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Holiday Getaways: There Are Places Other Than Home



John Schults/Reuters

The Champs-Élysées in Paris sparkles even more than usual at the holidays.

By **JENNIFER CONLIN**

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IF the thought of tinsel, turkey and trees leaves you feeling tired, tense and tortured, why not forget about celebrating Christmas at home and instead enjoy a soothing poolside rum punch in the Caribbean?

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Feedback from the News

With many hotels and resorts offering special rates during the holiday season to lure visitors, forget the guilt and think



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Villas and boats can be rented for a sunny holiday on St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands.



The New York Times

The Hermitage is a great reason to head for St. Petersburg in winter.

about escaping the drudgery of your kitchen (with or without the family). The holidays are a surprisingly great time to be a tourist - museums are refreshingly empty, stores start up their holiday sales early, and otherwise hard-to-book restaurants often have last-minute tables.

Of course, it's probably too late to do anything so drastic this holiday season - so you're probably stuck with your in-laws again, arguing over politics or who forgot to bring the eggnog - but here are some options for next year, from wintry Russia to the balmy United States Virgin Islands, for those who will wake up on the morning of Dec. 26 with one thought in their heads: never again.

WHITE DAYS IN ST. PETERSBURG

St. Petersburg, known as the cultural capital of Russia, has more than 100 theaters, offering everything from ballet and opera to jazz and folk music. It is also the home of the Hermitage museum, which has some of the world's most famous Old Masters and Impressionist paintings on display. Take advantage of the cold weather with a traditional horse-drawn troika ride through the snow-covered grounds of Pavlovsk palace, as well as an afternoon of skating at the Ice

Palace. More adventurous travelers might want to visit a Russian banya (steam bath) before hitting one of the city's many art cafes for a bit of vodka-tasting.

Where to Stay This year the Hotel Astoria, part of the Rocco Forte hotel chain, is offering a "White Days" package through Dec. 29 that includes three nights' accommodation, a buffet breakfast, transportation from the airport or railroad station, tickets to a ballet or opera performance at the Mariinsky Theater, and a Russian dinner in the hotel's Davidov Restaurant for 550 euros (\$660, at \$1.20 to the euro) a person in a double room. Hotel Astoria, Ul. Bolshaya Morskaya 39, (7-812) 313 5757; on the Web at www.roccofortehotels.com.

YOUR OWN CARIBBEAN VILLA

Rent your own villa with a pool in St. John, in the United States Virgin Islands - it's the only sure way to ensure you won't have to fight for a beach chair at this time of year in the Caribbean. The National Park Service owns three-fifths of the island, making it one of the least-populated in the Caribbean and one of the best places to snorkel and hike (poinsettias grow naturally here). Listen to steel bands play Christmas carols; peruse the colorful

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clothing and home shops in downtown Cruz Bay; and, most important, head to the island's many beaches - Trunk Bay, Hawksnest Bay and Cinnamon Bay to name a few. Most have restaurants and offer a variety of water sports.

Where to Stay Moon Cottage only sleeps four people but its pool and deck have 180-degree views of neighboring Tortola and Virgin Gorda, as well as a Zen garden and two outdoor showers. A one-week rental for Christmas 2006 costs \$5,500. For a family reunion, Kismet sleeps 12, has a pool, a hot tub, 360-degree views, and virtually every amenity imaginable, including a home cinema. A one-week rental costs \$35,000 in December 2006.

For Caribbean villa rentals contact, 800-537-6246 www.MclaughlinAnderson.com.

ON AND OFF THE SEINE

It is hardly surprising that Paris has some of the best Christmas decorations in the world, but the sight of the sparkling Champs-Élysées - where every tree branch is covered with thousands of tiny white lights - is nothing short of spectacular. Ice-skate in the sky at the seasonal rink set up on the first platform of the Eiffel Tower, ride the carousel erected each Christmas at the Hôtel de Ville, and walk by the Christmas windows at Galeries Lafayette. For a truly memorable Christmas, try booking a dinner cruise on the Seine - available through Allofrance.co.uk.

Where to Stay The 80-room, 20-suite Hotel Westminster, the former Paris home of the Duke of Westminster, a short walk from the Tuileries Gardens and the Louvre, is offering a Cozy Christmas package this year that includes a deluxe room (with no charge for one child staying with the parents as well as a Christmas gift for the child), a 10 percent discount on purchases at the nearby Galeries Lafayette, and access to the hotel's fitness club and sauna. Rates start at 290 euros a night, with a two-night stay minimum, through Dec. 27. Hotel Westminster, 13, rue de la Paix, (33-1) 42.61.57.46, on the Web at warwickwestminsteropera.com.

