

THINK BIG

Make 2021 the year to check out the best overwater villas in the Maldives

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BLUER PLANET

Cruise the Raj Ampat archipelago in the wake of naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace

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KIRSTY GALLACHER

'I went on a school trip to Val d'Isère and was the only one who hadn't skied'

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# Travel on Sunday



## Christmas isn't cancelled!

Well, not yet – but whatever happens in December, there are still hotels and self-catering options left which, restrictions permitting, will help you end the year on a happier note, says Fiona Duncan

It's not going to be the same, that's for sure, but with a full lockdown imposed upon all of us until at least Dec 2, Christmas is certainly going to be curtailed this year. And even once the national lockdown has ended, there are sure to be varying restrictions around Britain. As before, it is possible that household mixing will be forbidden for many and gatherings of more than six for all, but if we are stoic, imaginative and

flexible we can still have a memorable, if very different, Christmas. Since my husband and I are unlikely to be able to spend Christmas with our family, as that would make more than six, we have decided to spend it away – though admittedly not very far away – and it's a huge relief to have a plan in place, even though it all feels very strange. On Sept 1 every year without fail, our dear

departed mum would call my sister and me "to talk about Christmas". Who would be coming, what exact time would we be arriving and leaving, who would sleep in which upside down this year, or perhaps one of us could sleep on a camp bed by the Aga and baste it as it slow-roasted through the night? Who would bring the Neapolitan chocolates, cheese footballs, nuts and crackers? The

build-up was relentless and exhausting but the result, as a dozen or so of us crammed around the dining table, opening my mother's famously teasing table presents (the best being a series of tiny empty boxes, one inside the other, that finally revealed a much appreciated and very generous cheque) was always memorable and joyous.

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LEFT: VON HOFEN / TRIPARCHIVE.COM

# COVER STORY

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I don't know about you, but I don't much want to sit in our New Forest house on Christmas Day, looking dolefully at my husband across a stuffed turkey breast for two, dreaming of what might have been, even if my attempts at recreating my mother's no-holds-barred, no-detail-spared festivities have been poor substitutes for hers since she departed for her Christmas grotto in the sky.

So we've gone Awol and we've made a plan. We've booked ourselves into a lovely local café with rooms, a fun, informal and affordable place called Spot in the Woods that also has divinely cosy shepherd's huts, one of which will be ours on Christmas night. Meanwhile, six of the family - one single son, one married son, his wife and their one-year-old plus my daughter-in-law's mother and sister - will occupy our house. Three more - my sister, her husband and their son - have booked Thatched Eaves, a local luxury B&B, which is offering a Winter Glow Christmas hamper as well as a slap-up breakfast.

All very well, but will we ever meet? Can we meet? Yes, we will and we can (restrictions allowing), on Boxing Day, albeit suitably masked and distanced, on the ferry from Lynton to Yarmouth, from where we will walk on glorious Tennyson Down, pausing at the Needles Landmark Attraction en route, sadly Covid-closed this Christmas. Father Christmas won't be there in his grotto and the carousel will be stationary, but at least we can view the Needles from the Lookout Tower, get down to the beach, peer into the Sand and Sweet Shops and use the loos.

Having walked to Freshwater Bay and back to charming Yarmouth through Afton Marsh and along the Yar, we'll share turkey sandwiches and Christmas cake, and table presents of course, on the ferry home. I'm hoping it will be a memorable day out and feel like a holiday; it will certainly be different.

As you can tell, Christmas for my family has always been about coming home. But while my mother firmly believed that bunking off at Christmas was as bad as not listening to the Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge at 3pm on Christmas Eve, or watching the Queen at 3pm on Christmas Day, for others it's a chance to escape, to have a break and to recharge the batteries. And even she would surely admit that the circumstances in 2020 mean that this is the perfect year to ring the changes.

In this guide to Christmas Not Being Cancelled (hopefully), we have collated our selection of hotels that, at the time of going to press, still have availability, and the same for self-catering properties. We also round up festivals and events that, hopefully, will still go ahead. Where advance bookings are required, always check the booking policy, in case of cancellation or date change.

Hotels always pull out all the stops at Christmas, but never more so than this year, when they will be heroically determined to give their guests an unforgettable experience despite the stresses and restrictions caused by the pandemic. Wherever you choose, you'll find the highest standards and plenty of fun.



