

The seasonal journey that will take you back to childhood

There's nothing like a Christmas cruise to get you in the festive mood, says **Gabriella Le Breton**

It is impossible to avoid clichés when it comes to Europe's Christmas markets – the gingerbread-house stalls, decked with fairy lights; the aroma of sausages and roast chestnuts in the crisp air; the steam rising from mugs of *glühwein*; and the sounds of carol singers and church bells muted by falling snow... For once, everything is just as you imagine it will be. Combine this with a festive cruise and only the most dedicated Scrooge would fail to get into the Christmas spirit.

My own Christmas cruise began in Nuremberg where I boarded the River Empress. There was a giant Christmas tree in the lobby and *glühwein* to welcome everyone aboard. The discovery of a chocolate advent calendar in my cabin transported me immediately back to childhood.

Over dinner on my first evening, I picked up tips from seasoned Christmas-market cruisers: don't buy too much too soon or you'll have no money left by the time you reach Vienna; don't forget to take cash as many stalls don't accept credit cards; and drink enough *glühwein* to keep warm but not so much that you buy the entire market.

The next morning, I set out to tackle the 200 market stalls of Nuremberg's Christkindlmarkt (Christmas market). Just as my parents made me wait until after breakfast to open my presents, our guide made us complete a walking tour of the medieval city before letting us loose on the busy market square in Nuremberg's Old Town.

Heeding the words of the market veterans, I resisted the urge to buy every hand-carved wooden toy,



Star turn: the Rathaus in Vienna, a city that makes a perfect conclusion to a Christmas cruise

nutcracker and Nativity scene, and started small with candles and glass baubles.

As we left Nuremberg and motored towards Regensburg, I curled up in an armchair and watched the wintry landscape slip past. Children skated on frozen ponds and delicate church spires and squat onion domes towered above tiny villages under their snowy blankets. As darkness fell, countless fairy lights began to twinkle in the trees, homes and even cowsheds on the hills flanking the river.

Regensburg was equally atmospheric, and offered four markets to explore, my favourite being the Lucreziamarkt, where local artists and craftspeople sold

their handicrafts – I picked up a lovely, Breughel-like winter's scene of medieval Regensburg.

In Passau, a picturesque town located at the confluence of the Danube, Ilz and Inn rivers, the Christkindlmarkt took place beneath the ornate St Stephen's Cathedral. The strains of the organ (Europe's largest) could just be heard over the Inn, which roared past the market and pretty boutiques of Höllestrasse, or Hell Street, named after the repeated flooding its residents have had to endure.

At Linz, rather than take a two-hour bus ride to Salzburg, I strolled around the city, picking up edible gifts: delicious *linzertorte*, stollen and *lebkuchen*. I also enjoyed the empty River Empress, getting first dibs on freshly baked gingerbread and chatting with the crew.

In festive mood, the crew adopted us as their surrogate family, placing small gifts in our shoes at night (in the Saint Nicholas tradition), creating elaborate reindeer towel animals and sharing other Christmas rituals.

The following day provided a break from festive retail as we sailed through the Wachau Valley to Dürnstein, one of Austria's smallest and prettiest towns. The beauty of the valley was mesmerising;

coils of smoke rose from sleepy villages, and ruined castles on solitary cliffs looked down on terraced vineyards, the dark vines spidery against the snow.

The next day, these pastoral scenes were replaced by the genteel bustle and imperial grandeur of Vienna. I joined the fur-clad locals nibbling *vanillekipferl* (crescent-shaped Christmas biscuits) as we browsed the Christkindlmarkt beneath St Stephen's Cathedral.

As I admired a delicate music box on one of the stalls, the cathedral's bells burst into song above me. I have read that it was only when Beethoven saw birds startled by the bells and flying from this very cathedral, but could not hear any sound, that he realised the totality of his deafness. The music box, battling bravely against the bells, was playing Mozart – but it won me over anyway.

☎ Titan (0800 988 5867; titantravel.co.uk) has limited availability on its eight-day European Festive Markets cruise departing on December 8 2012 from Nuremberg, sailing to Vienna, from £2,449 per person, including return flight, transfers, full board, excursions and VIP Home Departure Service



Christmas markets are fun but seeing them on a river cruise is even more fun