

Acta Scientifica Naturalis

Former Annual of Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen: Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Geography

Journal homepage: <https://content.sciendo.com/view/journals/asn/asn-overview.xml>

The tourism potential of Christmas markets in Europe

Kamen Petrov¹, Mihaela Georgieva-Petrova², Milena Stoyanova²

¹ UNWE, Faculty of Management and Administration, Department of Regional Development, Student District,
19 8th December Str., 1700 Sofia, Bulgaria

² Konstantin Preslavski University of Shumen, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Department of Geography, Regional
Development and Tourism, 115 Universitetska Str., 9700 Shumen, Bulgaria

Abstract: *Christmas markets have become a symbol of a new modern Western European culture that combines historical continuity with the new challenges of the world's geo-economic development. These economic changes transform Christmas markets into mass cultural events. The article provides a brief historical overview of the centuries-old tradition of Christmas markets, which originally originated in German-speaking countries and has long since arrived in many European countries. Contemporary Christmas markets are an important part of the branding of certain regions of the world and in Europe in particular. They help to take the regional development of cities and regions in Europe to another level, with the aim of attracting investment and tourism that will positively develop these locations. To understand which European locations are particularly popular around Christmas, this article takes a closer look at 288 European cities. The premise was that the city should have a Christmas attraction such as a Christmas market. A large-scale analysis of demand volumes identified which European cities are particularly popular around Christmas in 2024.*

Keywords: Christmas markets, historical overview, Europe, tourist destinations

Introduction

The centuries-old tradition of Christmas markets, which originally came from German-speaking countries, has long since arrived in many European countries. The tradition of organizing Christmas markets dates back to the Middle Ages. Then the first fairs began to take place in German-speaking countries. Sometimes small and

charming, sometimes pompous and world-famous, they all have one thing in common: every year they attract thousands of visitors who want to immerse themselves in the contemplative and pre-Christmas atmosphere. Cities such as London, Brussels and Prague host several Advent markets in various locations. Christmas markets are usually organized from mid-November to the end of December. During this period, famous open-air Christmas events, usually called Christmas markets (Weihnachtsmarkt), have their traditions in many cities in Austria, Switzerland and Germany. From the available written sources, we learn that the first fairs were held in Vienna at the end of the 13th century. In 1296, Viennese merchants received the privilege from Duke Albert I of Austria to hold a "December market" to supply the population of Vienna. In 1310, a St. Nicholas market in Munich is first mentioned in documents. In 1384, King Wenceslas granted the town of Bautzen the right to hold a free meat market every Saturday from September 29 until Christmas. Thus, Christmas markets migrated from Austria to Germany in the 14th century and spread to the rest of Europe. They are organized in many large and smaller cities. One of the most famous fairs is the Striezelmarkt in Dresden, whose first edition was held in 1434 and is considered the first regulated Christmas market. At that time, winter fairs were an opportunity for artisans, who usually did not work in the cities, to present and sell their products. Wealthy citizens then shopped in the ornate squares in the city centers, while poorer sections of society traded in the side streets.

In this direction, it is believed that the oldest evidence of a Christmas market in its modern sense dates back to Nuremberg in 1628. The course of the market is described in detail in local archives, although some suspect that this market has existed since at least 1530. What makes bazaars so important is not simply the purchase of an ornament, but rather the whole experience of sound, smell and sight. For modern man, immersion in intangible cultural heritage creates ethical foundations, embracing traditions that are destined to be changed with each new generation. The Industrial Revolution had a profound effect on Christmas markets in the early 19th century. Rising standards of living and the emergence of the working class contributed to the development of Christmas markets. In Berlin, for example, the Christmas market grew from 303 stalls in 1805 to around 600 in 1840. This is because in the early 19th century, the Industrial Revolution had an impact on the standard of living of the inhabitants. This in turn had a direct impact on the scale of Christmas markets. The working class was happy to spend their hard-earned money on crafts and gifts for loved ones. When markets began to serve the working class, the urban elites showed no interest in the cheap gifts for sale, while the police in cities throughout Western Europe complained about the unruly masses of workers who visited them. Gradually, at the end of the 19th century, the markets were pushed to the outskirts of the cities.