**YULE LOVE IT HERE**  
The Lygon Arms, main, Christmas cocktails at Cliveden, below

## A HOTEL FOR THE HOLIDAY

If you've never spent Christmas in a hotel before, this may well be the perfect year to try it. From sheer unbridled decadence to cosy country chic, here are 10 of our favourite options that still have availability.

### SPOT IN THE WOODS NEW FOREST

This stylish B&B with five shepherd's huts features a lively café and tempting deli/shop. A large wooden veranda overlooks a secluded garden. Two and three-night packages are available, kicking off with welcome drinks and nibbles on Christmas Eve.

□ Two nights from £660; three from £980 (spotinthewoods.co.uk)

### LORD CREWE ARMS NORTHUMBERLAND

A lord-of-the-manor building, in a pinneat estate village, that oozes atmosphere at every stone-flagged turn. A reputation for honest British cooking, plus the rural location, makes it popular with walkers and foodies. For Christmas, expect Buck's fizz, board games by roaring fires and plenty of feasting.

□ Two nights from £359 (lordcrewearmsblanchland.co.uk)

### THE FIFE ARMS SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

The delight is in the detail at this wildly romantic, sublimely comfortable, uniquely fascinating passion project from international art dealers Hauser & Wirth. It's going all out for Christmas this year, with cracker and wreath-making on Christmas Eve using foraged ingredients, and a stocking on the door of each room the next morning.

□ From £543pn (thefearms.com)

### THE GROSVENOR AT STOCKBRIDGE HAMPSHIRE

This historic fly-fishing hotel is now a most comfortable and elegant place to stay; fun and thoughtful, traditional yet colourful. Yuletide celebrations will include a Christmas Eve afternoon tea to enjoy while being serenaded (safely) by carol singers.

□ Three nights from £685pp (thegrosvenorstockbridge.com)

### THE LYGON ARMS COTSWOLDS

The renowned Lygon Arms is one of Britain's most historic inns, on the doorstep to beautiful walks and with a terrific spa. Christmas Eve here will also see socially distanced carol singers, and four-legged guests will be welcomed with a tree bearing treats for them.

□ From £345 per night (lygonarmshotel.co.uk)

### CLIVEDEN BERKSHIRE

This National Trust property, dating back to the late 17th century and set among 376 verdant acres on the banks of the Thames in Berkshire, is truly something special. For a blowout end to what has been an indisputably dreadful year, enter Cliveden's three-night, all-inclusive House Party, with festive afternoon tea, carol singers, and plenty of five-star fun to be had.

□ Three nights all-inclusive from £3,900 (clivedenhouse.co.uk)

### CLARIDGE'S LONDON

Nowhere does Christmas in London quite like Claridge's. The art-deco grand dame is offering a three-night package that as well as breakfast and Christmas lunch (excluding alcohol), includes a bottle of champagne on arrival, in-suite Christmas trees and a host of magical touches: children's storytelling, mince pies and carrots for Father Christmas and his reindeer, a



kind of kitchen you'll want to prepare a festive feast in, while Christmas films can be enjoyed in the cinema room.

□ Sleeps up to 12, £3,269 for Dec 21-28 (eastaftonfarmhouse.com)

### GRAIG DDU MONMOUTHSHIRE

Known as "the cottage in the woods", this charming hideaway in Llanthony Valley has everything you need for a restorative Christmas break. It's suitable for a couple or close friends who want to do little more than read, walk and forest bathe - you can see the pines as you take a dip in the bath.

□ Sleeps two, £850 for a week's stay over Christmas (sawdays.co.uk)

### WINDLEY NORTHUMBERLAND

The wild, elemental beauty of Northumberland is so suited to our Christmas fantasies that places usually book up months in advance, particularly on the coast at Bamburgh, where its namesake castle looms. Still available, Windley is a very cool 1950s-styled cottage opposite the village's Grove.

□ Sleeps four, £1,555 for Christmas week (crabtreeandcrabtree.com)

### ROCKHAVEN MANOR CORNWALL

The grand mahogany staircase that greets you on arrival at this grand Georgian residence is like something from an American Christmas movie, and that's not where the Christmas idealism ends. There are open fires in both the lounge and dining room - leave one free for Father Christmas.

