



Nine skaters skating: the choristers of Winchester Cathedral take to the ice

Why settle for a run-of-the-mill festive season, when it's so easy to make it extra-special—if you just know where to look, that is....

Best of British

BY LOLA BORG

Christmas

BEST ICE RINK

Not that long ago, you were hard pushed to find an ice rink anywhere. Now, like Santa's grottoes, rinks pop up seasonally in most cities, as well as next to ▶



Somerset House rink for sheer urban elegance, especially in those precious days when the city is largely deserted. Outside the capital, the vote goes to Winchester (previous page). There, the rink is bang outside the Cathedral, so skaters glide in the shadow of the 1,400-year-old site of

worship that once housed the bones of St Swithin. There might even be some photogenic choristers in red fooling about on the ice—and there’s definitely a market for warming post-exercise refreshments. **Somerset House ice rink is open from November 22 to January 22; Winchester ice rink, Hampshire, from November 24 to January 2**

tourist attractions (eg, Hampton Court and the Eden Project). In London, it’s hard to beat the neo-classical backdrop of the

BEST LIGHT PARADE

A bright idea (pun intended) that’s now a regular fixture of West-Country life. Simply make a paper lantern, light it, and parade the streets of a dark and wintry Salisbury—along with a few thousand others—finishing up at the beautiful medieval cathedral. The Wilton Brass Band plays carols and the procession ends with the traditional sticky buns for all.

The Lantern Parade takes place in Salisbury, Wiltshire, on December 15



FRANCISCO MARTINEZ/ALAMY; COURTESY OF SALISBURYFESTIVAL.CO.UK



So this is what it’s like to be Santa! Feeling the chill at the Cairngorm Sleddog Centre

BEST FOR SNOW

The place in Britain where you’re most likely to find the white stuff is the Cairngorms in the Scottish Highlands. The mountains feature the highest, coldest plateaux in Britain—and have an actual “alpine” climate. Naturally, winter walking and skiing are popular Cairngorm activities, but to really get you into the Christmas spirit there’s also the UK’s only free-roaming reindeer herd at the Cairngorm Reindeer Centre in Aviemore. (Children can leave a letter in the reindeer postbox.) The Sleddog Centre, also in Aviemore, runs courses that culminate in a solo sled trip through the snow.

For demanding types who want snow south of the border, the Met Office’s advice is to head for Upper Teesdale in the North Pennines, just north of Barnard Castle, a beautiful area of hills and crags.



BEST MARKET

A German import (they first appeared in 15th-century Dresden), Christmas markets have recently become all the rage. The original—and many think the best—is Lincoln (above), which has been pulling in punters for 29 years now. More than 250 stalls are crammed into the historic Castle Square, between the Gothic cathedral and the Norman castle, so it wins hands down for magical seasonal atmosphere. Expect cobbled streets and all the trimmings: carols, stalls strung with lights and plenty of local produce, including Lincolnshire cheese and sausages. But be warned—it’s hilly, so go easy on the mulled wine, or use the Park-and-Ride Service to get bussed into the heart of the area.

Lincoln Market runs from December 1 to 4

BEST TRADITION 1

We British are mad, aren't we? Why else would some of us jump into the bone-chilling sea on Christmas Day when water temperatures can be as low as 5°C? There are traditional festive dips all over the British coastline, but the oldest is organised by Brighton Swimming Club,

whose members have been taking the plunge since 1895. They won't invite you to join them in the briny, though—unless you're a member, too. "We advise people not to go in," says BSC chairman John Ottaway. "Many people are not used to such cold water." But should you decide

to jump, well, no one can stop you. Not even the coastguards. Most take the easier option and watch. All welcome (Santa hats optional). **The Brighton Swimming Club Christmas Day swim is at 11am near the Palace Pier on Brighton beach, Sussex**



BEST TRADITION 2

All you have to do is get dressed up in a sweaty red nylon suit, add a scratchy beard and hat for good measure, and then run for your life. Yes, in less than a decade, the Santa Run for charity has become an annual event all over Britain. Newtown in

Wales held the first, back in 2001—and later broke the world record for "most Santas in one place" (almost 3,500). But now...well, take your pick. Aberdeen's is famous, but Llandudno's (right) is hard to beat: a mere one mile long—so not horribly taxing for couch potatoes—and along the rather elegant seafront. Just

MARK MACDONALD/ALAMY



turn up on the day and they'll even provide the outfit. Ho ho ho, as they say. **The Santa Run in Llandudno, Conwy, is at 11am on December 11. The registration fee is £12.50, and the money raised goes to Tŷ Gobaith Children's Hospice. To find a Santa Run near you for children's hospices, go to santasontherun.org.uk** ►



BEST TREE

The spruce in Trafalgar Square donated by the Norwegians is always a crowd-puller. But for something different (and more eco-friendly), it has to be Wakehurst Place, Kew Gardens' country estate, which can brag of Britain's largest living Christmas tree (above). At 115 feet—and strung with nearly 2,000 lights (all eco-friendly, too)—the tree is even a seasonal landmark for pilots flying into nearby Gatwick. The lighting-up ceremony is always popular, and there's also an open-air carol service led by a Salvation Army band and local choirs. But if you can't make those, the tree still looks spectacular from the main road.

