



PHOTOS: CURT WOODHALL/POSTMEDIA NEWS

Outdoor skating — either on the first floor of the Eiffel Tower or at the Place de la Trocadéro Christmas Market — is a popular festive season pastime.

Christmas in Paris

FROM HOLIDAY CUISINE TO OUTDOOR SKATING, the City of Light gets into the festive spirit in a major way

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POSTMEDIA NEWS

My childhood memories of Christmas are as foolishly sentimental as any Hallmark 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. Fueled with piping hot café au lait and buttery croissants, I took Paris by storm to tour its famed holiday attractions.

Marché de Noël

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



Shoppers check out the merchandise at the Marché de Noël.



Roasted chestnuts — a treat at Christmas markets.

quaint wooden chalets synonymous with Marché de Noël appear to commence the Christmas season. From handcrafted 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 crêpes, confectioneries, 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-Élysées market on the world's most beautiful avenue is a visual masterpiece with storybook

chalets, thousands of glittering lights and an illuminated ferris wheel.

Outdoor skating

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 Trocadéro 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 architecturally spectacular Hôtel 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.

Lights, bows, wreaths

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 Époque 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. A Seine River cruise is an excellent way to experience much of the city's holiday finery. Yachts de Paris offers an intimate six-course dinner cruise prepared by the 2 Star Michelin Chef Guy Krenzer. The Eiffel Tower, Notre-Dame and Hôtel de Ville are just a few of the iconic monuments the boutique luxury yacht passes on its cruise through the heart of Paris.

Insider information

There are countless museums and world-famous attractions in Paris, which can pack quite a punch on the

pocketbook in terms of cost. Purchasing a two-, four- or six-day Paris Pass before your trip is a great way of planning your itinerary while enjoying significant savings.

An adult pass ranges from €105 to €186 (about \$135 to \$240) and includes an extensive 120-page guidebook, two-day hop-on hop-off bus tour, a Métro card good for unlimited travel throughout Paris, Seine River cruise, French wine tasting as well as access to upward of 75 museums and attractions, including Notre-Dame Cathedral, Palace of Versailles, Montparnasse Tower, Paris Opera House, Pantheon, Arc de Triomphe and the Louvre.

Booking a hotel in Paris may be daunting. I chose the contemporary 46-room Color Design Hotel in the Bastille district for its central location and reasonably priced accommodations. Color Design is only 650 metres from a métro stop, a 15-minute walk from the Gare de Lyon, one of Paris's largest train stations, and borders the ultracool Marais neighbourhood. The modern, minimalist rooms have extremely comfortable beds, include free Wi-Fi and start from just €104 a night, which is an absolute steal in Paris.

My final recommendation for visiting Paris in the winter is to 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 weatherproof shoes are a must to sustain long hours touring Paris. If the weather proves to be too much, frequent stops at cosy pâtisseries, cafés and bars are a lovely way to temper the cold and sample holiday cuisine.

For additional destination information, visit www.arivalstravel.com.



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