



Sweet offerings ... Viennese baking beckons.

# Ten towns a-trading

From Stockholm to Berlin via Budapest, **Paul Ewart** explores the best Christmas markets the Continent has to offer – where handmade gifts, local delicacies and lashings of tradition are to be found.

PICTURE the scene: you're wrapped cosily in a coat, hat and boots. Your fingers grip a steaming glass of mulled wine. The smell of roasting chestnuts, sausages and spicy gingerbread fills the air, along with the angelic sound of choirboys singing carols.

Under your feet, powdery fresh snow crunches as you walk past Gothic church facades and ancient half-timbered houses. Fellow shoppers bustle past you, pausing to sample a lip-smacking local delicacy from one of the many surrounding food stalls.

Above you, stars and fairy lights twinkle and another snowflake falls silently onto your nose. Not your average shopping experience, is it?

Dating to the Middle Ages, the Christmas market is a favourite element of Europe's Yuletide celebrations. Nowhere does a market better than Germany, where Dresden and Berlin host two of the best-known of the country's 2500 markets.

But while Germany and France are well represented, they no longer have a monopoly on festive cheer. New markets that adhere to the original Germanic template have sprung up across Europe and are catering to an increasing demand from Christmas-time tourists.

Traditionally beginning on the Friday before the start of Advent and ending on Christmas Eve, markets offer the perfect antidote to our global culture of Identikit high-street stores and malls. Selling handcrafted, locally produced gifts at purse-friendly post-GFC prices, this is a retail experience like no other.

## Vienna, Austria

The Christkindlmarkt on the square in front of the magnificent Town Hall is Vienna's classic Christmas market. At more than 700 years old, Christkindlmarkt is also one of the oldest. Look for traditional images of St Nicholas and the devil (Krampus) sculpted in confectionery and, when you've had one sweet too many, take a stroll in the surrounding Rathaus Park – transformed into an enchanted scene of snow-blowing gargoyles, pony rides and endless streams of traditional red Viennese hearts. **When** November 13-December 24. **Buy** Hand-blown glass orbs, silverware, red heart ornaments and

incredibly detailed, hand-painted biscuit moulds.

**Eat** Golden kar toffelpuffen (potato cakes), sausages and hams.

**Don't miss** The Vienna Boys' Choir, free on Sunday mornings at the historic Hofburg Chapel.

**Getting there** Austrian Airlines flies from Sydney via Bangkok or Singapore. [austrian.com](http://austrian.com).

**More information** [wien.info](http://wien.info).

## Dresden, Germany

Dating to 1434, Dresden can legitimately lay claim to the market crown. Traditionally called Striezelmarkt – after a sweet delicacy the city was famous for, now known globally as stollen cake – the market stays true to its mediaeval origins. Its 250 stalls house traditional craftsmen selling their wares; however, the focal point is undoubtedly the world's tallest Christmas pyramid, complete with life-sized depictions of angels and the nativity.

**When** November 26-December 24. **Buy** Christmas pyramids, candle-holders, glass baubles, bright blue-and-white hand-thrown ceramics and the traditional pflaumentoffel, a chimney-sweep figure made of dried prunes.

**Eat** Stollen cake, obviously. Only approved bakers are allowed to sell the traditional, yeasty cake.

**Don't miss** The Stollen Festival, held on the second Sunday in December. A 3000-kilogram stollen is paraded through the city, presided over by a glamorous Stollenmaedchen (the stollen maiden).

**Getting There** Lufthansa flies from Sydney to Dresden five times a week. [lufthansa.com](http://lufthansa.com).

**More information** [dresden-tourist.de](http://dresden-tourist.de).

## Berlin, Germany

Berlin has 60 markets spread across the city this year, with at least one in each of its 12 districts. While you can still find the traditional sights, sounds and smells, the city's cutting-edge ethos prevails so many markets have a more contemporary feel. The most popular is Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedaechtniskirche. Other notable locations include the Charlottenburg Castle and Potsdamer Platz, which is a



Northern cheer ... (from left) options for the hungry in Hungary; Berlin's markets have a contemporary feel; Lille lights up.



Photos: Getty Images; AFP; istock



great option for kids, thanks to the nearby Legoland Discovery Centre. **When** November 23-December 31. **Buy** Unique artwork and contemporary jewellery.

**Eat** Bratwurst, currywurst and potato cakes.

**Don't miss** Europe's largest mobile toboggan run in the Winterwelt market in Potsdamer Platz.

**Getting there** Qantas flies to Berlin via Hong Kong and London. [qantas.com.au](http://qantas.com.au).

**More information** [christmas-markets-germany.de](http://christmas-markets-germany.de).

## Prague, Czech Republic

Wenceslas Square hosts one of the most famous markets around. The 11th-century marketplace has rows of wooden huts selling stocking-fillers, a stage-set nativity scene and daily carol singers and bands. Most impressive is the enormous Christmas tree ablaze with lights.