The lighting-up ceremony at Wakehurst Place, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, is on November 25 at 6.15pm; the carol service is on December 16 at 7pm. Both are entry by donation

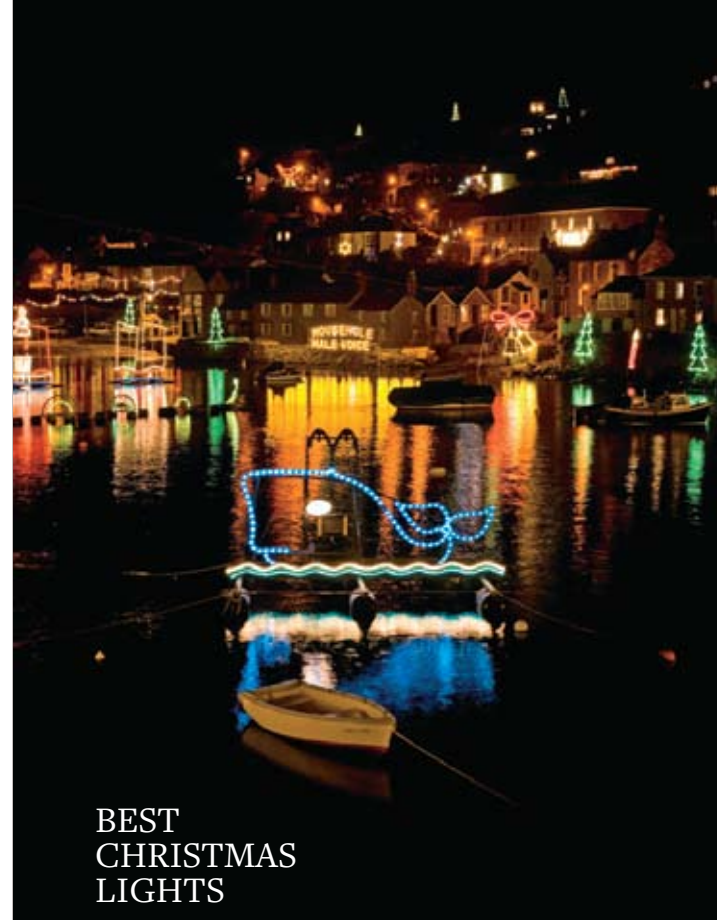


BEST ADVENT CALENDAR

Forget mouldy chocolates in cheap cardboard. Welwyn in Hertfordshire—not to be confused with Welwyn Garden City—

produces a *real* advent calendar using windows in the village with displays lovingly made by residents. (One year a local graffiti artist decorated the window of The Sagar Tandoori, but the organisers, St Mary's Church, got a little wibbly at his representation of the baby Jesus as a tiger. He changed it.) There's a daily unveiling, usually with refreshments: "We consume a massive amount of mulled wine and mince pies in December," says Jane Carr, St Mary's churchwarden. Those who can't make it to Welwyn can view the windows at welwynadventwindows.com.

ANDREW MCROBB/ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS, KEW



BEST CHRISTMAS LIGHTS

Gentler, sweeter and altogether more in the spirit of Christmas than Oxford Street, the tiny fishing village of Mousehole in Cornwall is the place for spectacular lights. Each year since 1963, they've twinkled merrily around the pretty harbour. Look out for Christmas trees, whales, Celtic crosses and the local Starry Gazey pie (a fish dish traditionally eaten on December 23—and so called because the fishes' heads poke out of the pastry and seem to be looking upwards) all fashioned out of bulbs. The switching-on ceremony is mercifully without a soap star in a starring role, but instead features community singing and the Mousehole Male Voice Choir. It also attracts vast crowds—so go early. ■

The Mousehole Harbour Lights will be switched on at 7.30pm on December 17

PHILIP SHARP/ALAMY

If you have a better slice of British Christmas than the ones mentioned here, why not let us know? Send us an email—with a picture if possible—to theeditor@readersdigest.co.uk.

There are more seasonal suggestions—and other pickings from our Best of British series—at readersdigest.co.uk/magazine, and also on Facebook at facebook.com/readersdigestuk.

NEXT MONTH: QUIRKY MUSEUMS