

01 RURAL RETREAT

Check into somewhere closer to home for some winter walks, open fires, pampering and gourmet food.

Mount Falcon on the banks of the River Moy in Co Mayo is a four-star hotel set in a woodlands estate with 100 acres of forest

and 4km of walking trails. The estate was once a hunting and fishing lodge, so fishing can also be arranged as well as walks and visitors can enjoy the indoor swimming pool, sauna, steam room and jacuzzi. Also in Mayo, the five-star Ashford Castle sits on another country estate dating back to 1228. It has superb gardens for walking, fishing and golf - and some great winter offers.

STAY: Mount Falcon is offering three nights for the price of two this winter and a Christmas break in a self-catering lodge costs from €720 for a 3-night stay or €920 for five nights. Call 096-74472 or see mountfalcon.com for details. Two nights mid-week at Ashford Castle, including dinner, costs from €500 per room and winter weekend specials, including dinner, start from €620. Call 094-9546003 or see ashford.ie



6 OF THE BEST Winter Breaks

FANCY A CHRISTMAS BREAK AWAY FROM HOME? YVONNE GORDON THE BEST OF WHAT'S ON OFFER OVERSEAS



02

02 SKI-FEST

Even if you don't ski, snow-filled mountain resorts are worth a visit in winter. Book into a luxurious mountain chalet, where all meals are provided and you can do non-ski activities like walking, tobogganing, zip-wiring - or just relaxing by the log fire with a book.

A stay in a Highlife chalet in Morzine in the French Alps comes with four-course meals, outdoor hot tubs/saunas and in-chalet

pampering treatments. For non-skiers, there are mountain and valley walks, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing trails through the Manche Valley, Morzine-Avoriaz and Lake Montriond -- perfect for anyone who finds the downhill pistes too steep or crowded for comfort. In St Anton in Austria, activities include ice-skating, curling, sleigh-rides and tennis. There is 276km of ski piste. Crystal Holiday's catered chalets include breakfast, afternoon tea, canapés and an evening meal with wine. Most have saunas, jacuzzis, open fireplaces and DVD players.

STAY: A Highlife chalet holiday costs from €805 for a week per person sharing. This price include meals and wines. A four-night stay will set you back €499. For details, call 01-6771100 or log on to highlife.ie. A four-star chalet in St Anton with Crystal Holidays from December costs from €949pp, including flights and transfers from Dublin. Call Crystal Ski on 01-4331010 or see crystalski.ie

03 POLAR TRIP

The next two or three years are predicted to be the best in an eleven-year cycle to see the natural phenomenon, so head to the polar regions this winter for the best chances of seeing the aurora borealis.

In Kakslautanen Hotel and Igloo Village in northern Finland, you can stay in your own glass-topped igloo for uninterrupted views. There is also a snow restaurant, an ice bar, ice igloos, a smoke sauna and for the brave, an ice hole in the lake for a cool dip afterwards. Activities in the surrounding Lapland region include husky, snowmobile and reindeer safaris. Or check into the Ice Hotel in Jukkasjärvi in Swedish Lapland and sleep on reindeer skins in a room made of ice and snow -- the hotel is running nightly northern lights bus tours this winter.

GO: SAS flies from Dublin to Helsinki with one stopover, see flysas.ie. There are daily flights from Helsinki to Ivalo.

STAY: The igloo village at Kakslautanen opens in December/January, see kakslautanen.fi, and the nearest airport is Ivalo. For the Ice Hotel, see icehotel.com. SAS flies from Dublin



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06 WINTER SUN

People start flocking to the Canaries and Morocco from November onwards to get some winter warmth into damp old bones and colour back into wind-whipped cheeks.

Lanzarote is just 60 miles off the coast of Africa, so it's no surprise that its blue skies and temperatures averaging 21 to 23°C make it a popular destina-

tion with winter sun-seekers. The volcanic landscape of the island's Timanfaya National Park and the caverns at Jameos del Agua are worth a visit. Gran Canaria has similar temperatures and scenery, with lots of sand dunes and picturesque ravines as well as a thriving nightlife. Fuerteventura, the least populated island of the Canaries, is quieter but popular for water sports such as surfing and windsurfing.

GO: Thomas Cook Holidays is offering two-week trips to

Gran Canaria in December from €465 including flights from Dublin. It also has eight nights in Lanzarote for €539. Contact your travel agent or see thomascookholidays.ie for more. Sunway's winter sun offers include a week in Lanzarote from €399, Morocco from €339 and Fuerteventura from €364. You can also get seven nights in an all-inclusive five-star resort in the Dominican Republic in January from €1385 per person sharing including flights. Call Sunway at 01-288 6828 or log on to sunway.ie for details. ■

to Kiruna via Copenhagen or Stockholm, see flysas.ie. **GoHop.ie** has a four-night break to the Ice Hotel, including all flights from €979 per person sharing.

04 SEASONAL CRUISE

Norway's fjords and islands are a wonderland in winter and the Hurtigruten coastal express travels along the coast of Norway, calling at 34 ports along the way and passing fjords, islands and fishing villages.

Excursions for passengers include dog-sledding, wildlife safaris, glacier visits and there is a good chance you will see the northern lights. Hurtigruten also runs cruises to Antarctica where visitors can see penguins, seals and whales and swim in a natural pool in the Antarctic, where the water is an average temperature of 0°C. For a winter sunshine cruise, Seabourn has luxury cruises to South America, calling at some of the smallest and prettiest ports in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Peru and the Falkland Islands.

GO: A seven-night Arctic Wonders voyage on Hurtigruten from Bergen to Kirkenes in Norway costs from €1,061 per person, including a night at the Kirkenes Snow hotel. A ten-day Antarctic Expedition costs from €4,000pp, see www.hurtigruten.co.uk. The 14-day Seabourn South America cruise, including flights from the UK, starts at €5,354 per person. All three cruises can be booked with John Galligan Travel, call 01 207 6555 or see jgt.ie

All prices correct going to press. Prices and availability subject to change.



04

05 CHRISTMAS MARKET

If you prefer to do your Christmas shopping while enjoying a warming mug of glühwein, freshly baked gingerbread and the strains of a choir in the background, check out one of Europe's Christmas markets.

Munich's is one of Europe's oldest, dating back to 1642. It has a great atmosphere, with stalls selling everything from wood carvings, Bavarian glassware and crib figurines to seasonal plum and almond delicacies. The streets of Budapest in

Hungary are also transformed into a Christmas Fair for four weeks with lots going on around the city. It is a great place to take in a Christmas concert, as is Vienna, where the Christmas market is set in the city's historical quarter. In Prague, you can watch stall-holders prepare traditional foods, while at the Christmas markets in Salzburg, you might be treated to performances from the Salzburg choir. The three Scandinavian capitals of Copenhagen, Stockholm and Oslo are also popular for their Christmas Markets, with Copenhagen's traditional Christmas market held in the beautiful amusement park, Tivoli Gardens.



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