Over time, a tradition spread throughout the European world. Thus, in the first half of the 20th century, markets became an integral part of the pre-Christmas traditions in a number of European cities. Gradually, however, the owners of new department stores in the center conducted successive campaigns to move the markets

to avoid competition. Thus, in larger cities from Berlin to Nuremberg, both in Germany and in other countries, they moved their Christmas markets to the outskirts, where they did not have the financial comforts of the central parts. The two wars in the 20th century further created difficulties for the existence of these markets. Towards the end of the 1940s, the wars in Europe led to a decline or an end to the merry Christmas markets in many cities, but in the 1980s, they returned in full splendor. The wealthier society, longing for normality, willingly participated in the cultural events associated with the fairs and rediscovered the meaning of the Christmas markets. Thus, the period between 1980 and 1990 turned out to be a turning point in history, when the German fairs became so popular that they almost became a cultural export. Thus, the tourist flow from the USA, India and Japan also turned to the Christmas markets. Often, in these countries, a tendency was observed to postpone the time of their markets in order to visit the European Christmas markets. The same trend was visible in most Western European cities.

In a practical sense, the "Christmas markets" in chronological terms are a sign of the prosperity of the region. The bazaars are initiated by the local population, which in a separate part of the settlement, presents its traditions in the culinary, artistic, artistic or other spheres. The formation of the overall appearance of the "Christmas bazaars" is often associated with the presentation of local creativity, which is exhibited on specific colorful stands and includes numerous handmade products - Christmas decorations (often from food products), jewelry, wooden toys, souvenirs, candles, ceramics, etc. Visiting the Christmas bazaars is a great opportunity to try local Christmas treats, often prepared according to old recipes, as well as to get to know part of the culture of local communities. It is accepted that in the 21st century, Christmas bazaars are an important part of the branding of certain regions around the world, and especially in Europe.

Outline

In Europe, visiting Christmas markets seems to be becoming a tradition. Choosing the best one is difficult because every city can offer something unique. In addition to the famous fairs in France, Colmar or Strasbourg, or Vienna, there are other cities where the atmosphere is like from a fairy tale. The idea of Christmas markets is believed to have originated in Germany, where Christmas has its deep roots woven into the religious essence of the German peoples. It is believed that many traditions, from Advent calendars to Christmas trees, originate from Germany. Some researchers even pay special attention to the Protestant reformer Martin Luther, who is often considered the first to put lights on the Christmas tree after a night walk through a German forest under a starry sky. Moreover, in Germany they have always believed that Christmas markets stimulate the economy as an effort to rejuvenate the markets. For example, during the Great Depression, Germans believed that sales of German-made goods could help stimulate the economy and lift the spirits of German citizens. Historically, the Berlin Christmas market in 1934 was visited by 1.5 million people, a record broken two years later when 2 million people

visited it. Then came the years of World War II, when the world changed and Christmas markets declined in organization and importance. Christmas markets in Germany returned in the late 1950s and gradually grew in the following decades, as the economic boom of the 1960s and 1970s and the rise of consumerism fueled the growth of Christmas shopping. Christmas markets became a symbol of a new modern culture of Western Europeans, which combined historical continuity with the new challenges of the world's geo-economic development. These economic changes transformed Christmas markets into mass cultural events. Meanwhile, in Germany, the number of Christmas markets has also grown over the past 50 years, tripling from around 950 in the 1970s to around 3,000 in 2019. Local tourist offices are tasked with persuading people to visit them during the darkest days of winter, and tour companies have expanded their activities from bus tours to Christmas River cruises that stop in towns along the Danube River, from Germany to Hungary.

A typical Christmas market consists of numerous stalls in the streets and squares of a city, often against a historical and popular backdrop. Christmas pastries and regional specialties such as gingerbread, pancakes, Christmas stollen, various sweets such as chocolate figures, candies, roasted almonds, hot chestnuts and hot dishes are offered. Warm drinks such as mulled wine, as well as mulled cider and punch (in Austria) are also served, as well as other drinks. At the Christmas market there are regularly stalls selling Christmas items or decorations for the Christmas tree, such as glass baubles, stars or handmade Christmas items. At larger Christmas markets, the goods are mainly offered by professional market traders. There are also markets whose proceeds go to charity or other non-profit purposes and which are organised by associations, which often also sell products made by them. Most Christmas markets also include an artistic or cultural programme. In most social institutions, kindergartens and choirs for children and adults, as well as musical groups, Christmas concerts or Christmas plays are given. For children, Santa Claus appears with his helpers or a Nativity scene is re-enacted and small gifts are given out. Horse-drawn carriage rides are offered in some places. A Christmas market usually gets its special charm from a large Christmas tree and festive lighting, which contrasts with the early darkness.

