

TRAVEL

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Christmas comes alive again in Paris

City of Light perfect for a joyeux Noel

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 FOR POSTMEDIA NEWS

My childhood memories of Christmas are as foolishly sentimental as any Hall-mark holiday classic. I loved everything about this time of year, from the school concerts, homemade baking and holiday crafts to the predictable Canadian Tire commercials. Christmas Eve seemed never-ending to me, as I would awaken each hour until 5:30 a.m. when I felt it was reasonable to wake the rest of my family.

While my excitement for the season has faded over the years, I still yearn for the togetherness and child-like spirit that emerges during the holidays. With my family spread out across the country, I decided that a trip to Paris might be just what I needed to rekindle the joy I have always felt the night before Christmas.

With its ornate window displays, bustling Christmas markets, outdoor skating rinks and delicious holiday fare, the City of Light shines even brighter during the Christmas season. There is something very special about visiting a city during a time when love and merriment emanates from its core. When I first set my eyes on Paris covered in a dusting of snow and all aglow from the twinkling holiday lights, the nostalgic feelings I had from Christmases past came flooding back. Fuelled with piping hot cafe au lait and buttery croissants, I took Paris by storm to tour its famed holiday attractions.

Adopted from 14th century Germany, Parisian Christmas markets have become a beloved holiday tradition for locals and visitors alike. Each year around the third week of November hundreds of quaint wooden chalets synonymous with Marche de Noel appear to commence the Christmas season. From handcrafted



Outdoor skating is popular in Paris on the first floor of the Eiffel Tower or at the Place de la Trocadero Christmas Market.



Shoppers check out the merchandise at the Marche de Noel, one of Paris' Christmas markets.



A beautiful Christmas tree towers outside Paris' famed Notre-Dame cathedral.

wooden toys and glass ornaments to leather goods and textiles, the markets are the perfect place to select special gifts and mementoes for friends and family back home. My greatest pleasure however came from the yummy French delicacies on offer. The Vin chaud chalet was always my first stop for a cup of spicy mulled wine to keep the winter's chill at bay. Sipping my piping hot elixir I would peruse the fine holiday fare: dry-cured sausages, soft-rind cheeses, quiches, pastries, baguettes, Nutella crepes, confectionaries, chocolate, looseleaf tea and roasted chestnuts all artfully displayed to seduce the senses.

Food fanatics will favour the market at the Montparnasse Tower for regional gastronomic specialties, however the Champs-Elysees market on the world's most beautiful avenue is a visual masterpiece with storybook chalets, thousands of glittering lights and an illuminated ferris wheel.

There is something terribly romantic about the notion of outdoor skating. Paris amplifies the romance.

Imagine, if you will, the swishing sound of skates gliding along the ice, couples skating mitt-in-mitt, fragrant cups of Vin chaud and the City of Light as your

backdrop. This is all possible from the Eiffel Tower ice rink, situated on the first floor 52 metres above the French capital.

For those with an aversion to heights — or long lineups — Paris also offers ground-floor festive skating

experiences. Steps from the Eiffel Tower, the open-air rink at Place de la Trocadero Christmas Market is free of charge and provides outstanding views of the city's greatest landmark.

One of the larger rinks is in front of the architec-

turally spectacular hotel de ville, Paris's city hall located in the historic Marais district. Home to must-see attractions and galleries such as the Picasso Museum and a burgeoning fashion and food scene, the Marais neighbourhood blends 14th century opulence with trendsetting style.

Many of Paris's treasured attractions dress for the holidays with extravagant displays of light and decor.

For more than half a century, the city's two most glamorous department stores, Printemps and Galeries Lafayette on Boulevard Haussmann, have competed to outshine one another with glamour and glitz. Elaborate light and window displays draw shoppers inside to a fantasy land of lavish ornaments, shimmering lights and, in Galeries Lafayette, a 20-metre tall Christmas tree displayed under the exquisite Belle Epoque stained-glass dome. Another beautifully decorated towering tree is found in the courtyard outside of Notre-Dame. While the cathedral's gothic architecture and stained glass windows are an amazing sight in any season, a visit in the month of December offers special touches including a nativity scene and Christmas concerts.

My final recommendation for visiting Paris in the winter is be sure to dress for the weather. The city's beauty is equalled by its chilly temperature, especially when the winds pick up over the Seine. Hats, gloves, scarves, warm socks and weather-proof shoes are a must to sustain long hours touring Paris. If the weather proves to be too much, frequent stops at cosy patisseries, cafes and bars are a lovely way to temper the cold and sample holiday cuisine.

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