

# Eat, drink and be merry

Experience the vivid and authentic Austrian Yuletide cheer of Salzburg's twinkling Christmas markets

**WORDS:** John Malathronas

**C**hristmas feels different in Salzburg. At first glance it oozes Yuletide perfection: baroque buildings covered in snow, full of brightly coloured decorations and twinkling fairy lights. A quick stroll reveals its half-dozen Christmas markets spread around town. They're the Real Thing — seeming to spring up organically from the local inhabitants' natural exuberance at this time of year and positively brimming with authentic festive cheer.

"The first recorded Christmas market in the Old Town was in 1491," says Michaela Muhr, whose Salzburg Experience offers a special Christmas tour. "As the salt mines couldn't operate in winter, the miners became traders as a way of earning some money. They worked leather and wood."

She points at a stall in the Mirabellplatz market by Salzburg's Town Hall displaying wooden boards. "These were our plates," she says. "We used to eat out of those." And such plates, as well as hats, boots, toys, wine and foodstuffs were bought and sold roughly two weeks before and after St Nicholas's Day on 6 December.

"We start ordering in January for next Christmas," says Christina Renzl, whose Blumenschloessl stall with its 400-odd decorative ideas stands in the Christkindl market under the shadow of the city's

imposing cathedral. "There are many different parts to a product. This toy, for instance, consists of a ceramic angel, a glass case, a cinnamon stick and two different kinds of holly. In the summer we start assembling everything and paint most of our items by hand."

The Christmas trade is so lucrative, everyone wants in. "The waiting list is 350 long, but it's one-in, one-out and there are only two to five vacancies every year," says Arnold Fellingner, member of the association that runs Christkindl market. "The infrastructure belongs to the stall owner but the association helps with the overall setup. We start in the first week of November because it's a major undertaking, project plan and all. Look up, for instance: for accessibility purposes, all power cables and water pipes are hanging above, but they're all carefully hidden beneath the decorations and lights."

Plus, there are rules: "Out of 96 stallholders only 12 are licensed to sell alcohol and are spread all over the market. Every food stall must offer, apart from the usual, its own speciality against which no one else is allowed to compete." He takes me to Kernei's Mostheuriger farm-to-table stall famed for its 'Haunsberger', a sausage meat patty in a bun served with curry sauce, mustard and onions. It's delicious and only to be found here.





## CHRISTMAS MARKETS



### UNMISSABLE CHRISTMAS TREATS

#### LEBKUCHEN

These gingerbread-esque cookies epitomise the scent and taste of Germanic Christmas, flavoured with cinnamon, cloves, cardamom and sugar aplenty, and have been sold here since the 1400s.

#### GLÜHWEIN

Red wine with mulling spices of clove and cinnamon with oranges and lemon juice are boiled together to make this perennial festive favourite. Perfect for warming hands and bellies.

#### TROCKENFRÜCHTEKRAMPUS

Children lessen their fear of Santa's demon goat helper alter ego by eating a dried-fruit version of him made of prunes, dates, apricots and sultanas.

#### KASNOCKEN

Salzburgerland's take on macaroni cheese. A spätzle (gnocchi style noodle) base topped with layers of grated pungent cheese such as Bierkäse from Pinzgau, and fried onions.

The Christmas markets may all seem the same to an outsider, but they're highly differentiated to a local. Families congregate at the small-but-perfectly-formed Sternadvent whose life-size manger and petting zoo appeals to young children. Almost everyone stops at the Alter Markt to drink Glühwein and eat sausages, the proceeds of which fund charities including the Lions Club, Children in Africa and Austrian Doctors. After work, locals meet up with friends for a drink at St Peter's courtyard, and some travel even further afield to the many idyllic markets in mountain villages and lakeside towns across the region. Next door, the Stiftskeller is tucked away in the abbey's vaulted chambers and claims to be Europe's oldest functioning restaurant. The lure of history is irresistible — many companies arrange their Christmas dinners here, while families try to visit at least once during advent.

For the most fascinating of all markets and an introduction to an Austrian Christmas icon, I take the bus for a 20-minute ride to south Salzburg. Here, just inside the city limits, rises Hellbrunn Palace. It's within these grounds you can find the gazebo where Liesl sings '16 Going On 17' in *The Sound of Music*. During advent, it stages an outdoor exhibition showcasing the infamous Krampus. Part-zombie, part-devil, part-animal spirit, Krampus was a pagan figure

**PREVIOUS PAGE:** Salzburg Christmas markets in Domplatz at dusk

**ABOVE:** Visitors stroll past a market stall specialising in Christmas ornaments

widely revered in olden times before its iconography was banned by the Inquisition. It re-emerged in the 17th century as St Nicholas's terrifying alter ego: while the saint brings presents to good, obedient kids, Krampus punishes the bad ones.

There's an extensive Krampus collection in Salzburg's Christmas museum. "December used to belong to St Nicholas and by extension to Krampus," explains the curator, Ulrike Winger. "It was St Nicholas who gave children presents on 6 December, but Martin Luther refocused the celebrations towards the birth of Christ." Indeed, even today Austrian children write letters to Baby Jesus rather than to Santa Claus. But as Ulrike points out: "Baby Jesus was too weak to carry all the presents so he needed some help. Enter Old Man Winter, who eventually turned into Father Christmas, merging with St Nicholas/Santa Claus in the 19th century."

Yes, Christmas feels different in Salzburg; it feels authentic and untarnished, if only because the legends and celebrations make sense here. □