It should be noted here that there can be more than one market in a city. For example, Christmas markets in the German capital Berlin have existed since the early 16th century. Over time, they have developed not only in the center, but also in communities that were independent until 1920, such as Charlottenburg, Friedrichshain and Spandau. Due to the lack of a developed city center, Christmas markets continue to be held in a decentralized manner, some of which are among the most visited in Germany. With interruptions due to the world wars of the 20th century and the division of the city, Christmas markets have become a magnet for visitors in almost all districts of Berlin. In 2008, 45 markets were reported, of which about a dozen take place over several weeks. In 2017 According to the Berlin city advertising agency visitberlin.de, there are over 50 Christmas markets in the German capital, and according to other sources around 80. So we can summarize that the number of Christmas

markets is difficult to specify. In Germany alone, the figures vary between 1,500 and 3,000, and the duration varies from one day to several weeks. Christmas traditions in German-speaking countries are known all over the world, and many countries have Christmas markets based on this model. The history of Christmas markets in Europe spans six centuries. The events organized during the winter holidays bring communities together around the 16th-century Christmas tree in a unique atmosphere.

Methods and Methodology

European Christmas markets are a well-established tradition that attracts millions of visitors every year to experience the festive atmosphere, learn about unique crafts and try regional delicacies. Every year since 2009, a special 8-day online competition selects 20 outstanding Christmas markets, chosen from over 6,494 across Europe. These markets are chosen according to various criteria - for their exceptional offerings, collaboration with local artisans, commitment to sustainability, charitable initiatives and creativity. The best Christmas markets are mainly in European countries such as Germany, the UK, France, Poland, Switzerland, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria and others. In these traditional markets, each city shows its inspiration in order to achieve the best Christmas look of the particular city, so that this can inspire local residents and create a festive atmosphere. The Christmas market is also related to the development of the regional economy. According to the concept of sustainable development of society, trade is of strategic importance for the balanced development of economic and social systems in each country.

The evolution of trade is influenced by the trends of increasing complexity, concentration and modernization of trade activity, but also by the increase in the standard of living and quality of life, determined by the improvement of the technical and material base, reaching a high level of mechanization, automation, cybernetization, by the practice of modern forms of trade, by increasing the level of qualification of trade personnel, by expanding the services offered to consumers, by the more explicit use of market research. In this direction, from a research point of view, it is important to consider what kind of tourist or citizen of the country visits the tourist markets in individual countries. However, there are a number of examples of private online initiatives that promote trips to Christmas markets, including through social networks, which are not representative in nature. User-generated content is one of the advantages that should be used to develop messages for cooperation and to better promote Christmas markets.

The need for research on tourist flows is emphasized by the analysis of a number of studies and annual reports of state institutions, which allow us to deduce the following feature of Christmas markets. In practice, these are mainly national and regional forums for trade, recreation and innovation, but after 2000 they gradually became desirable tourist destinations for a part of the tourist flow. The analysis shows that despite the joint development

of content as a tourist product, “Christmas markets” need additional branding and development with a solid foundation for information about the destination and infrastructural provision such as places for shelter and food. This labeling and branding should be improved.

It is noticeable that visitors to Christmas markets are in the age group of 30-55 years and an interest in visits to European cities with a large Christmas market. Two periods of visits to the Christmas markets are formed. The first period is from October 28 to December 21, or combined with a ski holiday or Christmas break from December 20 to January 6. According to data from ÖW Tourism Research, one of the leading tourism research agencies, about one in five respondents has already visited a Christmas market as part of a ski/snowboard holiday, and among respondents in Italy and Romania the figure is even one in four (the data is published on the official website of Austria Tourism). Thus, in recent years, more and more visits to the Christmas market are of a tourist nature. Short trips to the Christmas markets are becoming increasingly popular and are becoming an increasingly important part of the pre-Christmas period for more and more people. The following picture emerges: the average guest is 47 years old, is a regular guest and travels with someone. In fact, only 9 percent of all these guests are solo travelers. Most come as couples (43 percent), as families or with friends. Most guests who visit a Christmas market as part of their holiday come from Germany, Austria, Italy, the USA and the UK. This is clearly shown in the Winter Potential Study for 2024/25. Depending on the market, every fourth to fifth of those surveyed who are planning a winter holiday would like to travel to a Christmas/Advent market. Interest is particularly high in Italy - 30 percent, where a trip to a Christmas market is actually the most popular type of holiday in winter.

Overview of the most visited Christmas destinations in Europe

To find out which European locations are particularly popular around Christmas, we took a closer look at 288 European cities. The prerequisite was that the city had a Christmas attraction such as a Christmas market. The average search values in the city over the past twelve months were then compared with the increases in search volumes in November and December. This made it possible to determine which destinations are particularly popular with users around the Christmas season. A festive atmosphere with decorated streets, contemplative Christmas markets in the glow of lights and individual shopping opportunities - a city walk on Christmas Eve is an experience for young and old. In a large-scale analysis of search volumes, we found out which European cities are particularly popular around Christmas. The percentage data of search volume increases in November and December.

