizard of Oz," "The Lord of the Rings," "Scooby Doo," "Friends," "Casablanca" and more. Additional dates and locations can be found at [candlelightexperience.com](http://candlelightexperience.com).

©JEROME SILVERE AKA 21STREETZ



Bonn Santa Claus Run 2023 **Dec. 10, Bonn**

Run off those Christmas cookie calories and have some fun at the same time. You can choose between fun runs of 1 km and longer routes up to 10 km, so there is a distance for everyone. Registration ends Dec. 3.



©ILIZA.COM

Iliza Shlesinger Live **Dec. 12, Cologne**

Calling all elder millennials: Grab your party goblins and make your way to this comedy show from the winner of "Last Comic Standing." More German and European dates are available at [iliza.com/pages/tour-dates](http://iliza.com/pages/tour-dates).



Moving Shadows **Dec. 27, Nuremberg**

See Europe's "award-winning shadow theatre show." You will be captivated by the blend of light, music and the precision of eight people behind a screen. Additional dates, including Stuttgart and Kaiserslautern, can be found at [mobile-theater.de/termine.html](http://mobile-theater.de/termine.html).



Ski Jumping World Cup 2023 **Dec. 31, 2023-Jan. 1, 2024, Garmisch-Partenkirchen**

Cheer on skiers as they compete in the qualifying jumps. These two days are a part of the major "Four Hills Tournament" across Germany and Austria. For more jump dates, go to [skigebiete-test.de](http://skigebiete-test.de).

## Christmas Markets

If you are looking for a great list of Christmas markets, travel features, stocking stuffers and more check out Stripes' "European Christmas Markets" magazine, available online and in print at your local Commissary, Exchange and Express. ■



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**SEE OUR MENU**




# PHOTO of the month

Most people head to Seitan Limania Beach on the island of Crete to photograph the turquoise blue water and contrasting white-walled cliffs that hem in this beautiful beachy cove. But our contributing photographer found this goat more photogenic. We thought it would bring you some joy at this bleak time of year to know that somewhere in Greece a goat may be perched on a cliff keeping tabs on whether the beachgoers are naughty or nice.

**Photo by Melissa Rall**

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A DAY AT

# The World's Biggest Spa

By Kat Nickola

**F**orty minutes northwest of Munich, the Therme Erding claims to be the world's biggest spa. The local thermal waters are said to have mineral-based healing properties and a natural temperature of 65 degrees Celsius (149 Fahrenheit). The same water is used at the city's geothermal power plant. Don't worry, though, at the spa the water is treated and maintained at a pleasant 34 degrees Celsius (93 Fahrenheit).



There are two distinct areas at Therme Erding. First is the family-friendly, swimsuit-required Tropical Spa and Water Park. This Erlebnisbad (adventure pool) consists of a large spa pool area, a wave pool and numerous water slides. The second area is the textile-free (nude) Vitality Oasis (also called the Vital Therme) only accessible to those 16 and older, which has a massive series of spa pools and numerous saunas.

When you enter the facility, you will be given a wristband that opens your assigned locker and can be used for any charges at the restaurants or bars. You can pay your total bill via credit card before you leave. The vast locker room has changing cubicles for privacy. Don your swimsuit and make sure everyone is wearing their wristband. You will need to tap it on the entry turnstile for the different areas.

If you are heading to the swimsuit-required spa and water park, I suggest you stash the rest of your stuff, including towel and phone, in the locker before following the blue arrows. If you are heading to the textile-free spa, put your robe or towel over your swimsuit, wear some flip-flops, bring a book or a friend, and follow the red arrows.

Enjoy exploring this huge indoor tropical oasis. The water park area boasts 10 big tube slides, plus a smaller play area perfect for little kids. There is also an outdoor slide area that is closed in the winter. Near the wave pool you'll find access to the heated outdoor spa circuit, plus loungers and a swim-up bar. Across the facility is the spa area where you can take in a facial mud mask, soak in the thermal waters, enjoy the themed saunas, or float in the warm outdoor pool.