□ Sleeps up to 12, £3,620 for Dec 21-28 (latitude50.co.uk)

### DANDRIDGES MILL OXFORDSHIRE

Fully accessible, this one-floor apartment in the village of East Hanney is great for multigenerational bubbles. The open-plan living area means the cook need not miss out on the fun as they prepare lunch, and there are lots of nice walks nearby in the countryside.

□ Sleeps up to eight, from £3,800 a week over Christmas (luxurycotswoldrentals.co.uk)

### WOODLANDERS SHROPSHIRE

With a wood burner inside this luxury wooden cabin in private woodland, plus a wood-fired hot tub in the garden, this cosy home away from home is well named. A gorgeously romantic hideaway for two, there's even a skylight for stargazing from bed. A 15-minute walk will bring you to a country pub for Christmas Eve drinks.

□ Sleeps two, £1,462 for Dec 21-28 (boutique-retreats.co.uk)

## A HOME FOR THE HOLIDAY

To end 2020 on a happy note, book your bubble into a self-catering hideaway.

### ROSE CASTLE COTTAGE LAKE DISTRICT

Christmas is all about giving, so why not give back to the National Trust this season with a stay in this remote cottage? Set above the picturesque Tarn Hows, the only interaction you're likely to have is with the hardy Herdwick sheep.

□ Sleeps four, £674 for four nights from Dec 24 (nationaltrust.org.uk)

### OLD MILLHOUSE MIDLOTHIAN

For a posh Christmas - where you can start the day with a glass of champagne in the outdoor heated hydro pool - this old stone house on the Esk in Dalkeith is on the money (in all senses) and includes a bar room for your evening dram.

□ Sleeps up to 10, £6,107 for week from Dec 20 (oldmillhouse.co.uk)

### EAST AFTON FARMHOUSE ISLE OF WIGHT

This 18th-century farmhouse in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty has the

**HEAD FOR THE HILLS**  
Woodlanders in Shropshire, below; carol singers at The Ned, above



visit from the man himself, stockings for all, and a horse-drawn carriage ride around Mayfair with hot chocolate and marshmallows.

□ Three nights from £3,315 (claridges.co.uk)

### THE NED LONDON

For a capital Christmas with a twist, former Midland Bank turned party palace The Ned is hosting a one or two-night sleeper package, the latter with £150 credit to spend as you please, and both offering either Ned's Festive Feast or Cecconi's Christmas Day lunch. Swim it off in the pool, then recover in the spa with sauna and steam room.

□ One night from £540; two nights from £980 (thened.com)

### STANBROOK ABBEY HOTEL WORCESTERSHIRE

Christmas Eve carols will be extra special here, in the original church at the centre of the hotel. You'll wonder why you haven't concluded every Christmas Day breakfast with a falconry display. Later, work off the five-course tasting lunch with wine pairings with a 140-step climb up the Grade II-listed Bell Tower.

□ Two nights from £830 (handpickedhotels.co.uk/stanbrookabbey)

### THE MITRE HAMPTON COURT

The recently opened Mitre, by the people behind Beaverbrook in Hampshire, is housed in a building dating back to 1665 to accommodate the courtiers of Charles II. "Stay like a King" is the apt name of its Christmas package, including, in addition to all meals (even a Bollinger afternoon tea), a service at The Chapel Royal in Hampton Court Palace, gourmet hamper for Christmas Day night, Boxing Day yoga or Thames boat trip, and tickets for the Hampton Court Palace Ice Rink.

□ Two nights £3,000 (mitrehamptoncourt.com)

Prices are based on two sharing, unless stated otherwise

Rachel Cranshaw

**LET IT SNOW**  
Dreaming of a white Christmas at Stanbrook Abbey?



At the Fife Arms in the Highlands of Scotland, for example, an Alpine Winter will be under way, with a fondue restaurant, Glühwein and roasted chestnut bars, a Christmas tea room serving stollen, mini-gingerbread houses and Sprungli hot chocolate, a whisky and chocolate bar in the library and a garden transformed into a magical playground for adults and children.

At the Lord Crewe Arms in Northumberland there will be roaring fires, cosy hideaways, hearty feasting and surprises under the twinkling tree, while at the Grosvenor Hotel in Stockbridge you can expect carol singing under the porte cochère on Christmas Eve, a string quartet and a star pianist on Christmas Day and a jazz duo at its Boxing Day party.

