

TRAVEL

Welcome to the enchanting world of Dutch Christmas markets—a festive panorama of twinkling lights, sizzling *oliebollen* (deep-fried dough balls), unique gifts and spectacular locations! When it comes to Christmas festivities, the Netherlands has plenty of surprises in store to set the mood for the holidays and whisk you away into the magical world of winter celebrations.

Christmas Town Valkenburg

It doesn't matter what the weather forecast says when you're visiting Christmas Town Valkenburg, because this unique Christmas market takes place underground, within the caves that run beneath the old city. Christmas Town Valkenburg has been nominated for the European Best Christmas Market a few years in a row and has placed in the top ten a few times. In Valkenburg, you can visit the Christmas market for fifty-nine days from November until January. During this time, Valkenburg transforms into a Christmas town, with twinkling lights on the streets, delightful Christmas flavors coming from the stalls and Christmas music filling the air.

However, the main attraction is the underground Christmas extravaganza. You can wander through the corridors of the *Gemeentegrot* (Municipal Cave) and *Fluweelengrot* (Velvet Cave, see our November/December 2018 issue), browse the stalls brimming with gift ideas and taste the culinary delicacies. In the *MergelRijk* cave, you can admire Europe's largest exhibition of the Christmas story in miniature as well as the awe-inspiring marlstone sculptures.

Above ground, the city streets become a stage for street theater, the Landaal Christmas Parade

VERSTEL VAN VALKENBURG





(a magical parade held twice a week) and Santa Village. In the Fairytale Forest theme park, the inhabitants do their best to adorn houses with Christmas decorations.

Valkenburg is a city that attracts numerous tourists year-round due to its hilly landscape (which is unique in the Netherlands), rich history and former marlstone quarries (often referred to as caves, even though they are primarily manmade). (See our September/October 2014 issue.) These quarries date back to Roman times and are only used for tourism nowadays. The Municipal Cave has been used as a location for the Christmas market since 1986.

Haarlem Christmas market

Haarlem, situated about twenty miles to the west of Amsterdam, is the beautiful capital of the province of North Holland. Sometimes called 'Little Amsterdam', Haarlem is a tourist destination for those looking for a more quiet city that still provides rich history and many cultural attractions. (See our January/February 2012 issue.)

The Haarlem Christmas market presents a great alternative to the markets in Amsterdam, which are less impressive in size and also lack the old town atmosphere that can be found in Haarlem. Here, you can wander through one of the largest Christmas markets in the Netherlands, also considered one of the best in the country. The market (which usually takes place in early December) lasts only three days, but the city goes to great lengths to treat visitors to the most enchanting Christmas vibes.

With more than three hundred stalls lining the streets of the city and coming together in the main square (Grote Markt), visitors are welcomed with a great selection of seasonal gifts, winter

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delicacies, warm beverages and everything that is needed for a true Christmas atmosphere.

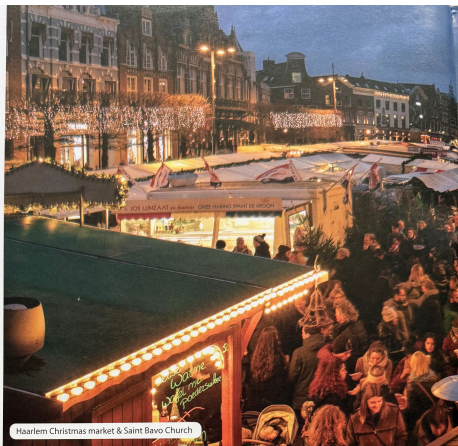
Adding to the festive ambience, various choirs singing carols and orchestras (including a Dickens orchestra) entertain the audience and provide a charming holiday background. The city itself, with its narrow, cobbled streets and old architecture, is the perfect backdrop for this nostalgic Christmas market. During the market weekend, Schaghestraat even changes its name to 'Sraatje van Emma' (honoring the Dutch queen who was on the throne from 1879 to 1890) and hosts a 19th-century-inspired Christmas fair where locals dress in Victorian clothing. Another highlight is the Christmas Eve sing-along when everyone gathers at the Grote Markt to sing Christmas carols.

Midwinterfeest (Midwinter Celebration) in De Rijp

A small but special Christmas market takes place in De Rijp (a village in the North Holland province) biannually, the *Midwinterfeest*, or Midwinter Celebration. For a few days in December, the picturesque center of De Rijp transforms into a fairytale land, transporting visitors back to the 19th century. During this event, locals dress in period clothing and stroll along the cobbled streets lined with old houses. The atmosphere is one-of-a-kind, leaving all who experience this event smitten by the village's enchanting charm. The streets and houses come alive with Christmas lights as well as decorations recalling De Rijp's fishing history, among them fishing nets and whale motifs. Before the lakes surrounding the village were drained and transformed into polders, De Rijp was a prosperous fishing village, an island with access to the sea, owning a medium herring fleet and also bigger boats for whale

TOP: HAARLEM DEGRINDENTEN; BOTTOM: JONAS VANDEN

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Haarlem Christmas market & Saint Bavo Church



Street decorated for Midwinterfeest in De Rijp village



hunting. Today, the rich history of the village can be seen in the many architectural monuments still standing, including some of the oldest wooden houses in North Holland.

