

Streets of fire in Scotland

In Scotland, the New Year's Eve festival of Hogmanay is the biggest event of the year. The Hogmanay celebrations in Edinburgh are known all over the world; this December's promise to match up to last year's, with four nights of events throughout the city. In the fishing village of Stonehaven – on the coast south of Aberdeen – the people have their own method of creating fireworks.

Thousands of spectators turn up a little after 11 p.m. to see the pipe band begin the festivities. Then, as the bell rings for midnight, the first of the "swingers" comes down the high street towards the harbour, swirling a flaming ball around his head. It is made of a cage filled with combustible material – each swinger has his own recipe – on a wire up to a metre long. To the music of the pipes and drums he walks several times between the Mercat Cross and the quayside, before finally throwing his fiery ball into the water. He is followed by up to 60 others, making a procession of fire down the High Street. It is thought that the ceremony, which lasts for just 20 to 30 minutes, has its roots in a desire by superstitious fishermen to ward off evil and bad luck for the year.

For details visit www.stonehavenfireballs.co.uk or www.visitscotland.com.

Swiss bobsleighs for all

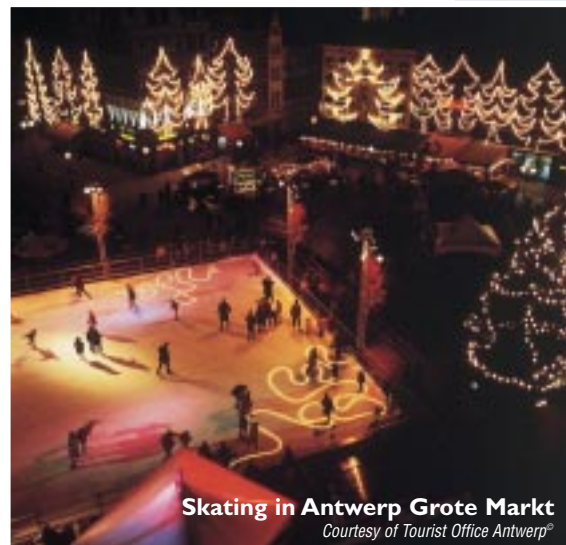
The bobsleigh season begins in St Moritz with the winter solstice, about 22 December. The fun and games continue in the Swiss mountain resort until the beginning of March. St. Moritz has the world's only natural-ice bobsleigh run, and the St. Moritz Bobsleigh Club has hosted more than 30 World Championships since it began in 1890. Races and training runs attract enthusiastic spectators every day to the St. Moritz-Celerina track. The run isn't only for the expert. Anyone who is daring enough can hurtle down the ice on a bobsleigh taxi ride. The fare is 210 Swiss francs for the full 1,612-metre-long run. Beware: there is no getting off halfway. Speeds can reach 145 km/h as the four-man bob zips through 19 turns with names such as Sunny Corner, the Shamrock, and the Leap.

For details, visit www.olympia-bobrun.ch or telephone Bob Taxi reservations at +41(0)81.830.02.00.

Celebrate traditional Norwegian Christmas

In Oslo, there is a choice of seasonal shopping. For the three Sundays before Christmas, the Norwegian Folk Museum runs a celebrated Christmas Fair, which includes a market of more than 100 stalls selling home-made crafts, treats, and Christmas decorations. The old houses that

have been moved from various parts of Norway and rebuilt in the open-air museum park are decorated as their original inhabitants would have wanted. In the 12th century Stave Church, there is a programme of entertainment with concerts by a children's choir, folk dancing and Santa's Workshop, where children can join in. Meanwhile, in another part of town, a horse and sleigh ride transports visitors every December weekend to Baerums Verk, a collection of 17th-century houses that now sell handicrafts and



Skating in Antwerp Grote Markt
Courtesy of Tourist Office Antwerp

designer goods. Every year, Baerums Verk makes a point of having Norway's tallest Christmas trees, which is really saying something. Strolling characters from times past enliven the atmosphere at both attractions.

For details, visit www.baerumsverk.com or www.norskfolkmuseum.no.

Watch the winter arts in Munich

Every winter, the capital of Bavaria hosts a performing arts festival at Theresienwiese, just outside the city centre. From its beginnings in 1988 as a local festival, the Tollwood Festival has grown to attract more than a million visitors every year. It is a giant party that lasts over a month with a host of events every night, including dance, theatre, and music and focusing particularly on circus and cabaret. The Deep in the Woods bar provides drinks, rock music, and literary readings; there is also an alternative Christmas market. And food is not forgotten. Many stalls provide food from every nation and culture, with Indian, Greek, and Italian cuisine all represented. The emphasis is on fine dining with organic produce. The festival culminates in a vast New Year's Eve extravaganza, with a different theme every



Bobsleigh racing in St Moritz

year. Last year, six enormous tents resounded to the sounds of DJs and bands playing different genres of music to cater for all tastes.

For details, visit www.tollwood.com or telephone +49(0)89.38.38.500.

Brighton burns

Brighton, on the south coast of England, is a haven of all things alternative. It has been voted the most vegetarian-friendly town in Britain; it also pulses with

nightclubs, cafés, and restaurants. It marks the winter solstice in its own distinctive style, with a parade called "Burning the Clocks." This contemporary community festival is a "new tradition," first held in 1993. Hundreds of people make their own lanterns to join in a procession led by enormous and brightly lit lanterns made from willow canes and tissue paper. Each year the festival has a different theme, but the lantern designs always includes a clock face to mark the passing of the old year and the coming of the new. Accompanied by live music from local bands, the parade ends on the seafront where all the lanterns go up in flames.

For details, visit www.visitbrighton.com or www.samesky.co.uk/brighton.

Skating in Antwerp

Antwerp may be the city of Rubens and diamond merchants, but it is also renowned for its fashion designers and a thriving student scene. The custodians of the great galleries and churches of the city encourage contemporary artists to provide the whole city with an exciting buzz at any time of year. In the month before Christmas, this mix of old and new comes to the centre of town. A Christmas market outside the west porch of

the cathedral on the Groenplaats offers visitors the chance to sample gluwein and listen to Christmas carols while examining the spire of the tallest Gothic church in Europe or buying records, books, clothes, antiques and Christmas decorations. To add to the festive atmosphere, the city sets up an ice-rink is set outside the town hall in the Grote Markt; there, visitors can take to the ice on rented skates or just listen to the latest DJs.

For details, telephone +32(0)3.232.01.03 or visit www.visitantwerpen.be or www.visitflanders.com

French mountain driving

Rally drivers Alain Prost and Yvan Muller will be battling each other again this year in an exciting series of races for the title of ice-racing champion. The first stage of the Andros Trophy takes place in Val Thorens, one of Europe's youngest ski resorts, on December 3 and 4. The series of seven races has been held each year since 1990 at different mountain resorts and the challenges attract many big-name drivers. They have to steer their cars through hazardous winter conditions, often including packed ice and sometimes fresh snow, which ensure that most of the progress is made sideways and skids are frequent. Through December and January, the races will move on to other resorts, such as Pas de la Casa in Andorra and Alpe d'Huez, before the grand final in March.

For details, visit www.tropheeandros.com or www.valthorens.com.