Self-catering means doing Christmas your way, but somewhere new. We passed the gorgeous East Afton Farmhouse on the Isle of Wight when we tested out our planned walk; we're booked in elsewhere but have noted it for another year. As we are a largely Scottish family, The Old Millhouse in Dalkeith would have been fun, with the promise of Hogmanay in nearby Edinburgh at the end of the Christmas Week, and at the other end of the price scale, cosy National Trust Rose Castle Cottage in the Lake District also appeals.

As for family events, there are still plenty around if you know where to look, from Santa Steam Trains to ice skating at Hampton Court. All is not lost: here's the definitive list. Wrap up warm and please don't let it rain!

## UK TRAVEL ADVICE

◆ As a result of the travel restrictions introduced in England this week, overnight stays and holidays away from primary residences are not allowed until Dec 2. This covers holidays abroad and in the UK. A new five-tier system was introduced in Scotland on Nov 2 and residents should check their regional restrictions before travel. The Wales firebreak lockdown, banning all but essential travel, is due to end tomorrow. For further information, see gov.uk/coronavirus; gov.scot/coronavirus-covid-19; gov.wales/coronavirus



## KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

### MICHELLE JANA CHAN



## The bus ride that brought me close to a very different America

**I**t was my first year at college in the US and I'd spent spring break skiing in Colorado. I'd been moving between ski towns and still recall the wide open pistes of Breckenridge; the chilly night skiing at Keystone with its floodlit snowy slopes; and the Old West-style saloons and vintage clothes stores in Winter Park. It was an exhilarating week, but when I arrived at the airport in Denver, all the talk was of a snowstorm on the east coast. My flight to Raleigh-Durham was cancelled.

I pleaded with airline staff: "Where's the furthest you can fly me east?" The check-in agent looked at her screen: "Dallas."

Dallas sounded more south than east but I took up her offer, flying into Texas, while hatching a plan to continue my journey overland. I found my way to the Greyhound bus station in downtown Dallas, hoping to buy a one-way ticket out of there.

"You don't know about the storm?" the handler asked. "No buses going that far east. Can get you to Texarkana. Maybe Memphis."

I'd long harboured the dream of travelling by Greyhound across the US. I remembered hearing about my dad's adventures in the 1960s from Boston to the west coast and back again to New York. And my grandfather's tale about how he and my grandmother had once taken too long at a comfort break, emerged to find the bus gone, only to be bundled into a state trooper, blue lights flashing, to catch up with the bus and their luggage. Charged by the romance of these stories, I boarded, shuffling down to find my seat beside



Open roads – and open hearts

Rosie alighted in Memphis... we hugged each other tightly and I forgot to say thank you

a large, pink-lipsticked woman eating her lunch, fast food bags strewn about. She shifted her weight as I slipped in, introducing herself as Rosie, and giving me the rest of her Chick-fil-A. Gratefully I ate the rest of her fried chicken.

That was where our journey together began. Rosie adopted me with untold kindness: buying me food, giving me tissues for the public restroom; making a pillow on her shoulder for me to sleep; reprimanding people in the aisle for bumping me; covering me with her sweater when I napped.

But what I remember most was how she shared her life story with me, unreservedly. She told me about being raised in rural Arkansas; about hardly knowing her mother, who was earning a wage looking after four white children; about her strict grandmother. I heard about protests she'd joined during the civil rights movement; about Bill Clinton, who'd just been sworn in for his first term as president, a white man from the state we were travelling through. She

also told me about not being able to access the public library as a child; about Rosa Parks, who had a name like hers; about how her brother was in prison, without saying why. Then she recited portions of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech in resonant tones, like a hymn.

As we neared the border with Tennessee, she told me about shootings on the street in Memphis, where she now lived; about "how life wasn't easy for a big black woman in America"; about how it was better to be a talented white man like Elvis Presley, whose home Graceland, she pointed out, was not far from where we were. "He's dead though," I quipped, and she smiled.

Rosie alighted in Memphis. It was in the days before email and mobile phones so there was no talk about staying in touch. We hugged each other tightly and I forgot to say thank you for everything. A few minutes later, she returned, out of breath. "You still here," she said, pleased. She pressed into my palm a necklace, which I had barely noticed her wearing: a gold strand with a locket and nothing inside. "It's from my mother but I don't have children. I want you to have it. You're the only one who listens to me."