If you choose to enter the textile-free zone, be prepared for an incredible Roman-themed spa experience. After the turnstile, you will enter a foyer space where you can stash your swimsuit in one of the cubbies. Continue to wear your robe or towel when walking around the spa but take

it off and hang it on the hooks when entering a pool or sauna. Now, explore! There is a massive spa pool, tons of themed saunas, swim-up bars and relaxation spaces galore. Don't miss participating in a few of the special programs and ceremonies. You may find yourself donning a clay mask, meditating to a singing bowl or being wafted with intense heat.

It is best to book a reservation ahead of time at [www.thermenreservierung.de/erding](http://www.thermenreservierung.de/erding). Choose Erlebnisbad (adventure pool) for the family-friendly swimsuits-on area, or VitalThermen & Saunen for the 16+ nude spa area. An online reservation is simply a guaranteed entry on a particular day and time. Booking a lounge also has this same advantage. You can pay when you arrive for your reservation, or you can buy entry tickets, called vouchers, ahead of time at [www.shop.therme-erding.de](http://www.shop.therme-erding.de), which often advertises discounts.

Spend the whole day enjoying family time in the healing waters and exciting pools or submit to total relaxation in the adult area. ■

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# HISTORY IN THE *Heart of Bulgaria*

By Kat Nickola

NEBET TEPE



ROMAN AMPHITHEATER

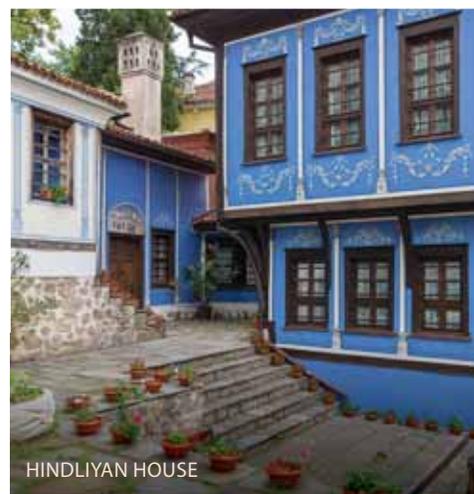
## PLOVDIV

When we pulled into the Plovdiv train station, my sister and I were doubting our travel choices. It had been a restless overnight train ride from Istanbul with two little kids. Our berth on the Bosphor Express was comfortable enough but a series of border stops kept us awake in the wee hours. Riding into town past litter-filled vacant lots, Cyrillic graffiti and row upon row of brutalist housing blocks wasn't the welcome we were after.

Then it all changed. A quick taxi ride whisked us up the hill into the Old Town of Plovdiv, and suddenly we felt like we were back in time. The tiny stone-lined streets wound between colorfully painted homes and former mansions built in the Bulgarian National Revival style that developed here. Six of these buildings, with their dark wood framing, rows of windows and overhanging

second floors, can be visited. We enjoyed the bright blue Hindliyan House which housed floor-to-ceiling murals and period furniture that highlighted the wealth of the burgeoning Bulgarian merchant class.

The Bulgarian National Revival occurred in the 1700s, when the Ottoman government was in decline and Bulgarian culture and nationalism could develop. Bulgaria was part of the Ottoman Empire for nearly 600 years, and previously part of the Byzantine Empire. But Bulgaria's origins are much older. The Bulgars, for whom the area is name, were a semi-nomadic people who united in 632 as Old Great Bulgaria. The nation developed north of the Black Sea, but quickly expanded southwest creating an empire that lasted until 1018.



HINDLIYAN HOUSE

There are much older layers to this town, though. Before the Bulgars moved in, the area was part of the ancient Roman Empire and Plovdiv was known as Philippopolis. The Roman stadium was built in the second century by Emperor Hadrian. It was a ten-minute, downhill walk along the cobble streets of the bustling, cafe-lined shopping district. In another five minutes, we walked to the ancient Theatre of Philippopolis, a large Roman amphitheater that still hosts performances.

Back up on the hill in the old town, we visited the oldest layer of history at Nebet Tepe. Atop the hill is an archaeology park at a prehistoric settlement dating from 4000 B.C. that eventually became the city of Plovdiv. Thracian tribes fortified the settlement with dry-stone walls and towers. I marveled at the construction while my daughter pet a local cat and we enjoyed the hilltop view and city-park ambiance.

