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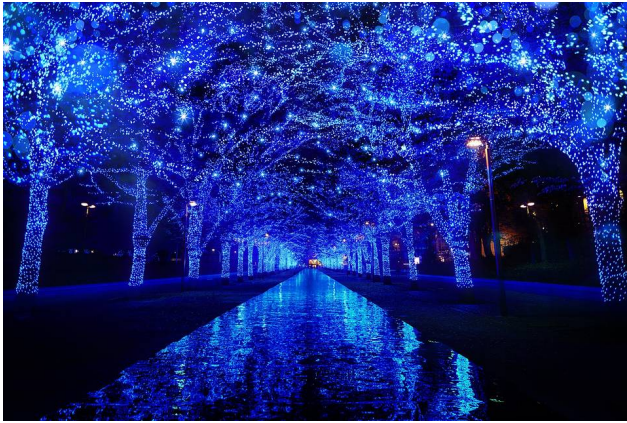
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TRAVEL

5 Festively Original Holiday Getaways

Christmas can bring out a certain generic kitschiness in otherwise appealing destinations. Exceptions?

These locales from Santa Fe to Tokyo to Moscow



The Ao no Dokutsu, or 'Blue Cave,' display in Tokyo's Shibuya district. PHOTO: SHIBUYA AO NO DOKUTSU

By *Valerie Stivers*

Nov. 22, 2017 10:10 a.m. ET

GLÖGG AND REINDEERS and knitted booties are holiday-magical in theory. In practice, however, these selling points of a holiday trip—along with pop-up skating rinks, folksy craft markets and vintage-model-train events—can seem tacky or generic. How special is that ornament you just bought if every stand in your host country sells identical ones? Isn't that hotel turkey dinner similar, though frankly inferior, to what you can get at home? Most of us travel to experience something different and remarkable and photographable, but the holidays can bring out the sameness in places, obscuring the local culture we've strenuously sought out. The solution? A holiday getaway to one of the following locales, each with a unique spin on tradition, and indigenous arts and culture that generate cheer with much less of the cheese.

Marathon Meals and Brass Bands

New Orleans, La.

A Cajun-style Christmas defies preconceptions. Papa Noel arrives in a boat pulled by alligators; people celebrate the Eve with bonfires on the levee; and fried green tomatoes and red velvet cake feature on holiday menus. Though the weather can get somewhat chilly (highs of 64 degrees Fahrenheit, lows of 45), New Orleans in December feels more family-friendly than it does during Jazz Fest's boozy concerts and Mardi Gras's bead-necklace-flinging madness. You'll find no shortage of things to do: Check out the city website followyourjoy.com (cloying name notwithstanding) for a complete list of events, which include house tours of Garden District mansions and "Celebration in the Oaks" in City Park from Nov. 24 to Jan. 1, a nighttime display of lights entwining the Spanish moss on the gnarled oaks, and giant whimsical illuminations (a rocking horse, for instance) dotting the lawns.

Food-fixated travelers can try réveillon (from the French word for "awakening"), a multicourse holiday meal, which was traditionally served after midnight mass. These days it's offered at a more reasonable hour at places like the Country Clubin Bywater, a hipster restaurant-lounge with a pool (634 Louisa St., thecountryclubneworleans.com), and at Cafe Dauphine, a white-tablecloth restaurant that opened in a historic building in the Ninth Ward after Hurricane Katrina (5229 Dauphine St., cafedauphine.wixsite.com/cafedauphine). With luck, after dinner, you'll get to see the best seasonal entertainment unfold on the street in the French Quarter, where ragtag brass bands play to dancing crowds. What better place to spend Christmas than a party where you feel welcome even if you don't know a soul.

Beach Bash

Kerala, India



Traditional Kathakali dance on New Year carnival in Fort Kochi (Cochin), Kerala, India. Kochi, formerly known as Cochin, is a city and port in the Indian state of Kerala. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

India's most Christian state, home to some of the country's finest beaches, erupts in a series of seaside festivities in late December. The port city of Kochi, for one, hosts a Christmas costume parade as well as midnight masses at the St. Francis Church, built in 1503, and the Gothic Santa Cruz Basilica, trimmed in colored lights. At the same time, year-end carnival festivities can last for up to two weeks.

Carnivals at Kochi and the surfing beach at Kovalam feature fireworks and parades of locals wearing gilded headdresses or dressed as many-armed Shivas. On New Year's Eve in Kochi, participants burn a giant old-man statue symbolizing the old year. Winter is also the season for Theyyam dance. These ritual performances invoke the

spirits of heroes and ancestors, and take place at countryside shrines throughout the state. Tourist organizations like Theyyam Calendar can help with travel planning so you can take in as many—or as few—of the celebrations as you'd like (theyyamcalendar.com).