I tried to resist but she spun me around, circling it around my neck, fiddling with the clasp. "Funny," she said, laughing. "I've been doing it up all my life behind me, but can't do it up in front of my eyes." I continued my journey wearing Rosie's necklace, fingering it time to time, a companion of sorts. The bus came to a standstill in Nashville where I was stuck for a few more days. It turned out the snowstorm was a record-breaker; in North Carolina, where I was bound, there had been 14ft snowdrifts.

When the weather cleared, I was finally on my way. It would probably have been just as quick to wait out the storm in Denver and catch the first flight, rather than take the open road, but then I would never have met Rosie and experienced all her kindness. And it is for chance encounters such as this that we go travelling, and why we will travel again.

### LAVENDER COTTAGE SUSSEX

This Tudor cottage in the chocolate-box village of Alfriston is an easy escape for those looking for a more traditional Christmas. It has an inglenook fireplace, exposed beams and a slightly ramshackle but warm feeling. It's a quick toddle to the pub or the South Downs.

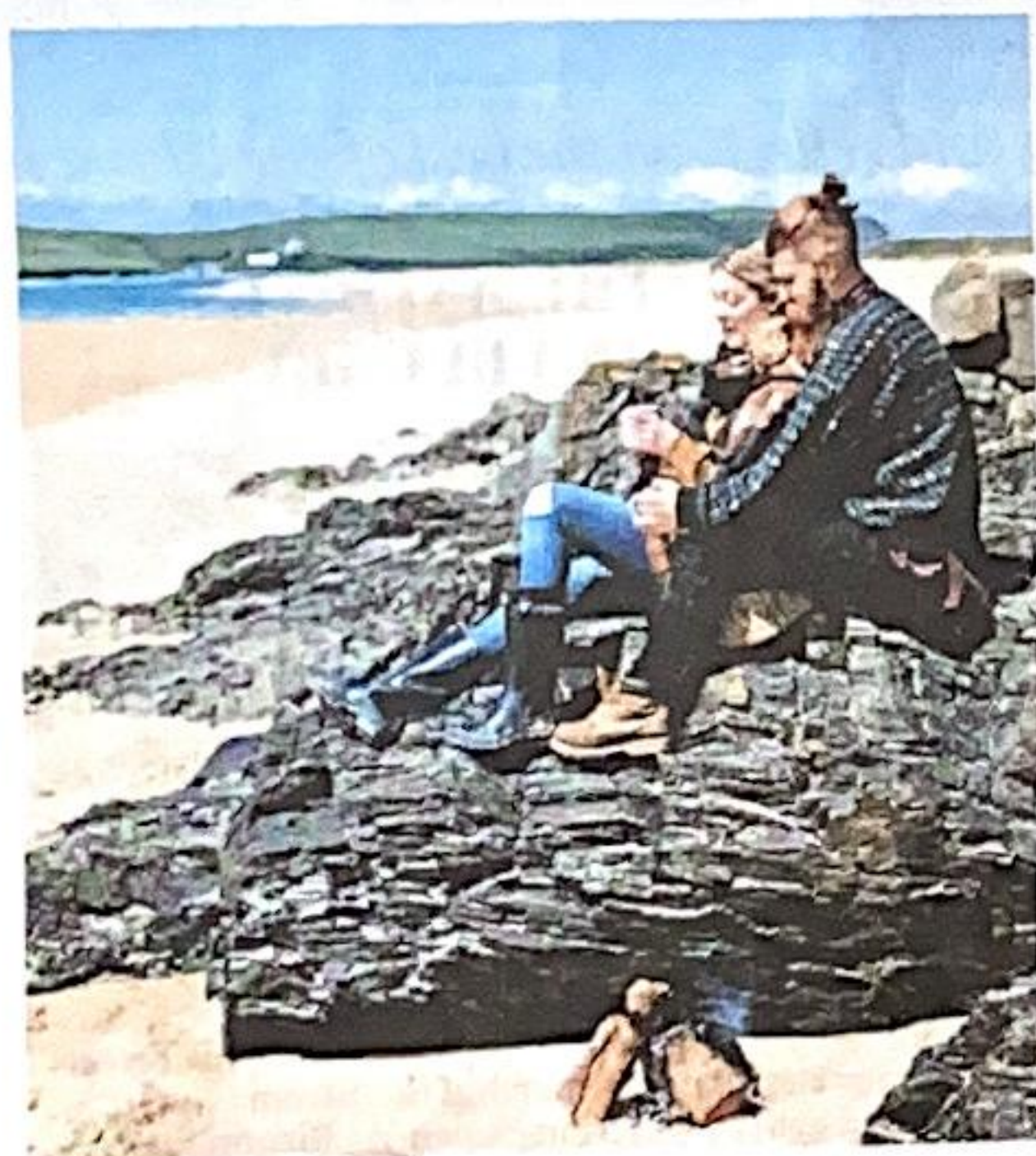
☐ Sleeps four, £830 for Dec 24 week (amberleyhousecottages.co.uk)