Midwinterfeest is a joyful celebration for everyone, no matter their age. The beautifully decorated streets are peppered with stalls selling hot chocolate, *glühwein* (mulled wine) or the traditional, thick *erwtensop* (split pea soup). All around the village there are many events, pop-up petting farms and musical performances, some of them in private residences, others at the splendid old church. As the main attraction, the beautiful Christmas market is packed with stalls selling a wide range of locally crafted and handmade products.

Magical Maastricht Vrijthof

With the city center's romantic light route, market, traditional ferris wheel and House of Santa, Maastricht becomes the epitome of Christmas charm. This city hosts the Magical Maastricht Vrijthof for the entire month of December, to the delight of Christmas lovers from every corner of the country and even Belgium, Germany and Luxembourg. The Christmas market in Maastricht offers a good reason to book an entire weekend in the city, which will give you enough time to experience the joyful atmosphere and visit all the main attractions. Situated on the River Maas and developed on the spot of an old Roman settlement, this city breathes history. (See our July/August 2017 issue.)

Stroll through the orange-illuminated streets, browse the stores and the artisan stalls at the market, glide happily on the covered ice rink or experience the new attraction – a street curling rink. Delicious flavors of Dutch and German winter

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treats surround the market from all directions, while steaming beverages like *glühwein* and *schrobbeier* (an herbal liqueur from Tilburg) help chase away the chill after a long walk. A recent addition to the market is the Regional Products Square, with over 150 local producers from Limburg.

To complete the picture, a 148-foot-tall ferris wheel with glass-covered gondolas offers amazing panoramic views over the city. The first Magical Maastricht took place in 2010 as a new event where the emphasis was more on creating a Christmas atmosphere and less on a fair. The precursor to Magical Maastricht – Winterland – was considered too big by some locals and a big fair rather than a cozy Christmas market. Therefore, changes were made to accommodate their wishes, giving rise to this new celebration.

Royal Christmas Fair in The Hague

Said to be one of the most popular Christmas markets in the Netherlands, the Royal Christmas Fair is a sixteen-day holiday celebration on the beautiful Lange Voorhout street in the historic heart of The Hague. You might know The Hague as the country's administrative center and its seat of government, but that doesn't mean it can't become an enchanting Christmas destination come December! The Christmas houses at the fair are arranged under the tree canopy and amidst twinkling lights, creating a long avenue where you can stroll around and immerse yourself in the festive atmosphere. This event is the largest multi-day Christmas market in the country, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors annually and celebrating its seventh edition this year. The Royal Christmas Fair boasts more than one hundred Christmas houses packed with beautiful products, many of them local and handmade. At the food stalls, visitors can sample delicacies from around the world alongside traditional Dutch treats. For warmth, stoves with crackling fires are placed throughout the market, inviting guests to take a break, while stalls with hot beverages have options for every taste. Children can attend the special Christmas fair in The Hague, too. Santa visits (almost) daily and is happy to pose for photos. Actors dressed in period clothes roam the fair, adding to the atmosphere, while children's choirs provide a delightful backdrop.

The Hague is rich in culture and boasts a royal atmosphere, all while embracing its international allure. The Christmas fair is surrounded by interesting attractions such as the Binnenhof (see our November/December 2019 issue), Noordeinde Palace, various embassies, museums and lively shopping streets.

December is the month of celebration, bringing a cornucopia of events all around the country. The sound of horns announces winter in the northeast with the *Midwinterhoornblazen* tradition. One of the oldest light festivals in the Netherlands, Gouda by Candlelight, will illuminate the city's majestic town hall with around 1,500 candles. In Amsterdam, the Light Festival creates a route of light art installations. In Deventer, Charles Dickens stories come to life in the city center with the *Dickens Festijn*, and Winter Efteling greets guests with a captivating winter ambience in the country's favorite theme park. For more magic, The Luminous Nights at De Haar Castle and the Ice Sculpture festival in Zwolle are two must-see events!

THE FERRIS WHEEL AND THE LIGHTS OF THE MAGICAL MAASTRICHT VRIJTHOF. THE CHRISTMAS MARKET AT THE ROYAL CHRISTMAS FAIR. PHOTO: DANIEL DE BOK.

DANA MARIN

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