Table 1. Top 25 Most Trendy Christmas Destinations in Europe

City	Country	Search Volume Increases in November and December (%)
1. Östersund	Sweden	286.82
2. Valkenburg an der Geul	Netherlands	115.00
3. Oberndorf near Salzburg	Austria	78.41
4. Annaberg-Buchholz	Germany	72.22
5. Rovaniemi	Finland	66.16
6. Dublin	Ireland	32.50
7. Prague	Czech Republic	32.32
8. Røros	Norway	25.00
9. Dortmund	Germany	22.29
10. Lienz	Austria	18.78
11. Stans	Switzerland	15.70
12. London	UK	11.19
13. Paris	France	11.18
14. Quedlinburg	Germany	10.91
15. Hamburg	Germany	10.75
16. Berlin	Germany	10.75
17. Penamacor	Portugal	2.38
18. Zaragoza	Spain	2.36
19. Matrei	Austria	2.27
20. Saarbrücken	Germany	2.03
21. Grossarl	Austria	2.03
22. Schladming	Austria	2.02
23. Tartu	Estonia	2.02
24. Tampere	Finland	1.85
25. Einsiedeln	Switzerland	1.39

Source: Eurostat, UNWTO and authors' calculations

The ranking shows that the central Swedish city of Östersund secures first place with a 287 percent increase in search volume in November and December 2024. The capital of Jämtland province attracts visitors on Christmas Eve with its popular Jamtli Christmas market (December 6-8, 2024) in the open-air museum. Visitors can enjoy a warm fire, a dance, stalls with traditional crafts and regional delicacies, as well as the opportunity to ride a dog or horse sled in a historic setting. Sports enthusiasts will not be disappointed in the town on Lake Storsjön: the snowy landscape is conducive to snowshoeing or skiing in winter.

In second place is the Dutch city of Valkenburg an der Geul. It is a dream Christmas destination with a 115 percent increase in search volume. During Advent, the town transforms into a winter wonderland with a Christmas village. That is why it was awarded the title of European City of Christmas 2018. Another highlight during Christmas is the famous underground Christmas markets. In the Gemeentegrot (the oldest cave) and the Fluweelengrot, Christmas lovers can discover crafts and regional specialties in a special atmosphere. The Christmas parade with its illuminated floats and festively dressed participants invites visitors to celebrate the pre-Christmas season. In addition to the Christmas attractions, the city offers a historic castle as well as winding streets and historic buildings. In third place is the village of Oberndorf near Salzburg, Austria. Here, the search volume increased by 78 percent. During Christmas, it offers romantic Christmas markets as well as a contemplative atmosphere with festive decorations and lights.

The small town is also considered the birthplace of the Christmas carol "Silent Night, Holy Night", which was first performed here in 1818. The Silent Night Museum is dedicated to the Christmas carol and offers insights into the background of the song and the time. The picturesque winter landscape around the town invites nature lovers to long walks and hikes, which are rewarded with breathtaking views of the surrounding area. In fourth place, with a 72 percent increase in search volume in November and December, is the regional town of Annaberg-Buchholz in the Ore Mountains. The Christmas market here is considered one of the oldest and most traditional in Germany and has made the region famous throughout the country. Another highlight on Christmas Eve is the mountain parade. Accompanied by music and lights, participants parade through the town in historic miners' uniforms, recalling the mining history of the region. The late Gothic Hall of St. Annen Church is festively decorated on Christmas Eve and welcomes culture lovers to concerts. Art lovers will not be disappointed in Annaberg-Buchholz: Erzgebirge folk art with its famous woodcarvings make a visit to the provincial capital a special experience.

In fifth place remains the city of Rovaniemi in Finland, which secured a leading position in the analysis of the most fashionable Christmas destinations with a search volume increase of 66 percent in the months of November and December. The small town in Lapland is the official home of Santa Claus - the Santa Claus Village is open all year round and attracts a particularly large number of Christmas pilgrims during Advent. It is also home to the Santa Park amusement park with the Christmas elves' workshop. The Northern Lights can be observed particularly well between September and March. Other highlights include winter activities such as snowmobile tours, dog sledding or reindeer safaris.

Next in line is the Irish capital Dublin, which takes sixth place among the most fashionable Christmas destinations with a search volume increase of 32 percent. The festive atmosphere of the Irish capital makes it a popular destination during the Christmas season. In addition to handicrafts and culinary delights, the Christmas

market at Dublin Castle also offers festive music that creates a good atmosphere. The 12-day Christmas market in the Docklands area offers numerous stalls, as well as ice rinks and attractions that will put a smile on the faces of even the youngest visitors. The capital of the green island is also a real hotspot for Christmas shopping. From the famous Grafton Street with its many small and large shops to Stephen's Green Shopping Center, you can find a suitable gift for every taste.