### ALBA BEACH HOUSE CORNWALL

Raise a Christmas Day glass from the balcony of this pink cob cottage that overlooks Porthmeor Beach. Put on your wetsuit for a swim, and play board games around the living room wood burner or admire the view from the window seat.

☐ Sleeps eight, £4,950 a week over Christmas (uniqueshomestays.com)

Sally Coffey



ESCAPE THIS CHRISTMAS  
Rockhaven Manor in Cornwall is handy placed for beach lovers, left

## THE BEST EVENTS FOR FAMILIES THIS CHRISTMAS

There are still family events being held around Britain this year, from Christmas markets to fairy light-festooned trails. The following offer a frisson of hope (restrictions across Britain allowing), but being prepared and advance booking advance is essential.

**CHRISTMAS MARKETS**  
Most Christmas markets are cancelled this year, but there are a few still hoping to open, including Cardiff (cardiffchristmasmarket.com), Sheffield (sheffieldchristmasmarkets.co.uk) and Swansea (swansea-city-centre.com). Bath (bathchristmasmarket.co.uk) and the Peak District (visitpeakdistrict.com/christmas-market) are hosting virtual markets so you can order online. Throughout December

**SANTA'S GROTTO WITH PETER RABBIT & FRIENDS, MILTON KEYNES**  
The great man will halt his sleigh at mega-mall Centre MK in 2020. There's plenty of space here for a socially-spaced grotto, an immersive experience including Potter characters such as Squirrel Nutkin and Mr Toad. Kids will decorate biscuits with

Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, and get a gift in the grotto. Dec 2-Dec 24; adult £499, child from £12.50; centremk.com

**CHRISTMAS AT THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL, LONDON**  
London's gilded, red-velvet Royal Albert Hall has celebrated Christmas for 149 years, and it's thrilling that it plans to open this festive season. Seating half its usual capacity, RAH will present the Royal Choral Society and Handel's *Messiah*. There will also be Christmas carols, the glorious *Nutcracker*, Guy Barker's Big Band Christmas and the family show, *My Christmas Orchestral Adventure*. Events Dec 9-Jan 2; tickets from £15; royalalberthall.com

**CHRISTMAS AT THE BOTANICS, EDINBURGH**  
With light sculptures, motion-activated lasers that burst around the greenery like fireworks, and a glittering walkway, Edinburgh's light show in its botanical gardens is in its fourth spectacular year. There's also the essential cockle-warming mulled wine and hot chocolate. Nov 26-Jan 3; adult £19, child £13; rbge.org.uk



LOOK AFTER YOUR ELF  
Alnwick Garden's light trail and skating at Hampton Court

**SANTA STEAM TRAIN, LEICESTERSHIRE**  
Risk-assessed and socially distanced, Santa Claus is coming to town by train this year on the Great Central Railway, where each bubble will occupy their own compartment. Various dates after Dec 2; four-person carriage £69; gcrailway.co.uk

**HAMPTON COURT ICE RINK, LONDON**  
Many of the UK's seasonal rinks are closed, but Hampton skates on, with its rink in a peerless location. With river views and a backdrop of Hampton Court, this year the ice rink is larger than ever before, in order to make space for socially-distanced pirouettes. Dec 5-Jan 3; adult £16, child £11.50; hamptoncourt.com

**ALNWICK LIGHT TRAIL, NORTHUMBERLAND**  
A magnificent light show awaits visitors to the Alnwick Garden, where this year they have extended their trail to ensure more can attend. There is even a Father Christmas grotto in a treehouse. Dec 4-31; Adult £11, child free; alnwickgarden.com

Abigail Blasi

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