

The holiday spirit thrives in Central Europe, where Christkindlmarkt—or Christmas markets—turn grand city squares and baroque palaces into magical winter wonderlands. The banks of the Danube play host to some of the continent’s oldest and most treasured Christmas traditions. Immerse yourself in vibrant markets and holiday cheer alongside a National Geographic Expert and a National Geographic Photography Expert as you cruise from Budapest to Vienna to Austria’s Wachau Valley to Passau. Browse charming huts filled with handmade ornaments, gingerbread, and wooden soldiers, as choral music and the aroma of mulled wine fill the air. Visit historic palaces that have been transformed into Christmas villages. With a variety of daily excursions to choose from, you can tailor the trip to fit your Christmas wishes.

DAY 1: BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

The Hungarian Parliament Building with a dome and spires lit up at night on the Danube River

Arrive in Budapest and settle into your cabin this afternoon. If you wish, get your first taste of holiday cheer with a visit to one of Budapest’s Christmas markets. After the captain’s welcome reception and dinner, enjoy entertainment on the ship.

Meals Included: Dinner

Accommodations: AmaViola for the entire trip

DAY 2: BUDAPEST

A Christmas tree and St. Stephen’s Cathedral are lit up at night in Budapest, Hungary

Straddling the Danube, Hungary’s capital is a tale of two cities: Buda, set on quaint cobbled streets, and Pest, a grand cityscape of wide boulevards and majestic buildings. Set out on a morning tour to discover Buda’s Castle Hill, home to Matthias Church, where Habsburg royalty held coronations and weddings. Take in sweeping views of the city from Fisherman’s Bastion. Then head to Pest to see Heroes’ Square and venture into the spice-scented stalls of the city’s renowned Christmas markets. Meet the ship in Esztergom and take to the Danube this afternoon. As we cruise, gather for a talk with our expert and take part in Eastern European traditions—including a “pickle hunt”—while decorating the ship’s Christmas tree. Sit down to dinner as we follow the Danube along the border with Slovakia toward the Gabčíkovo Lock.

Meals Included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 3: BRATISLAVA, SLOVAKIA / VIENNA, AUSTRIA

People stroll among rows of striped roofs on stalls of a Christmas market at a square in Bratislava

Discover Bratislava, capital of Slovakia and, for many years during the Ottoman era, the capital of Hungary. On a guided walk, venture into St. Martin's Cathedral, a massive Gothic structure where Hungary's kings and queens were crowned for centuries. Stroll cobblestoned streets to the Old Town Hall on the picturesque main square, and see Michael's Gate, the last remnant of the city's original fortifications. Then meander through Bratislava's charming Christmas market. Alternatively, set off on a food tour, seeing the sights as you make your way on foot to a local restaurant to sample cheeses, charcuterie, and other traditional delicacies. Or explore Bratislava on an invigorating hike, climbing to the city's castle for breathtaking views. Cruise on to Vienna this evening and enjoy free time to explore the city.

Meals Included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 4: VIENNA

Rows of stalls at the Rathausplatz Christmas market in front of Vienna City Hall lit up at night

Spend the morning discovering imperial Vienna on foot, from the magnificent Opera House to the Hofburg—the residence and seat of Habsburg power for more than 600 years. Or set out on a guided bike tour, pedaling to the city's highlights. After lunch on the ship, choose one of two excursions. Take a special behind-the-scenes tour of Vienna's Museum of Natural History led by Ludovic Ferrière, a National Geographic Grantee and curator of the museum's meteorite exhibit. Or get a glimpse at the city's more opulent side on a guided tour of Schönbrunn Palace—the baroque summer residence of the imperial family—and sip a glass of Weihnachtspunsch (Christmas punch) or Glühwein (mulled wine) at the palace's intimate Christmas market. This evening, attend a classical concert in town or experience the glittering lights and festive atmosphere of the Rathausplatz Christmas market at night.

Meals Included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 5: WACHAU VALLEY / MELK

A tree lined riverbank on the Danube with the spires of a church rising above in the distance

Dock in Weissenkirchen, a village nestled in the heart of Austria's UNESCO-designated Wachau Valley, and choose from three excursions. Go on a walking tour of medieval Dürnstein, then taste local wines or sample the area's apricot-based delicacies, such as jams and chocolates. Choose to ride a bike along the back roads of the Wachau Valley, passing through charming villages on the way to Melk. Or remain onboard the ship to experience the Wachau Valley from the river, sailing to Melk for a visit to the magnificent Melk Abbey, considered one of the finest examples of baroque architecture in the world.

Meals Included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 6: LINZ / SALZBURG, AUSTRIA OR ČESKÝ KRUMLOV, CZECHIA (CZECH REPUBLIC)

A castle overlooks the snow covered town of Linz on the banks of the Danube River

Arrive in the port city of Linz, a cultural capital that inspired composers like Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. Explore the old city on a walking tour that includes Linz's Christmas markets as well as the Mozart House, where the composer wrote Linz Symphony in only three days. Or explore on a guided bike ride, following the city's Culture Mile and tracing the banks of the Danube.

Instead of Linz, you may choose to travel to Czechia (formerly the Czech Republic) for a visit to Cesky Krumlov—a labyrinth of cobblestoned streets and hidden squares with medieval, baroque, and Renaissance buildings.

Alternatively, choose a full-day excursion to Salzburg. Stroll the storybook streets of UNESCO-designated old town and visit Salzburg's Christmas markets. Wander among the charming wooden huts of the market here before returning to the ship.

Meals Included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 7: PASSAU, GERMANY

The Danube River flows by the snow covered buildings of Passau, Germany

Set at the scenic confluence of the Danube, Inn, and Ilz rivers, Passau was once an important trading center founded on the site of a Roman camp. Admire the town's celebrated baroque architecture on a walking tour, and explore the Christmas market in Cathedral Square, set against the green-domed belltowers of St. Stephen's. Soak up local culture as you browse unique crafts, including Bavarian-style houses and glass ornaments. For a more active excursion, hike to the hilltop pilgrimage site of Paulinerkloister Mariahilf, or join a guided bike ride along the Danube. Later, sail for Vilshofen, and toast our voyage at an exclusive Oktoberfest celebration.

Meals Included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 8: VILSHOFEN / MUNICH

Rows of quaint buildings on a snow covered street decorated with Christmas lights in Munich, Germany

Disembark after breakfast and transfer to the airport in Munich for your flight home.

Meals Included: Breakfast