Introducing some of the main traditional Christmas markets in Europe

The oldest tradition of the Christmas holiday is associated with countless legends, one of which says that once, in very distant times, three sisters of virtues (Hope, Love and Faith) set off on a long journey in search of the tree that would represent them: tall as Hope, great as Love and strong as Faith. After a long search, the traveling sisters found the Christmas tree, which they illuminated with the rays of the stars, and thus became the first sacred tree decorated for Christmas. The fir tree is considered a sacred tree because its top points to the divine sky, and its branches remain evergreen, reminding us of eternal life. The oldest traditions associated with the Christmas tree come from Ancient Rome, when homes were decorated with a fir tree or fir branches during the holidays. Sometimes the tree was hung upside down from the ceiling, a custom that no one has been able to decipher to this day, and Christmas trees were not decorated until the 12th century. In 1510, the first decorated Christmas tree appeared in Riga, Lithuania, and in 1521, Princess Helen of Mecklenburg brought the custom of decorating the Christmas tree to Paris after marrying the Duke of Orleans. In 1584, pastor and chronicler Balthasar Rousseau wrote about the tradition of decorating a tree in the square, where young people would sing and dance around it, then light it. In 1605, the first Christmas tree, decorated with red apples, was erected in a public square in Strasbourg, and in the same year, in Breslau, Duchess Dorothea Sibylle von Schlesien decorated the first tree in the way we still decorate it today. The Christmas tree arrived in the United States in 1749, when German colonists settled in Pennsylvania and mercenaries were paid to fight in the Civil War and in 1804, soldiers at Fort Dearborn cut fir trees from the forest to decorate their barracks during the winter holidays dedicated to the Nativity of the Savior.

In 1841, the first Christmas tree appeared in England, when Prince Albert gave one to his wife, the famous Queen Victoria, and installed it at Windsor Castle. An angel was placed at the top of the tree, which was later replaced by a star to remind us of the star seen by the Three Wise Men coming from the East. In 1836, tree decorations were first legalized in the state of Alabama, in 1878, silver glass globes from Thuringia appeared, and in 1882, after Thomas Edison patented the electric light bulb, Edward Johnson, his friend, created the first Christmas tree decoration with colored bulbs that replaced candles. In 1880, the custom of decorating the Christmas tree reached the White House in Washington, but was later banned by President Theodore Roosevelt,

citing fire hazards and the need to protect the environment, and the tradition was only revived in 1923 and has been preserved to this day. From 1930, large trees were placed in squares or public places, and in the 1970s, artificial trees appeared. One of the first well-documented, typical Christmas markets is the Striezelmarkt in Dresden. It has been held since 1434, and its name was coined a few decades later, after the oblong yeast dough. Similar bazaars had been organized earlier, although somewhat less described. The Bautzen Fair, mentioned in various chronicles, was probably about 50 years older.

Vienna fairs may have been held as early as the 13th century. They changed locations over the years, unlike the Dresden fair, which was located in the Old Town from the very beginning. Originally, the Striezelmarkt had little to do with sweet pastries. According to a privilege granted to the Dresden city council by Duke Frederick II the Silent and his brother in October 1434, the city could organize a meat fair. Since the event was originally a one-day event, it was not worth building anything special for the occasion. Therefore, there were no stalls, as we know them today. The city's residents could buy mainly roasted meat for the holidays. At first, merchants spread them out on boards, and in later "editions" - on specially displayed carts. The idea turned out to be successful. In the following years, new products appeared on long stands made of borrowed boards – including the aforementioned yeast bread. Today's Striezel or Stollen has an oblong shape, is often sprinkled with powdered sugar and contains a lot of butter. Inside you can find raisins, other dried fruits, marzipan or poppy seeds. The surviving documents do not contain any recipes from the 14th century. They were probably a little poorer. Over time, more and more artisans came to the Dresden fair - mainly from Bohemia and Upper Lusatia. This did not please local manufacturers and merchants in the least. The reason was the lower prices for visitors. Complaints were submitted to the city council from 1649. All the proposals submitted amounted to a ban on foreigners selling at the Dresden fair. At first, they went unnoticed. In 1704, however, the presence of merchants from outside Dresden was gradually limited – as was the amount of goods, they could sell. Control and restrictions eased the conflict somewhat, but did not completely resolve it. Visiting artisans were sometimes expelled from the city.

Nevertheless, the fair continued to grow. In the first half of the 18th century, it lasted for 8 days, and in the following decades, even for two weeks. Traders could purchase permanent stands for life. In addition to meat and baked goods, the stalls increasingly featured ceramics, sculptures, and toys, especially dolls. Small items such as paper lanterns or edible plum figurines could be purchased for children. With each decade, the streets of the Old Town became noisier, and the fair changed its character. It was no longer just an opportunity for purchases, often at promotional prices. It began to grow with street performances by actors, singers and other artists. Gradually, the Christmas market became an entertainment event.