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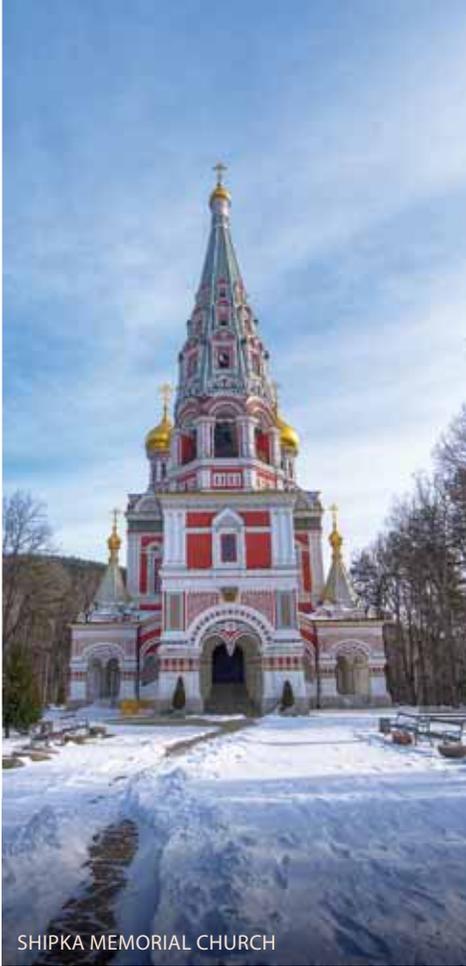


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BACHKOVO MONASTERY

we hiked up to Asen's Fortress, a medieval cliff-top ruin with a church precariously perched over the valley.



BACHKOVO MONASTERY (INTERIOR)

Buzludzha Monument rose up like a post-apocalyptic relic left by the communist government. Back down the other side, however, was the contrastingly serene Dryanovo Monastery. We were able to pop into this canyon-floor religious center just prior to closing time and got a wonderful tour of the icon-laden church and grounds by a lovely older monk.

It was a curving mountain road up over Shipka Pass. At the top, the abandoned saucer-shaped

Tired of driving, we finally rolled into the historic city of Veliko Tarnovo.

## OVER SHIPKA PASS

**W**e rented a car in Plovdiv and planned to take a day to drive up over the Balkan Mountains and visit sites along the way. With my sister at the wheel, our first stop was only 20 minutes out of town.

Bulgaria is known for its numerous active Orthodox Christian sites, and Bachkovo Monastery is the second largest. We visited three unique mural-covered churches, wandered along the arched columns and walkways and fed the sheep that live at the complex. Nearby,



BUZLUDZHA MONUMENT

“

*The scenery and small mountain-town atmosphere define the Veliko Tarnovo area.*

”

## VELIKO TARNOVO

In 1185, a revolt by leading Bulgarian nobles threw off the crumbling Byzantine Empire to re-establish the Bulgarian Empire. Lasting over 200 years until Ottoman forces invaded, the Bulgarian monarchs based their government in Veliko Tarnovo.

The city is laid out on the cliffs of the wildly meandering Yantra River, which folds in and back on itself so much that the town appears to be a series of cliff-top islands. In the Middle Ages, this situation made the town, and the seat of power at Tsaravets Fortress nearly impenetrable.

We planned for a morning at Tsaravets Fortress but stayed all day. Thank goodness we had snacks. After crossing a high cobblestone bridge and passing under three gateways, we finally entered the massive complex where vendors offered extra experiences like horseback rides and guided tours. My daughter loved the opportunity to dress up as a Bulgarian empress and pose on the throne.

Tsaravets Fortress was a small city that housed government families, a military base and barracks, a palace for royals and a huge monastery. While most of it lies in ruins, the Ascension Cathedral at

the top of the hill was rebuilt in 1981 to mark the then-communist state's anniversary. Inside, we marveled at the unique, dark modernist murals of Bulgarian suffering.

