

[Back to online version](#)**TheObserver** Escape : Print version

Christmas days out

Add a little sparkle...

Don't be a Christmas couch potato. Nicki Symington offers some alternatives

More on...**Travel**

Family holidays

Life and style

Family

Shopping

Christmas 2004

The Guardian

Observer Escape section

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Sleigh-bells in Scotland... See the UK's only reindeer herd in Aviemore. Picture: Corbis

This year don't let your holidays descend into a fortnight of bad television and boredom-induced family meltdown. Instead, take advantage of some of the hundreds of festive events around the country, from lantern parades to pantomimes. Most are closed on Christmas Day (unless otherwise stated), when you'll just have to suffer the TV turkeys or resort to an extended dog-walk for entertainment.

Warwick

Warwick Castle (0870 442 2375) is celebrating its medieval roots until 3 January, with flaming torches, fire eaters and a dragon by way of entertainment. There will also be fairies and puppet shows and a storyteller weaving wintry yarns as well as a bird-of-prey display and an ice rink for feats of chilly virtuosity. £13.50 for adults, £8.25 for children.

Isle of Wight

Queen Victoria spent most of her Christmases at Osborne House (01983 200022)

on the Isle of Wight and this year the house has been decorated à la Victoria, with a Christmas tree (which Albert had a hand in popularising in this country), ornaments and presents. The house is open for tours (which must be pre-booked) and the Terrace restaurant will be serving a seasonal menu. Until 31 December (closed 24-26 December).£7 for adults, £3.50 children.

Wakefield

Do some superior last-minute Christmas shopping, expose your kids to art and get some fresh air all at the same time at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (01924 832631) The 500-acre garden in Wakefield houses an extensive collection, including works by Henry Moore, Elisabeth Frink and Barbara Hepworth, and three galleries, one of which, The Bothy Gallery, is hosting the Christmas Craft Show (until 27 February). Impress your friends by buying them one of the featured pieces of jewellery and ceramics, all of which are by established and emerging artists, and all of which are for sale. Closed 23-26 December.

Telford

Lapland comes to Telford in Shropshire in the form of a Christmas Village, complete with snow-capped houses, sleigh rides, a giant ice mountain and a toy factory, all in a woodland setting. Themed rides and an ice rink promise fun for youngsters and a magic wishing waterfall allows children to make a wish. Proceeds go to the WWF (formerly the World Wide Fund for Nature) campaign for the conservation of polar bears. On Saturdays, sign-language Santa will be able to communicate with children with hearing difficulties. Call 01952 591633 to book. £6.95 for children, £4 for adults.

Aviemore

Visit the UK's only reindeer herd at the Cairngorm Reindeer Centre in Aviemore (01479 861 228). Weather permitting, groups can go up into the hills of the Glenlivet Estate and meet, stroke and feed the animals that make up the 150-strong herd and learn about Father Christmas's choice of sleigh-pullers. Adults £6, children £3. From 11am. Closed Christmas Day and New Year's Day.

Birmingham

Frankfurt Christmas Market has taken up residence in Birmingham's Victoria Square until Tuesday. Germany is famous for its markets with their twinkling stalls selling everything from handmade toys and traditional Christmas decorations to ceramics and jewellery. Refreshment comes in the form of bratwurst and there's glühwein and lager for the grown-ups. Contact Birmingham Tourist Information Line: 0121 202 5099.

Oldham

Catch the winning results of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition that are on display at Gallery Oldham (0161 911 4653) in Oldham town centre until 9 January. Organised by the Natural History Museum and BBC Wildlife magazine, the 109 photographs have been whittled down from 20,500 entries

from more than 60 countries and showcase some equally moving and heartstopping shots of animals in the raw. Closed 25-28 December and 1-3 January.

Brighton

The mini festival of Burning the Clocks which takes place on 21 December in Brighton was conceived 10 years ago to celebrate the winter solstice. This free event involves a children's lantern parade through the city centre, leaving the Corn Exchange in Church Street at 6pm and culminating in a firework display from the beach at Madeira Drive near the pier, where many of the paper lanterns are burnt in a spirit of pagan festive frenzy. Contact Brighton & Hove Visitor Centre on 01273 292633 for routes.

London

Step back to the year 1100 and join William the Conqueror's son, Henry I, in celebrating Christmas, Norman-style, at the Tower of London, London EC3 (0870 756 7070). There's a Normans-versus-Saxons narrative that develops throughout the day, so get there early to witness the rivalries unfold. Costumes, food and music contribute to the merriment. Admission to the tower is £13.50 for adults, £9 for children; family tickets cost £37.50 for two adults and three children and entry to the Norman Christmas is free. From 27-31 December, 11.30am-4.30pm in the White Tower.

Esher

Find out how Christmas is celebrated around the world on a specially designed family trail at Claremont Landscape Gardens, near Esher, Surrey (01372 467806). It is suitable for children of all ages, who pick up a clue sheet on entering the garden. There are no prizes, but it is fun and informative. Until 2 January 2005. Admission to the gardens is free for National Trust members; non-members pay £4 for adults, £2 for children.

Edinburgh

Edinburgh's Princes Street Gardens have been turned into an ice rink where you can skate in the shadow of the castle daily until 10pm on 9 January (0131 221 6349). Admission and skate hire: £7 adults, £6 children.

Liverpool

Christmas isn't Christmas without carols. Families of all ages can sing along with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir at the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall on 20, 22 and 23 December (tickets from £12.50 to £28. Book on 0151 709 3789).

Norwich

The spirit of Christmas takes over Norwich today, when a one-day seasonal festival hits town from 10am-9pm, as an antidote to the commercialism that takes hold at this time of year. There's everything from an ice rink to ice sculpture, street performers, art displays, a magical lantern parade that starts at

3.45pm from Timber Hill and ends at Millennium Plane where outdoor carol singing takes place. Evening events include a display of aerial theatre by Scarabeus, which promises to involve fireworks, fake snow and abseiling from the cathedral clock tower. For details, call the information line on 01603 212626.

He's behind you... in the queue for show tickets

Ticket for the Snicket

Fans of the Lemony Snicket books will queue up for the film of A Series of Unfortunate Events, starring Jim Carrey, Meryl Streep and Jude Law. On general release, certificate PG.

Material boys and girls

Lyra and Will continue on their journey of discovery in His Dark Materials until 2 April at the National (020 7452 3000). Tickets from £10-£35, with concessions for under-18s.

Russia's circus tricks

The Moscow State Circus is coming to town with traditional circus acts from strongmen to acrobats. At the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London (0870 382 8000) from 26 December until 5 January 2005. Tickets from £10-£25.

Beauty spot

Laurence Boswell's production of the fairy tale Beauty and the Beast is guaranteed to charm audiences of all ages. At the Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon (0870 609 1110) until 16 January. Tickets cost from £10-£32

Mixed nuts

A decadent Weimar interpretation of the Nutcracker is at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow (0141 332 9000), until 31 December. Tickets cost from £14 to £33.50.

Sir, that's no dame

There ain't nothing like a dame and there is certainly none like Sir Ian McKellen's Widow Twankie. Aladdin at the Old Vic, London (0870 060 6628) runs until 23 January. Tickets from £7.50-£32.50.

Ugly side of showbiz

Catch Wayne Sleep and Anthony Dowell as the ugly sisters in Cinderella at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden WC2 (020 7304 4000) until 14 January 2005. Tickets from £7-£82.

Modern times

Aladdie is playing at Glasgow's Tron (0141 552 4267) until 8 January, in a contemporary offering (set in a laundrette), but no less pantotastic for all that. Tickets are £7-£14.

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