Thus, Christmas markets gradually became relevant and important for the local population. European cities "compete" with each other when it comes to street decorations, scattered Christmas trees and artistic

programs that accompany the events. One of the most popular Christmas markets in London is the "Winter Wonderland" in Hyde Park. Not only savory and sweet dishes await visitors there, this Christmas market in London feels like a Christmas fair. During the fair, you can try local dishes prepared with products from friendly farmers. There are numerous attractions for all ages, from carousels to roller coasters and ghost trains to ice rinks and the "Giant Observation Wheel", a Ferris wheel with incredible views over London. North of the Thames, Hyde Park is nestled between the districts of Mayfair and Kensington and is a popular destination for Londoners and tourists visiting England, and not just in winter. During Advent, it mainly attracts visitors who want a Christmas market with a bit more action. However, Hyde Park also offers plenty of opportunities for contemplation, for example with a hot chocolate in the 1980s-style "Après Ski Bar Ice", where all the seating and drinking vessels are made of ice. The "Street Food Village" is home to the largest outdoor ice rink in the UK. The Hyde Park Christmas Market in London has been held since 2007.

The Prague Christmas Market on the Old Town Square around the Jan Hus Monument is the most visited by visitors and residents of the city. Located in the center of Prague, it is both the largest and most popular Christmas market in the Czech capital. Typical of Prague is Trdelník, a Czech dessert that is sold on the old market stalls. Anyone who visits this Christmas market in Prague will be surprised by the impressive views – caught in a sea of thousands of lights. There is also appropriate entertainment: there is a live concert or performance every day. Another Christmas market takes place in and around Prague Castle, on St. George's Square on the other side of the Vltava River. While visitors are rewarded with pre-Christmas snowdrifts, the complex is transformed into a fairy-tale castle with a panorama of the Czech capital, which sparkles magically in winter.

Strasbourg is located in the northeast of France; Strasbourg is considered one of the most beautiful cities in Alsace. The Christmas market there, which is named "Noël à Strasbourg", is one of the oldest in Europe and the oldest in France: it was first held in 1570. Even today, it still attracts crowds of visitors every year, who flock to the Grande-Île around Strasbourg Cathedral and admire the Christmas decorations and lights on every corner of the city. It is not for nothing that Strasbourg is the most brightly lit city in Europe in December. The 30-meter Christmas tree, which is placed on Place Kléber and bathes the square in warm light, also contributes to this record. Around 300 exhibitors are located in various locations in the city, offering regional and national delicacies, homemade crafts and many other treasures for sale. Traditional delicacies include the so-called "Bredele", which means "cookies" in German. However, mulled wine, non-alcoholic punch, pancakes and waffles are also available on every corner.

The Belgian capital Brussels also enchants with a Christmas market that stretches across several squares in the city. Under the name "Plaisirs d'Hiver" (Christmas Delights), numerous huts are located on a route of more than two kilometers around the Grand Place, Place Sainte-Catherine, Place de la Bourse and Marché aux Poissons.

Culinary delicacies, handmade jewelry, Christmas decorations and other treasures make the hearts of Christmas fans beat faster. There is an ice rink in front of the beautiful Brussels Opera. In the past, all of these markets had their own Christmas markets, but today they have long since merged into a conglomerate of Christmas lights, sounds and sweets.

Every year during the Christmas markets, the Croatian capital Zagreb becomes one of the most popular destinations at Christmas. The festivities are not concentrated in one place, but are spread throughout the city center. Since 2014, a 2,000-square-meter ice rink has been prepared here every year, overlooking the beautiful art pavilion on the square. The Zagreb Christmas Market has been voted the most beautiful in Europe several times.

The Gdańsk Christmas Market has been awarded the title of the best European Christmas Market 2024-2025 with 90,000 votes, following an online vote. As night falls, the heart of Gdańsk, Poland, comes alive with illuminations, Christmas melodies and the joyful sounds of children, marking the long-awaited Gdansk Christmas Market. This event envelops both locals and visitors in a festive atmosphere, offering cozy dining options and charming shopping areas. The market is a hub of artistic performances and charming corners, seamlessly combining theater, dance, caroling and the making of festive ornaments. Strolling through the picturesque streets of Gdansk, visitors can discover charming places such as Santa Claus' Corner, the Art Corner, the famous Luczek Elk Hideout, the delightful Venetian Carousel and the Angel Corner illuminated with breathtaking lights.