Outside, the kids enjoyed getting a bit lost in the nooks and crannies of the vast ruinous complex. There were stairs to climb, tunnels to search, and crenelated walls to walk along. Numerous places offered scenic views across the river to the Trapezitsa Fortress, where medieval noble families once lived.

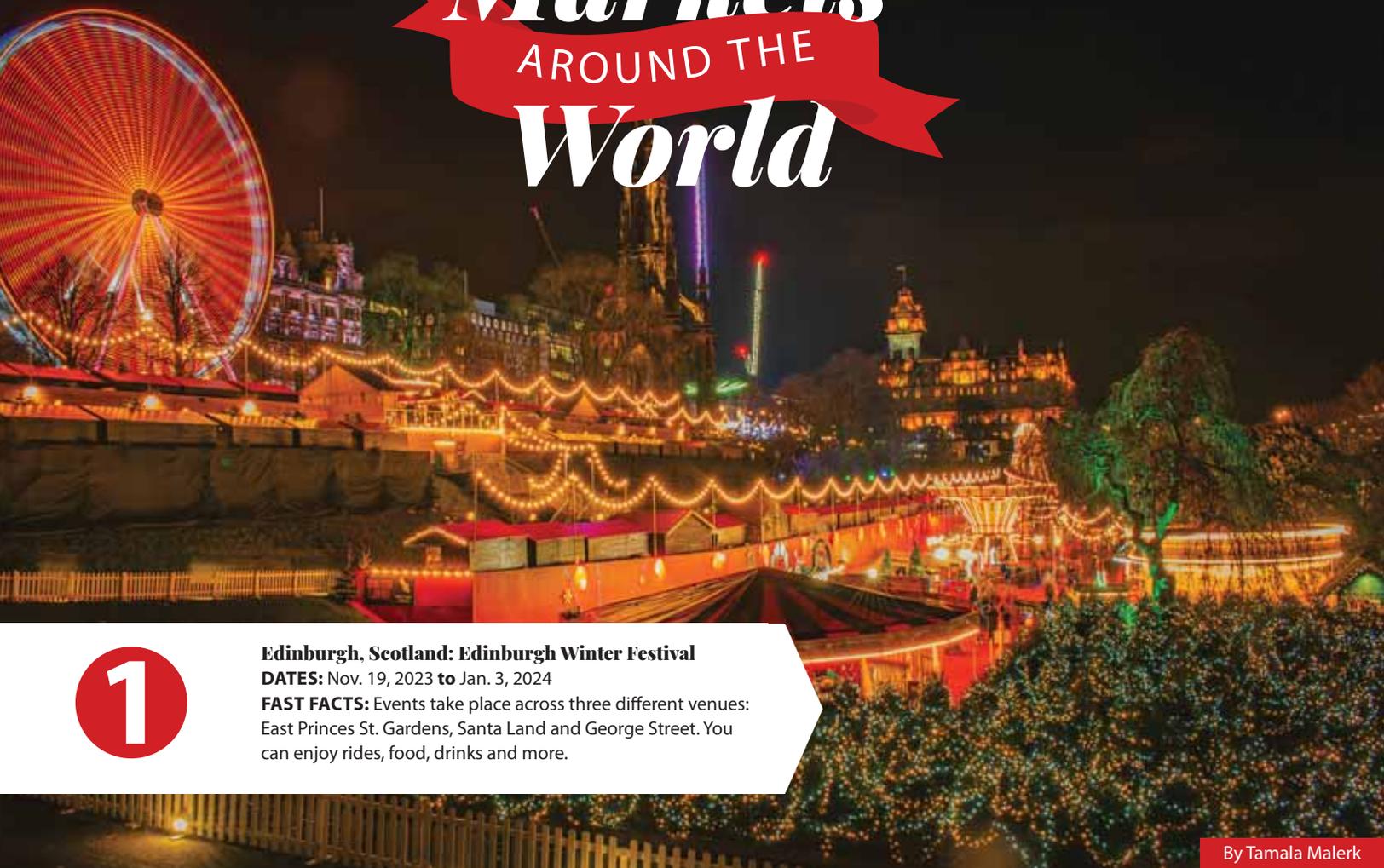
The scenery and small mountain-town atmosphere define the Veliko Tarnovo area. We drove a few kilometers up a steep road to the tiny village of Arbanassi, which is maintained as a cultural heritage reserve. We wandered around the preserved, but still occupied, 17th-century stone homes and admired the chickens and horses eating clover in the village square. We respectfully entered a few of the small neighborhood churches whose windowless walls and arched ceilings were covered in old murals and icons that had aged and darkened from burning incense.