**When** November 28-January 1. **Buy** Handmade wooden puppets that represent characters from Czech folklore, Bohemian crystal, garnet jewellery and traditional straw-and-maize decorations.

**Eat** Trdlo, a soft yeast dough that is wrapped around a hot metal pin and baked into a cylinder, then rolled in ground almond and sugar.

**Don't miss** Mikulas (St Nicholas Day) on December 5, when actors portraying St Nicholas, an angel and the devil appear at the market, rewarding good children with treats.

**Getting There** Qantas flies to Prague via London.

**More information** [czechtourism.com](http://czechtourism.com).

## Tallinn, Estonia

What Tallinn's Christmas market lacks in history, it makes up for with beautiful, chocolate-box charm. Taking place in the cobblestone 15th-century



Crowd pleaser ... NK department store's windows draw crowds.

Old Town square, 60-plus wooden stalls are clustered around a huge Christmas tree. By December, Tallinn is usually under a quilt of snow. The Gothic town hall in front of the market provides a fairytale feel and, when the cold gets too much, there are candlelit restaurants on the fringes of the square that can provide excellent refuge.

**When** November 27-January 9. **Buy** Carved wooden bowls, decorations made from wood and twine, hand-knitted jumpers, felted hats, buckwheat pillows, ceramics and glassware.

**Eat** Spicy blood sausages and sauerkraut, soups, marzipan and gingerbread.

**Don't miss** The open-air ice rink in nearby Harju Street.

**Getting there** Finn Air flies from Sydney via Hong Kong and Helsinki. [finnair.com](http://finnair.com).

**More information** [tourism.tallinn.ee](http://tourism.tallinn.ee).

## Copenhagen, Denmark

In the capital's romantic, 19th-century Tivoli Gardens, Copenhagen's main market celebrates Jul (yuletide) in style.

marketplace in the Grand Place is dominated by a 50-metre Ferris wheel; at its base is the Village de Noel – a reproduction of a snow-covered village. The market's 60-plus wooden stalls sell crafts and gourmet treats.

**When** November 24-December 30. **Buy** Nativity figurines and Christmas decorations, traditional French toys.

**Eat** Cheese, chicory pate, macaroons and babeluttes (soft caramels).

**Don't miss** Father Christmas "falling" from the Chamber of Commerce's 80-metre belfry on the Saturday before Christmas.

**Getting there** Air France flies from Sydney to Lille. [airfrance.com/au](http://airfrance.com/au). **More information** [noel-a-lille.com](http://noel-a-lille.com).

## Stockholm, Sweden

Two markets really stand out. One is Gamla Stan, in the city's oldest neighbourhood. Held in the shadow of the Royal Castle, the Gamla Stan market hosts small stalls that sell home-made gifts and traditional Swedish Christmas foods. From here, take a boat to the market at Skansen and the world's oldest open-air museum at the same time, including a zoo complete with Nordic animals. Market staff wear folk costumes.

**When** November 21-December 24. **Buy** Embroidery, leather goods and ornaments made of straw.

**Eat** Smoked sausage, eel, salmon, pepparkakor (ginger snaps), saffron buns and braenda mandlar (roasted, candied almonds).

**Don't miss** The Christmas window display at NK, Stockholm's swankiest department store.

**Getting There** Scandinavian Airlines flies from Sydney to Stockholm. [flysas.com](http://flysas.com).

**More information** [visit-stockholm.com](http://visit-stockholm.com).

## Basel, Switzerland

City officials claim their "Christmas street" is Europe's longest. Set in the Old Town, Basel's market features choirs and concerts aplenty and more than 100 stalls and houses, in which traders and craftspeople offer their goods and demonstrate their skills. Whether they desire a sparkling diamond bracelet or world peace, visitors can write a private seasonal wish in the city's Book of Wishes.

**When** November 25-December 23. **Buy** Decorations, toys and knives.

**Eat** Basel biscuits and wine.

**Don't miss** The Coureng of St Nicholas on December 30.

Marking the end of Christmas and beginning of New Year, the celebration sees "St Nicholas" being chased through the streets by 44 men armed with boughs of holly and sprigs of mistletoe (representing the new year).

**Getting there** Lufthansa flies from Sydney to Basel. [lufthansa.com](http://lufthansa.com).

**More information** [baslerweihnacht.ch](http://baslerweihnacht.ch).

## Budapest, Hungary

Budapest has several markets, with the most popular being at Voeroesmarty Square. Ranked as one of the best in Europe, folk dances take place daily among Voeroesmarty Square's 150-plus cottage-style stalls.

**When** November 19-December 29. **Buy** Handmade, authentic glassware and wooden puppets.

**Eat** Goulash, strudel, Christmas cookies, sausages and sweet yeast cake.

**Don't miss** The Gerbeaud building's Advent calendar "opens" at 5pm daily – look at the windows for brilliant scenes.

**Getting There** Austrian Airlines flies from Sydney via Vienna. [austrian.com](http://austrian.com).

**More information** [budapestinfo.hu/en](http://budapestinfo.hu/en).