

Recreation and Travel

Christmas spent on the high seas

By VINCENT EGAN
Travel Columnist

Santa Claus, as everyone knows, is the world's greatest and fastest traveller, girdling the entire globe the night of Dec. 24-25 - with frequent stops for milk and cookies too.

Santa is famous not only for his speed but also his elusiveness. However, diligent research shows that there are plenty of places where he is expected to be seen on his visits this year.

A strong claim is made by Rovaniemi, the capital of Lapland, where his personal post-office address is Arctic Circle, 96390 Rovaniemi, Finland. From there, he replies to children's letters in six major languages, including English; each reply contains a special game or puzzle about Santa.

Finnair is offering three-night and four-night "Christmas in Finland" tours to Rovaniemi and even more remote centres in northern Finland, with adult prices beginning at the equivalent of about \$700 Canadian, round-trip from Helsinki, starting Dec. 23.

Activities are geared to the interests of children, with tree-trimming, toboggan rides, ginger-bread baking and visiting reindeer farmers. For parents, the program includes snowmobile trips, saunas and lessons in driving a one-reinder open sliht (Oh, what fun it is!)

SILENT NIGHT

Austria is another interesting country for those who prefer a European Christmas.

The crowning event of the season is the annual commemoration in the chapel at Oberndorf, near Salzburg, where the carol Silent Night, Holy Night

was first performed more than a century ago.

Austria's last remaining Baroque nativity theatre with rod puppets is still functioning in the town of Steyr, which also claims to have the world's largest nativity scene - some 800 figurines in an area of more than 24 square metres.

Other notable nativity scenes may be visited in Salsburg, Innsbruck, Graz and Vienna. In some villages such as Bad Ischl

(site of the famous Zauner's pastry shop), certain private homes open their nativity scenes to visitors.

Christmas traditions are similarly strong in Britain - so strong that few services (public transit, places of entertainment, etc.) are open on Dec. 25, and foreign visitors must book their meals (usually at their hotels) well in advance of that day.

Visitors can choose from an endless number of short Christmas and New Year's holidays at British hotels, stately homes and guest houses.

Ski reports available

The Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Recreation, in cooperation with the Ontario Ski Resorts Association, is once again providing daily information on ski conditions throughout the province.

The alpine and cross-country ski reports are available 24 hours a day and provide accurate, detailed information on snow surface conditions, weather, lifts, slopes and operating trails.

"Ontario has some wonderful ski facilities," Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Recreation Peter North said. "By taking advantage of the Ontario Ski Reporting Program, skiers throughout the province will be able to get the most out of Ontario's winter playgrounds."

Alpine and cross-country skiing are among Ontario's most popular winter recreational activities and the ski condition report allows enthusiasts to get the most up-to-date information available before planning their ski outing.

The alpine condition information line is (416) 963-2992. The cross-country information line is (416) 963-2911. The taped report is available to the public beginning today at 7 a.m. and continuing daily through the Easter weekend of 1991. The report is updated at 11:15 a.m. and 2:15 p.m.

Skiers can receive more detailed information by calling Ontario tourism information officers at (416) 965-4008 in Toronto or toll-free at 1-800-ONTARIO between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. Monday through Friday. The same service is available in French by calling toll-free at 1-800-268-3736.

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