

# The Gift of the European Christmas Markets

Feature and Photos by Dom Gagliardi



No matter how we try to imitate the European Christmas markets here in the United States, that is all they are—an imitation. With the first known Christmas market said to have taken place in Dresden, Germany in 1464, many of the current markets date back to the Middle Ages. Perhaps it is this shroud of historic tradition, but nothing can match the magic and ambiance of the holiday season that attracts millions of locals and visitors each year to experience the festivities found in such cities as Vienna, Zurich or Salzburg.

The first time I celebrated Christmas and New Years in Austria was in 2015. That experience was so inspiring and memorable I decided to return in 2023 but expanded my horizons to include Switzerland and Slovakia. My companion and I crisscrossed these countries for nearly a month immersing ourselves in the local holiday traditions. While we stumbled into Christmas markets in many town or village squares, often reflective of a different theme or attribute of that neighborhood, I will highlight some of the larger and more renown markets.

Our first stop was in Zurich, Switzerland. Despite a little rain, the Wienachtsdorf Market, adjacent to the Zurich Opera House, teemed with revelers. The aroma of roasted almonds and chestnuts that sifted through the night air teased one's appetite, bewildered by which of the delicious foods to try next. Fondue chalets were interspersed throughout the more than one hundred vendor stalls. Raclette anyone? In addition to the delectable food choices, handmade crafts, especially wooden Christmas ornaments, were predominant at this market.

A two-hour train ride to the South brought us to our next stop, the postcard city of Luzern with its shimmering lake and metaphorical welcome mat to the Alps. Although this was our jumping off point for some Alpine hiking in the

Rigi Kulm, there was still time to explore several of the larger markets. In the heart of Luzern's Old Town, Franziskanerplatz is transformed into a miniature town crammed with over seventy gaily decorated stalls filled with handcrafted wares and gift items, a wealth of food and drink, and its famed Christmas Carousel. Adjacent to the Bahnhofplatz (central train station) sat another favorite market, Rudolf's Weihnacht, where visitors strolled through the tiny cottages or gathered with friends around the many fire pits placed throughout the market.

Upon leaving the German-speaking regions of Switzerland, we trained over the Alps to the Italian-speaking city of Lugano situated near the Swiss-Italian border in the Ticino region. Never to be disappointed, we discovered some of the larger Christmas markets in Lugano's Central District. The most notable was in the Piazza della Reforma where a huge traditional Christmas tree boasted its nearly perfect symmetry in the square. Over sixty traditional wooden booths spilling over with food items, flowers, wreaths, and candles animated the streets. And just a few steps away the Christmas market in Piazza Dante showcased just as many delights with slightly less bustle.

As enjoyable as the Christmas markets were in Switzerland though, we were anxious to arrive at our next stop in Vienna. Christmas in Vienna is as romantic and magical as it sounds. With punch stands on nearly every corner, the aroma of roasted chestnuts, and the clickety-clack of horse drawn carriages making their way through narrow cobblestone streets, one cannot help but get into the spirit of the season. Spending one full week in this old world but cosmopolitan city provided ample time to visit many of the markets throughout the city, some multiple times. Three of the largest markets are located at Stephenplatz surrounding St. Stephen's Cathedral and at Schonbrunn Palace. But





the largest one in all the world continues to rank as one of our favorites.

Officially known as the Rathausplatz Christkindlmarkt, this market is an Austrian icon that dates back to the 18th century and is located near Vienna's historic City Hall and attracts nearly three million visitors each holiday. One hundred booths lead up to and surround the often bustling ice rink, and the neighboring park is decorated with elaborate festive lights as are so many of the neighborhoods in Vienna. The unique background of City Hall's Gothic towers gives this market a charm of its own. One can spend hours circling through the booths filled with handmade items, nativity sets, and other religious mementoes, ornaments, and a variety of culinary delights.

Not to be outdone, the Christmas markets in Salzburg can be stiff competition for those in Vienna. Its premier markets in Residenzplatz and Cathedral Square

date back to the 15th century. Located in the Old Town of this charming city, traditional huts line the perimeters and fill the centers of the squares. Both the distinctive starry sky lighting that hovers over the markets and the regular pealing of church bells only adds to the sensory overload of the aromas of fresh baked goods, mulled wines, and other delights.

While each of the Christmas markets we visited has its unique appeal, there are several things they all have in common. Even the casual observer cannot overlook the strong family ties that exist among the generations as the local residents participate in long worn traditions.

Despite the heavy consumption of gluhwein, glogg, and other customary libations, in and around the markets, everyone is able to enjoy the moment and remain well behaved. Finally, in every market one will find a wide variety of nativity sets and other religious symbols that serve as

a constant reminder of the reason for the celebration in the first place.

While we spent the majority of our time in Switzerland and Austria, there are Christmas markets throughout Europe. If you decide to spend a Christmas holiday in Europe for the first time, here are some things to keep in mind. The first is that most markets generally open at the start of Advent, which is December 1st and will remain open until Christmas. Some will remain open until the New Year. Online schedule information is readily available. Depending on the city, some markets will be heavily visited, so plan accordingly. While we prefer to visit markets on our own schedule, market tours are available which might accommodate a brief stay in a particular city. In any event, you will not be disappointed. The only thing missing on this trip was a little snow which arrived shortly after we returned home. Maybe next time!