A SAFE BET IN NEVADA

Las Vegas might not be the first place one thinks of spending a holiday like Christmas, but it does have the advantage of never shutting down. And if the thought of a casino Christmas in the desert sounds depressing, visit the Lake Las Vegas Resort instead. Situated 17 miles from the Strip, the Resort has constructed a floating ice rink the size of the one at Rockefeller Center on top of the 320-acre lake this year. To add to that Christmas feeling, carolers will sing around a large Christmas tree and Santa will be available for photos. After skating, you could play a round of golf on one of the three championship courses or hit the Resort's casino.

Where to Stay MonteLago Village on Lake Las Vegas, located near the shops, restaurants and the casino, is offering a Holiday Skate, Stay and Shop Till You Drop package that includes two nights' accommodations, ice skating and skate rentals for two, as well as discounts at MonteLago Village shops, for \$164 a person from Dec. 15 to 30. MonteLago Village Resort, 30 Strada di Villaggio, Henderson, Nev., 702-564-4700; www.montelagovillage.com.

MARKET TIME IN BAVARIA

One can hardly escape Christmas in Munich. Since the 14th century, the city has been host to one of the largest Christmas markets in Germany. With a 30-foot high tree lighted by 2,500 candles, endless stalls selling wooden toys, hand-carved Nativity figures, lebkuchen (aniseed cookies) and glühwein (mulled wine), Munich has much to offer. Stop in at the Hofbrauhaus for a frosty stein of beer and a plate of bratwurst, enjoy a champagne brunch at the Ratskeller restaurant, and leave the smell of clover and roasting chestnuts behind for a day and visit the Nymphenburg Palace, the most famous of the fairytale castles built by King Ludwig II.

Where to Stay The recently renovated Dorint Sofitel Bayerpost Munich is near the Town Hall and the city's historic center. The spa has a Turkish bath, indoor pool and fitness center, where guests can work off the Christmas cookie calories. Rates start at 170 euros a night. Dorint Sofitel Bayerpost Munich, Bayerstrasse 12, Munich, (49-89) 599 480; www.sofitel.com.

SAILING IN THE TROPICS

Spend a week sailing around St. Vincent and the Grenadine Islands, where rain forests, protected coral reefs and crater lakes are far from extinct. Be sure to pull into port at St. Vincent between Dec. 16 and 25 when the whole island celebrates Nine Mornings, -a predawn indigenous festival. Tourists are welcome to partake in the many activities, which include sea baths, story telling, street dancing and calypso competitions. Consider sailing through the Grenadines, featured in the film "Pirates of the Caribbean," and anchoring for lunch at Petit Tabac, the beach where Sparrow, the character played by Johnny Depp in "Pirates," was marooned. On New Year's Eve ask the crew to dock at Basil's Bar in Mustique.

Boats to Rent A wide variety of yachts, catamarans and other vessels is available to rent. Ten guests can comfortably sleep on Freya, a crewed luxury catamaran yacht with a large outdoor deck and bar for entertaining; it can be chartered for 12,000 euros a week. For an even bigger splurge, rent Azzura, a 95-foot sailing yacht with a teak interior that sleeps six guests in three cabins, each with a bathroom. With every amenity from a CD and video library to a boat for shuttling passengers back and forth from the islands, the Azzura's crew

will even set up a tree in the lounge for Christmas sailors; it goes for 34,000 euros a week. Both vessels can be rented through a Web site, Boatbookings.com.

ICE SKATING IN LONDON

For a traditional family Christmas, head straight to London where your kids can skate their way through history. Five ice rinks have been set up this holiday season, including one in the moat surrounding the Tower of London and another at King Henry VIII's Hampton Court Palace, and perhaps the most inviting one, on the frozen courtyard of Somerset House. Stroll through the Christmas market at Covent Garden where opera singers bellow out carols to passing shoppers; visit the amazing toy department at Harrod's, and take the kids to a Royal Ballet performance of the "Nutcracker" (www.royalopera.org, 44-207-304-4000 ; tickets £8 standing room to £84 stalls) or a live reading of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." Music lovers may want to attend one of the many Christmas sing-along concerts at the Royal Albert Hall and see the musicians play in 18th century costumes and wigs (www.royalalberthall.com; Carols by candlelight, tickets from £12.50 to £33.00.) For Christmas dinner, head to any of the larger hotels for a traditional meal of turkey and plum pudding in a festively appointed dining room, as most restaurants will be closed on Christmas Day .

The Chesterfield in Mayfair, a four-star hotel off Berkely Square, is offering a "Santa Baby" package until January 8th that includes a full English breakfast, Santa Claus hat and gift upon arrival, mistletoe in your room, a taxi to shopping at Oxford street, and tea for two with a Christmas cake. Families booking an executive suite, which sleeps up to five persons, will get a tree in their room, drinks vouchers for each night, canapés each evening, and unlimited use of the in-room entertainment system. A minimum stay of two nights is required. £311.81 per night for an executive suite. Chesterfield Mayfair, 35 Charles St. +44-20-7491-2662, www.chesterfieldmayfair.com.

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