The Romanian city of Craiova in 2024 is ranked second in the best Christmas markets in Europe. It was also voted the title of the most beautiful Christmas market in Europe by a panel of travelers, beating out well-known destinations. This recognition reflects the remarkable growth of the market, which now covers over 280,000 square meters, making it the largest Christmas event in Europe. Craiova has truly become the Christmas capital of Romania and Europe. The market offers four different Christmas worlds. Beauty and the Beast: An enchanted kingdom that brings the classic fairy tale to life. Santa Claus Village: A festive haven filled with festive spirit. Traditional Romanian Christmas: A demonstration of the peace and generosity of local customs. Galactic Christmas: A futuristic experience with Star Wars-inspired decorations. Visitors can enjoy attractions such as the highest-flying Santa Claus sleigh in Eastern Europe, an ice rink and a panoramic Ferris wheel. Millions of lights illuminate the city, and hand-painted houses add a fairytale charm.

For its first time in this European competition, Geneva also secures a place among the best Christmas destinations in Europe for 2024 and has been awarded the prestigious title of “Best Christmas City 2025” by travelers. This recognition also confirms Geneva’s “Noël au Quai” as the best Christmas market in Switzerland. Located along the picturesque shores of Lake Geneva on the Quai du Mont-Blanc, “Noël au Quai” offers a charming holiday experience. Visitors can browse unique gifts from talented local artisans, with new artisans featured each week. Culinary delights abound with over 30 food stalls offering street food, warming racklette,

mulled wine and specialties from the iconic Chalet à Fondue. Antique carousels and a children's yurt offering games, crafts and storytelling enhance the festive atmosphere. Beyond the market, Geneva presents a diverse range of winter experiences. Visitors can indulge in an invigorating winter swim followed by restorative sauna sessions, enjoy local chocolate delicacies, take part in watchmaking workshops, enjoy brunch at the Grand Théâtre and explore the city's rich cultural scene, fine dining and sporting activities. Its medieval half-timbered houses and Renaissance buildings characterize the French city of Colmar.

At the same time, with its cobblestone streets and the Lauch River, it exudes a unique charm that seems even more magical during Advent. Then there are six different Christmas markets in different locations that come together to form the "Magie de Noël à Colmar" and offer the right delicacies and sights for everyone. In total, around 180 exhibitors present their food, jewelry, crafts and Christmas gifts in the little Christmas villages, as they are called. The most popular sights of Colmar are Koïfhus, Pfisterhaus, Little Venice and the St. Martin's Collegiate Church, in a completely new splendor. Place Rapp is home to an ice rink and decorated Christmas trees; In the Renaissance building Koïfhus, the former customs house, and numerous artisans exhibit their works in cozy and warm temperatures. Place Jeanne d'Arc is reminiscent of a small village; Here, Alsatian specialties such as foie gras, Christmas cakes and local schnapps are on the menu.

Every year from the end of November, the picturesque old town of Lübeck shines in the pre-Christmas glow of lights and expects thousands of tourists to stroll through the famous Christmas markets in a historic setting, included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. In the clear winter air, the streets and markets of the old town are filled with the aroma of baked apples, roasted almonds, and doughnuts, mulled wine and delicious grilled sausages. A total of eleven Christmas worlds enchant with the traditional Christmas market, located around the town hall and considered one of the most beautiful Christmas markets in Europe.

The Christmas markets in the city of Cologne are also of great importance. The Christmas market around Cologne Cathedral is of leading importance. It is the largest in the city with approximately five million visitors. It is spread over about 160 stalls and mainly presents crafts and international gastronomy. Foreign tourists from the UK and the Benelux countries in particular travel here by bus. The Christmas market on the Alter Markt focuses on the theme of little elves, who populate the almost 100 wooden stalls with very small figures. Various themed strips describe what is on offer. For example, there is an artisan's alley where products are made on site and visitors can participate. The first Christmas market in Cologne took place on December 5, 1820 as the "Nicholas Market" on the Alter Markt. On the Neumarkt there is the Christmas market of the angels. Other Christmas markets in Cologne are that on Rudolfplatz, the Christmas market on the harbor. The Imhof Chocolate Museum has been hosting a Medieval Christmas market, a Christmas market on ships on the banks of the Rhine since 2010. Since

2022, there has been a vegan Christmas market in Cologne-Klettenberg. The "Christmas market" focuses on health and sustainability and offers vegan food as well as a program for young and old.

The Bolzano Christmas market was founded in 1990 and is the largest and first Christmas market in Italy. It takes place in Bolzano. The market has around 80 stalls. Since 2006, there has been a second Christmas market in Bolzano with around 15 additional stalls, called the Winter Forest. It is located in the garden of the Palais Campofranco. There are other secondary markets in the old town of Bolzano, such as the craft market on the town hall square, the solidarity Christmas market in some streets of the old town and on the Kornplatz (around 30 stalls). In total, there are around 150 stalls in the old town. In 2005, around 1.2 million people visited the Bolzano Christmas market (2004: 850,000). It is the most visited Christmas market in South Tyrol and Italy.