Steps away from the parade and carnival festivities in Kerala are white-sand beaches where you can be nearly alone, like those near the upscale Gateway Hotel Janardhanapuram, in Varkala (*from \$206 a night, gateway.tajhotels.com*).

Alternatively, book the extremely affordable Clafouti Beach Resort, where the beachfront restaurant makes a fine, if unlikely, spot for Christmas dinner. Choosing the catch-of-the-day from giant platters of fish on ice may not be the traditional holiday meal, but that's exactly the appeal (*from about \$36 a night, clafoutiresort.com*).

Deck the Plaza

Santa Fe, N.M.



Farolitos on an adobe wall in Santa Fe. PHOTO: DANIEL NADELBACH/TOURISM SANTA FE

If

Christmas tamales aren't reason enough to plan a holiday trip to Santa Fe, we should point out that this art-obsessed city, nestled at 7,000 feet, also offers umpteen seasonal cultural attractions. The city has explicitly guarded its multiethnic heritage since the early 1900s, and still upholds traditions rooted in Native American and Spanish customs. On Dec. 10, a Las Posadas nativity play parades around the Santa Fe Plaza, and on Christmas Eve, the gallery district hosts a "Canyon Road Walk," lit by farolitos (candles in paper bags) and scented by pinyon (pine) bonfires.

The Santa Fe School of Cooking holds classes focused on New Mexican holiday specialties such as tamales and *bizcochitos*, cinnamon and anise cookies (santafeschoolofcooking.com). For the annual Glow holiday program at the Santa Fe Botanical Garden, two local artists will transform 4 acres of the 18-acre territory with light installations more akin to James Turrell than Father Christmas, and create a grove of "spirit poles," a modern spin on indigenous traditions (santafebotanicalgarden.org).

It's also the time of year for feast-day dances held at the nearby Northern Indian pueblos. A blend of Native American and Spanish Catholic influences, they're

ceremonial affairs, not performances, but tourists can often take a peek (*santafe.org*).

Light-Bright Bonanza

Tokyo

The Emperor's birthday, Dec. 23, trumps Christmas as a national holiday in primarily Shinto and Buddhist Japan. On that day, revelers gather outside Tokyo's Imperial Palace to wave small Japanese flags in dignified celebration. But come nightfall, November through February, the high-tech capital blazes with holiday lights—which might turn off kitschphobes if it weren't for the sheer ambition and punctiliousness of the display. Millions of LED bulbs illuminate skyscrapers, pedestrian streets, any number of landmarks and even a stretch of the Meguro River. Particularly impressive: the “Jewellumination” program at Yomiuriland amusement park. On New Year's Eve, shrines are open all night, offering food stalls and *otaki-age*, a practice in which worshipers burn wooden plaques with the previous year's zodiac sign in a communal bonfire. The main drawback to all this liveliness? The crowds. Book a hotel in a quiet neighborhood, like the new One@Tokyo in Oshiage (*from about \$95 a night, onetokyo.com*).

High-Caliber Ice Capades

Moscow



100-meter-long “Lights tunnel” at one of the venues of the Moscow Journey to Christmas festival in 2016. PHOTO: JOURNEY TO CHRISTMAS ORGANIZATION COMMITTEE

In this land of deep snow, fur coats, pastel-painted medieval and Italianate buildings, and plentiful gut-warming vodka shots, the winter festivities recall the era of czarist excess. Dec. 25 is not a holiday in Moscow—Russians decorate trees and exchange presents on New Year's, while Christmas within the Russian Orthodox tradition falls on Jan. 7. But the city's winter festival starts on Dec. 22, and its eye-popping production values, 70 sites and more than 10,000 events are reason enough to visit. Among the holiday staples is the 8,000-square-foot skating rink that pops up in Novopushkinsky Square. There, between free public skate times, you can watch hourlong ice-ballets performed multiple times daily, some featuring Russia's figure-skating stars.

On New Year's Day, Tverskaya, the city's main street, shuts to traffic and turns into an open-air stage, presenting plays with actors from drama companies such as the

Bolshoi Theatre, Electrotheater Stanislavsky and the Moscow New Opera Theater, all free to the public. And throughout the season, the Christmas Market at the GUM department store on Red Square sells unusually high-quality ornaments and shawls and distinctive blue and white Gzhel china. Best of all, a favorable currency exchange rate has made previously expensive Moscow very affordable—a luxury room at the Kremlin-facing National Hotel, one of Moscow’s best, cost \$166 a night at press time. Now there’s a gift (*national.ru*).

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