Later we ate at the Sevastokrator Hotel's restaurant. With views over the Veliko Tarnovo canyon below and a playground for the kids, it was a perfect afternoon in the heart of historic Bulgaria. ■



ASCENSION CATHEDRAL

# 10 Christmas Markets AROUND THE World



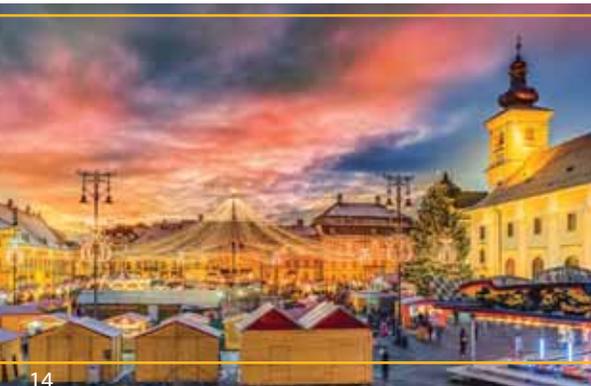
1

**Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh Winter Festival**

**DATES:** Nov. 19, 2023 to Jan. 3, 2024

**FAST FACTS:** Events take place across three different venues: East Princes St. Gardens, Santa Land and George Street. You can enjoy rides, food, drinks and more.

By Tamala Malerk



## Two

**Sibiu, Romania**

**DATES:** Nov. 10, 2023 to Jan. 7, 2024 (tentatively)

**FAST FACTS:** Check out light shows, food, and a blend of German, Romanian and Hungarian cultures at the Piata Mare in old town Sibiu.

3

**Hong Kong, China: WinterFest**

**DATES:** Late Nov. 2023 to early Jan. 2024

**FAST FACTS:** Enjoy artwork, markets, games, meet Father Christmas and more.





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**4** **Lisbon, Portugal**  
**DATES:** Nov. 2023 to Dec. 2023  
**FAST FACTS:** Many markets take place in Lisbon. One of the most famous is Wonderland Lisbon which features an ice rink, Ferris wheel, train, trampoline and more.



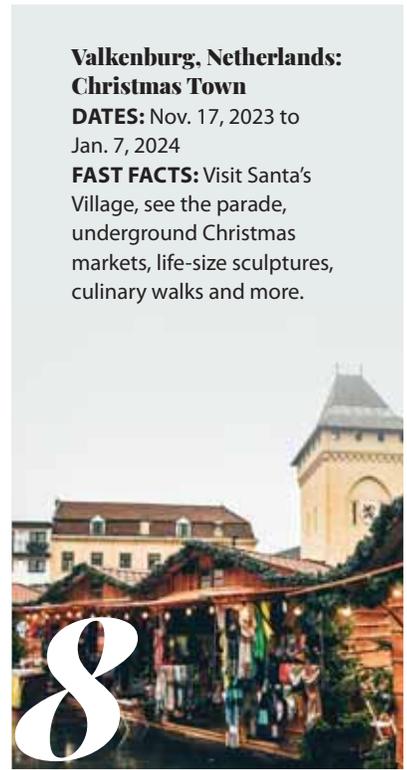
**FIVE**  
**Washington, D.C.: Downtown Holiday Market**  
**DATES:** Nov. 17, 2023 to Dec. 23, 2023 | Closed Thanksgiving Day and Monday, Dec. 4  
**FAST FACTS:** Features live music and over 70 exhibitors so you can shop for crafts, food and more.