The Wrocław Christmas market is modeled after the most beautiful German markets. On the Wrocław Market Square, on Plac Solny, on Świdnicka and Oławska Streets, there are dozens of stalls where you can buy food products and see local crafts and much more. One of the many attractions is a several-meter-high windmill.

Conclusion

Every year during the festive period, Christmas markets transform town squares across Europe into winter wonderlands. A typical Christmas market takes place in the streets or squares of older parts of the city. There are stalls offering Christmas decorations, local culinary specialties, showcasing various crafts, etc. The fairs are accompanied by various artistic performances, such as Christmas plays, charity concerts, nativity scenes, etc., and sometimes amusement parks and other entertainment attractions. This tradition became relevant in medieval Europe, when Christmas occupied an important place in the annual cycle. It is not only a religious festival, but also an important social and cultural anchor for society. Christmas serves as a time of community and togetherness. It provides an opportunity for family gatherings, public celebrations and the strengthening of social ties. In a time often marked by hardship and uncertainty, Christmas provides an opportunity for joy and merriment. The meaning of Christmas encompasses various aspects of medieval life. In medieval Europe, Christmas occupied an important place in the annual cycle. It was not only a religious festival, but also an important social and cultural anchor for society.

The meaning of Christmas encompasses various aspects of medieval life. Twinkling lights decorate wooden cottages, and branches of lights hang from street lamps. Vendors offer hand-carved ornaments and figurines depicting the Nativity scene, as well as warm glasses of mulled wine accompanied by carols. In Germany alone, where this tradition originated, there are usually between 2,500 and 3,000 Christmas markets each year. After 2022, Christmas markets return after several years of closure due to COVID-19. The Christmas market as a place for socialization is a catalyst for the development of art, music and literature. Christmas plays, songs and

artistic depictions of the birth of Christ enrich cultural life and contribute to the spread of the Christmas message. The questions for the modern active person in the tourist sense are "Where to see the best Christmas markets?" The Christmas atmosphere of European cities delights and attracts tourists from all over Europe. It is also important to note that Christmas markets help the regional development of cities and regions in Europe to be brought to another level, in order to attract investments and tourist flows, which will have a positive development for these settlements. Historians say that preserving this cultural tradition in old city centers is as important as strengthening medieval cathedrals or protecting ancient Roman ruins. They argue that regional markets will develop on the basis of "Christmas markets", which should be included in the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage.

Acknowledgement

This publication is realized with the financial support of Project No. RD-08-117/31.01.2024 of Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen.

References

- [1]. Bartunek, Jean M.; Boram, Do, The Sacralization of Christmas Commerce, *Organization*, **2011**, 18(6), 795–806.
- [2]. Broeckerhoff, A.; Galalae, C., Christmas markets: their long history and changing future, *The Conversation*, **2020**.
- [3]. Becker-Huberti, M., Feiern, Feste, Jahreszeiten. Lebendige Braeuche im ganzen Jahr, Herder Verlag, Freiburg, **2001**.
- [4]. Brida, Juan Gabriel; Disegna, M.; Osti, L., Visitors' Expenditure Behavior at Cultural Events: The Case of Christmas Markets, *Tourism Economics*, **2013**, 19 (5), 1173–119.
- [5]. Galalae, C., Galalae, C.; Kipnis, E.; Cui, C.C.; Johnson, E.; Licsandru, T.; Vorster, L.; Demangeot, C.; Kearney, S.; Mari, C.; Martín Ruiz, V.; Pullig, C.; Lindsey-Warren, T.M., A multicontextual lens on racism and discrimination in the multicultural marketplace, *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, **2023**, 8.1, 95–106.
- [6]. Humphreys, J., How German Christmas Markets Came to the UK. *BBC News*, **2014** <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-30392324>.
- [7]. Miller, D., Christmas: An Anthropological Lens, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, **2017**, 7(3), 409–442, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.14318/hau7.3.027>.
- [8]. Broeckerhoff, A.; Galalae, C., Christmas markets - marketplace icon. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, **2025**, 25(1), 79–90.

- [9]. Varman, R., Curry, *Consumption Markets & Culture*, **2017**, 20(4), 350–356.
- [10]. Warnaby, G.; Dominic, M., Marketplace Icons: Shopping Malls, *Consumption Markets & Culture* **2018**, 21(3), 275–282.
- [11]. https://www.austriatourism.com/kontakt/Austrian_Tourist_Office_Vienna (21.04.2025).