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'Tis the season for European Christmas markets



[SHIRLEY O'BRYAN SMITH](#) | November 9, 2011 05:27 PM EST | Associated Press 

It's a scene played out all over Europe as the holidays approach: The air is cold, the sky is bright and snow crunches underfoot as crowds make their way through rows of little wooden structures that look like storybook houses with sloping roofs and rustic trim, each one offering some treasure that's beautiful, fun or delicious.

Chatter, laughter and music waft through the air, mixing with the smells of gingerbread, grilled meats and cookies as shoppers browse among the carved toys, small musical instruments, ornaments, handcrafted clothing, homemade soap, candles and hand-blown glass.

Millions of people – both locals and visitors – attend annual Christmas markets in cities all over Europe each year. They're not only tourist attractions, but they're also big business for local economies. But will the European financial crisis be the Grinch that steals the holiday spirit from the continent's Christmas markets?

Slovak economist Vladimir Vano, in Bratislava, says probably not. The Volksbank Slovakia chief financial analyst says if anything, it may enhance the experience because "the main draw of these markets isn't just the buying and selling of wares."

He says they're really an old version of our modern online social networks – a place to connect. In times of trouble, he adds, people want that connection to be more personal. They want to hold hands or talk face-to-face as they enjoy activities with their family and friends. If you add in the nostalgic spirit of the holidays, you have what he calls "behavior economics," and that could keep the Christmas markets strong this year.

But that's not the only factor. Vano says some potential vendors may decide it's more important than ever to invest the several thousand dollars it takes to rent a seller's stall. According to Jozsef Molnar, managing director of the Budapest Tourism office in Hungary, vendors pay about \$3,500 to set up for six weeks at his city's main market and they usually take home something in the neighborhood of \$14,000.

Spaces are limited, but some municipalities across Europe are opening up a few more this year, hoping that more vendors offering a greater variety of merchandise may in turn attract even larger crowds.

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Of the nearly 600,000 visitors who attend the Budapest Christmas market at Vorosmarty Square each year, 30 to 40 percent are foreigners, according to Molnar. That means revenue for hotels, restaurants and other segments of the travel industry in addition to income for the vendors and the markets.

Vorosmarty is a lovely location that offers a giant Christmas tree, nativity scenes and a unique Advent calendar that opens up in the windows of the historic Gerbeaud confectionary. The merchandise is quite good. Sellers are judged by experts representing craftsmen and folk artists, and only those of high skill are allowed to set up shop. But quality doesn't come cheap. You could pay hundreds of dollars for a nativity set, \$40 to \$60 for a woman's hand-styled woven hat or less for small trinkets.

Food is also top notch. One favorite is the chimney cake, a delicacy once made by wrapping dough around actual chimney pipes. Now the dough is wrapped around something that looks like a large, slightly V-shaped rolling pin. It's sprinkled with sugar or slathered in butter or honey, cooked on hot coals, then twisted off the pin, wrapped in paper and devoured by appreciative customers.

Another outstanding market is Vienna's huge Christkindlmarkt, which usually ranks as one of Europe's best. It's well-organized, beautiful, set in Rathausplatz, the plaza in front of the Rathaus (city hall) and the quality of goods is first-rate. You'll find excellent hand-blown glass, cute carved toys and musical instruments, ceramics, and lovely clothing items.

Space is set aside inside the Rathaus for special children's activities like cookie-making and crafts, including handmade Christmas ornaments. Outside, sellers offer warm handmade clothing, toys and Christmas decorations. Shoppers sip hot punch made from fruit, rum, wine and spices as they browse.

Herbert Gindl, with the Vienna Chamber of Commerce, predicts the event will attract a few million visitors, 500,000 of them from abroad.

Salzburg, Austria, offers a different look for its market. The city, located at the foot of the Alps, is Mozart's hometown and his image appears all over – including on Mozart chocolates. "The Sound of Music" was filmed here and there are movie-themed tours available.

Salzburg's Christmas market, located along the streets of the historic part of town, can get very crowded, but it's a fun kind of hustle and bustle that includes street musicians, guided tour groups, and formal choral presentations. Painted tins, homemade soaps and snow globes are mixed in with the usual crafted items.

The main Christmas markets in Bratislava, Slovakia, are located in beautiful public squares around the city. You'll find handmade pottery and wooden decorations often in the design of fish. That's because carp is a traditional dish during Slovak Christmastime. Food and drinks served at the markets include tasty potato crepes with jam and poppy seeds and a honey wine similar to mead.

In Paris at Christmastime, it seems like the whole city twinkles with 300 illuminated sites, including lit-up bridges and the Eiffel Tower. Markets

are scattered all over the various districts, but one of the prettiest is found along the Champs Elysees, where decorations, handcrafts, food, clothing and mulled wine can be found in dozens of wooden chalets.

Germany is famous for its many markets, including those in Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt, Dresden and Nuremberg. But markets in small towns like pretty Passau also have charm.

Passau is where I had my first cup of gluhwein, a traditional hot spiced wine drink that's perfect for warming up cold hands and bellies. In many places, it's served with an extra shot of rum. Mine came in a souvenir mug. You're charged a few euros for the drink and container. You can either keep the mug or get a refund for turning it back in.

The Passau market isn't as large as some others but it isn't as crowded, either. It's in a beautiful historic setting near St. Stephen's Cathedral, known for its enormous pipe organ and holiday concerts.

As I sipped my gluhwein and walked among the stalls, I found a mixture of items for sale. Some were obvious cheaper imports, but many were handmade, such as the carved wooden "smokers" – incense holders designed to look like little men smoking pipes.

In Britain, like other places, each market has its own personality. There's a "Dickens Christmas at Rochester Castle" in Kent that's small but nice. The castle lit up at night makes a pretty backdrop. Other markets use a Victorian theme and some specialize in German or other European goods; some have street performers in costume. The merchandise can be very good, especially textiles, artwork and jewelry. Food and drink includes spiced wines, teas, roasted chestnuts, sausages and baked goods.

In terms of trip-planning to see Europe's holiday markets, timing varies by individual location but most open in late or mid-November, a month or more ahead of Christmas. Some tour operators offer organized trips to markets in several different places; they include transportation, hotels and some meals. You can also find European river cruises offering excursions to Christmas markets. If you're traveling independently, remember that hotels near markets may fill up quickly at holiday time.

A few other tips:

Don't expect bargains. These markets are about tradition, camaraderie, family and the holiday spirit, and well-crafted handmade goods don't come cheap.

Not all countries in Europe use the euro. Those using their own currencies may accept euros as payment but you'll probably get change back in the local money. And don't count on using credit cards – market vendors are often cash-only.

Go with the flow. Stroll through these little wonderlands, pick up some unique gifts, sample the local cuisine. And don't forget the gluhwein!

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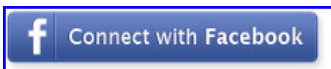


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