

Out and About

BY RENATA RUBNIKOWICZ



AT CHRISTMAS TIME

GOUDA SWAPS CHEESE FOR CAROLS AND CANDLES

One night a year, an already magical medieval city in Holland adds music to its Gothic architecture and becomes a place of enchantment. On December 14, the people of Gouda forget cheese, switch off the electricity and sing carols by candlelight in the market square. Around them, the 300 or so historic buildings of the city, including the vast, pinnacled town hall dating from the 15th century and the 123-metre-long St. John's Church with its 16th-century stained-glass windows once again appear as they did on the long winter nights when they were first built, when Gouda was one of the five most important cities in Holland and as big as Amsterdam. Afterwards singers can feast on Goudse Stroopwafels, the thin syrupy waffles that are a local delicacy.

For details, see www.visit holland.com.

PROBABLY THE BEST DANISH COLLECTION GOES TO LONDON

Masterpieces from the Carlsberg Glyptotek museum in Copenhagen are on display in Britain for the first time at the Royal Academy in London until December 10. Ancient Art to Post-Impressionism shows the collection of antiquities and French and Danish 19th-century painting and sculpture built up by father and son Carl and Helge Jacobsen, descendants of the founder of the Danish brewery Carlsberg. Among some 250 works on show will be exceptional examples of Greek, Roman and Etruscan sculpture collected by Carl, who also acquired contemporary works by Danish Golden Age painters. After his father's death in 1914, Helge continued amassing the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists his father derided as "awful, mannered and ghastly." Eventually Helge bequeathed the museum a fine collection of works by Monet, Manet, Degas, Cézanne and Gauguin.

For details see www.royalacademy.org and www.glyptoteket.dk.

CELEBRATE DYNAMITE AND CANDLELIGHT IN SWEDEN

Depending whether you are a child or an exceptional adult, there are two red-letter

days in the Swedish calendar in December. The first date, December 10, is when the King of Sweden awards the Nobel Prizes. For more than a century, the prizes have marked the world's greatest achievements in physics, chemistry, medicine, literature and peace as decreed in the will of Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite. But what if you are not part of the august gathering for the prize-giving at the Stockholm Concert Hall? Then, like everyone else in Sweden, you can celebrate St Lucia's Day on December 13. In medieval times, St Lucia, a 4th-century martyr from Syracuse, on the island of Sicily, was revered as the patron saint of sight and of the blind. Artists often depicted her holding a dish containing her eyes. In present-day Sweden, her festival marks the beginning of the Christmas season. Wearing a crown of lighted candles, a school girl assumes the role of St Lucia. Followed by boys and girls dressed in white, St. Lucia visits schools, hospitals, shops and offices singing traditional songs and handing out coffee, gingerbread biscuits and saffron buns known as "Lucia cats."

For details, see www.visit-sweden.com.

SEE FRENCH FOWL ON THE MOVE

In the village of Licques, a short distance inland from Calais in northern France, a different kind of procession heralds the coming of Christmas. Over the weekend of December 11 and 12, the village celebrates the rearing of free-range poultry, particularly turkeys. First farmed here by monks, the birds arrived here via Latin America through Spanish explorers. This area of France is still known as Les Trois Pays – the three lands – because it was where, in the 16th century, the borders of the English, French and Spanish kingdoms met. Now that the French eat almost as much turkey every year as the Americans, connoisseurs come to Licques to buy the best birds. But before they can grace the Christmas table, the condemned birds must parade through the streets of Licques, accompanied by local officials, to be admired by onlookers fortified with the local liqueur, also known as licques.

For details, telephone +33-3-21 35-80-03 or see www.cc-trois-pays.fr/licques.

FOLLOW THE DUTCH DEEP INTO CHRISTMAS

The spa-town of Valkenburg in Holland has been a tourist destination for more than 150 years. Valkenburg is well set up for winter visitors with not only heated pavement



cafés but also two Christmas markets, running from mid-November until December 21. Uniquely both markets take place underground in the caves and once-secret passages that run through the yellow marlstone on which the town's now-ruined castle was built in 1050. The Gemeentegrot market in the passageways of Town Cave is the largest, with bars and seasonal music. This has been so popular that another market has opened in the Fluweelengrot, or Velvet Cave, with tableaux on the theme of Christmas around the world, through which Father Christmas makes his rounds accompanied not by a reindeer, but by a suitably subterranean bat. For details, see www.kerststadvalkenburg.nl and www.vvzuidlimburg.nl.

WALK THROUGH AN ALPINE ADVENT CALENDAR

It can sometimes seem as if the whole of Europe has been given over to Christmas markets in December. But the village of Reith, near the picturesque ski resort of Kitzbühel, in Austria, has devised a unique seasonal attraction. On the night of

December 1, one house in the village lights up a window decorated with a Christmas scene. Each night as the month goes on, another house illuminates a decorated window until, on Christmas Eve, 24 houses around the village display brightly lit Christmas scenes in their windows and the whole of Reith becomes an Advent calendar for visitors to walk around. The Advent calendar of light continues until the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6. For details, see www.kitzbuehel.com.

PLAY AN IRISH MEGALITHIC LOTTERY

To experience the pre-Christian spirit of winter, apply for tickets to visit the Newgrange passage tomb in Ireland at the winter solstice. Newgrange is the most famous of a group of megalithic burial sites named for their position in a bend of the River Boyne. For a few minutes during sunrise on the winter solstice, the rays of the sun filter through a narrow opening at the entrance of the chamber and down a narrow 19 metre-long passageway to the very centre of the tomb. The tomb, which dates from 3,200 BC, is covered with a quarter of a million tons of earth and rock. One of the finest examples of Stone Age mounds in Europe, the tomb features stones carved with spirals, chevrons and lozenges. Each year, the tomb's visitor centre holds a lottery for about 20 tickets for each sunrise from December 19 to 23. Depending on the year, the solstice falls on December 21 or 22. "By tradition, we celebrate it here on the 21st," explains one tourist guide. "There's very little difference on the amount of sunshine seen in the chamber anyway."

For details, see <http://www.knowth.com/winter-solstice.htm>.