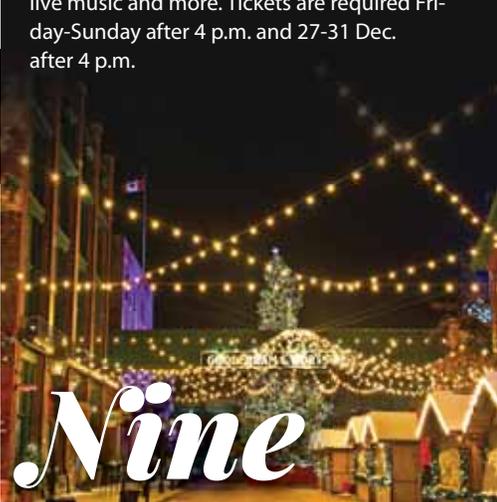
**Madrid, Spain: Plaza Mayor Christmas Market**  
**DATES:** Nov. 2023 to Dec. 31, 2023  
**FAST FACTS:** Over 100 exhibitors await you at this 100-year-old market featuring DIY nativity scenes, gag gifts and Christmas decorations.



**Gdańsk, Poland**  
**DATES:** Nov. 17 to Dec. 23, 2023  
**FAST FACTS:** Enjoy Polish dishes such as kielbasa, pierogi and bigos while shopping.



**Valkenburg, Netherlands: Christmas Town**  
**DATES:** Nov. 17, 2023 to Jan. 7, 2024  
**FAST FACTS:** Visit Santa's Village, see the parade, underground Christmas markets, life-size sculptures, culinary walks and more.



**Toronto, Canada: Distillery Winter Village**  
**DATES:** Nov. 16, 2023 to Dec. 31, 2023  
**FAST FACTS:** Interactive treasure hunt, 65+ exhibitors, cafes and restaurants represented, live music and more. Tickets are required Friday-Sunday after 4 p.m. and 27-31 Dec. after 4 p.m.



**Merano, Italy**  
**DATES:** Nov. 24, 2023 to Jan. 6, 2024 | Closed Christmas Day  
**FAST FACTS:** Shop food and crafts and go ice skating while choirs sing and music plays. You are also a short trip from the Lagundo and Sterntaler Christmas markets. ■

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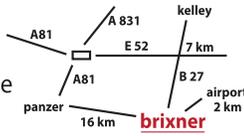


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»»»» SO MUCH ««««

# Mistletoe?



When we first moved to Germany in the dreary late winter a couple of years ago. Having come from the desert, we were excited to see what kind of new growth would pop up in the spring. However, I looked out the wintry car windows, "when what to my wondering eyes should appear?"

## MISTLETOE!

To my surprise, there were huge spheres of this green plant surviving the cold weather in the bare trees.

Mistletoe is a parasitic plant that grows in the tops of trees. It uses its host's water but photosynthesizes its own food. It is poisonous if eaten and is often treated as a nuisance in the States. So why does it seem so prevalent here in Europe?



## Mistletoe in History

The Greeks and Romans used mistletoe medicinally, even though it is known to be poisonous today. More about this later, but it turns out that they may have been onto something.

The Celts considered it a sacred plant, likely because it is one of the few, along with holly and ivy, that can thrive during the cold winter months.

Mistletoe's poisonous aspect was also regarded as notable in the Norse traditions. In one story, Frigg cast a spell making all plants safe for her son Baldur, but mistletoe was overlooked, and it ended up being used to kill him.

## Mistletoe Has Value

In Europe, mistletoe growth is not as controlled as in the States. It is considered a valuable part of a healthy ecosystem since it doesn't actually kill its host trees in areas where there is ample water. For that reason, you will

see it allowed to grow in trees that line drainage ditches and lakes, or trees that live on low ground.

In addition, the extract from mistletoe is used in a few European dietary supplements and homeopathic remedies. Most of these are prescribed to older adults for the treatment of ailments like arthritis and high blood pressure.

Mistletoe has also been studied at length in Europe for the treatment of cancer. While some types of cancer show no effects, colorectal and pancreatic cancers seem to respond well to medicine made from mistletoe and it is used fairly widely in Europe as a complementary treatment to chemotherapy.

I appreciate mistletoe more now and look forward to seeing it exposed on empty tree branches as the seasons change. I might even kiss a loved one under it. ■

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