

Northern lights

France is known for its wonderful Christmas markets, but you don't have to go as far as Alsace to find them, as **Alison Weeks** discovers



There is something particularly magical about the Christmas season in France. Every year towards the end of November, Christmas markets spring up all over *l'Hexagone*. Shopping malls can be an exhausting experience at this time of year but a charming *marché de Noël* does something for the soul. The intoxicating smells of mulled wine and roasted chestnuts evoke thoughts of an old-fashioned Christmas, while the hustle and bustle of shopping seems much more cheerful in the open air as all those colourful chalets, with their warm lights and rosy-faced vendors, brighten up the winter landscape.

Christmas markets originated in Germany in the Middle Ages and eventually spread around Europe. The one in Strasbourg, capital of Alsace, is the oldest in France, having begun in 1570, and others still have ties to Alsatian culture (you will find the regional speciality *pain d'épices* at markets as far away as Provence).

Keen to enjoy this Yuletide tradition without straying too far from Paris, my husband and I decided to visit three of the biggest Christmas markets in northern France: Amiens, Arras and Lille. It's not surprising that markets are popular in this area, where the colder weather lends itself to the festive mood and a cup of *vin chaud* makes a welcome hand-warmer on a frosty day.

Making our merry way

Situated an hour north of Paris, Amiens is the capital of Picardy, a region rich in its own cultural traditions. Its Christmas market is one of the largest in France, with more than 150 stalls covering most of the high street, all the way from the train station to the *hôtel de ville*.

We started our tour at the food stalls around Place Gambetta, where vendors offer everything from *choucroute* (the French take on *sauerkraut* and sausages) to chocolate-covered *gaufres*. A popular choice seemed to be *tartiflette*, a hearty Savoyard speciality made from potatoes, onions, bacon and reblochon cheese.

Feeling fuller and quite a bit merrier, we set off to explore the rest of the market. About halfway down, a particularly colourful stall selling *savon de Marseille* caught my eye. This traditional soap is made with olive oil and other natural ingredients; the French use it for everything from bathing to removing stains. There was every colour and fragrance imaginable: lemon, grapefruit, sage, almond, green tea, cinnamon and lavender, to name a few.

Convinced that I had stumbled on the ideal stocking filler for everyone on my shopping list, I selected an assortment and we continued on our way in a cloud of fragrance. Further along, we found some beautiful hand-knitted scarves in a variety of colours and patterns. The quality was reflected in the price, but it wasn't more than you would pay at an upmarket shop.

Back towards Place Gambetta, we stopped for a cup of mulled wine. Visitors appeared more interested in

RIGHT, FROM TOP: The Christmas market in Amiens with dolls for the children and *savon de Marseille* for the grown-ups

LEFT: The *Grande Roue* in the Grande Place, Lille





ABOVE: Russian dolls on sale at the market in Arras where there were plenty of refreshments on offer (RIGHT)

soaking up the atmosphere than actually doing any shopping and in spite of the cold, everyone seemed happy to stand around outdoors as long as they had a warm drink to hold; everyone, that is, apart from the children, who were keeping warm on the winter playground in the main square.

As the market started drawing to a close, we headed to the magnificent Cathédrale de Notre-Dame d'Amiens where a crowd was gathering for the evening light show. During a 40-minute display, this imposing Gothic building was brought to life with vibrant lighting. The effect bathes the intricate sculptures of the façade in colour, showing how the cathedral would have appeared in the 14th century. This dazzling show takes place every evening in December and has become a seasonal tradition for many families.

The next day we headed further north to the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, a region known for its blend of French and Flemish cultures. This cultural identity becomes more apparent during the festive period, when tradition calls for regional favourites such as cinnamon-flavoured biscuits called *spéculoos* and a *coquille de Noël*, or *pain de Jésus*, a brioche said to resemble the shape of the baby Christ wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Along with Alsace and Lorraine, the *Fête du Saint-Nicolas* on 6 December plays a more significant role in Nord-Pas-de-Calais traditions than in other parts of France. Each year the saint makes his rounds leaving treats for well-behaved children. He is sometimes accompanied by *le Père Fouettard* (the whipping father), who traditionally distributed lumps of coal or spankings to naughty children. Several towns in the north of France mark *Fête du Saint-Nicolas* with parades.

Our next stop was Arras, just over an hour's drive from Amiens. The capital of the Pas-de-Calais *département* and the centre of the historic province of Artois, Arras is one of the north's hidden gems.

Its Christmas market is less spread out than Amiens', being contained in the picturesque Grande Place, with its scalloped skyline of Flemish buildings. Although compact, the market was by no means small. It had about 70 chalets across the main square, which was bordered by a wall of fragrant pine trees. For younger market-goers, there was a carousel and a pop-up skating rink off to one side, but the main attraction was clearly Santa Claus's grotto, where a queue of wide-eyed children stood with bated breath, hoping for a chance to meet the man himself. Nearby, others

In spite of the cold, everyone seemed happy to stand around outdoors as long as they had a warm drink to hold

PHOTOGRAPHS: TIM WEEKS; OT DES TROIS-PAYS; J. M. HECQUET



waited to have their pictures taken inside a giant snow globe, an attraction that we were sorry to learn was only for children.

For the adults, a chalet selling *cidre chaud* was the biggest draw. At neighbouring stalls we found an unusual local confection called *rats d'Arras*, chocolate-covered pralines in rodent form (a nod to the town seal of Arras), as well as *les coeurs d'Arras*, heart-shaped gingerbread biscuits made by renowned local *pâtissier* Sébastien Thibaut.

Some chalets were less than spectacular, selling generic Christmas decorations or personalised Santa hats that you could easily find at home. But most seemed to offer unusual gifts, from hand-painted snow globes to Arabesque lanterns. We completed the circuit a couple of times to make sure we hadn't overlooked any treasures before passing through the gateway of Christmas trees and back into the real world.

Leaving Arras, we followed the A1 *autoroute* north to Lille for our third and final Christmas market. With its excellent retail centre and trendy boutiques, this northern city is always a good bet for shopping. This is especially true at Christmas time, when the shops open on Sundays and operate for longer during the week.

Night had fallen by the time we arrived and the whole city was aglow with Christmas lights. The funfair was spread out over the three main squares and an iconic feature of the festive season in Lille, the *Grande Roue*, an illuminated 170-foot Ferris wheel, dominated the Grande Place, with adults and children alike



The festive north

If you are looking for further holiday cheer, the north of France has something for everyone, with a variety of festivals and other Christmas markets

Marché de Noël de Boulogne-sur-Mer

5 December to 16 December
Situating in the walled city centre, this coastal Christmas market is packed with maritime traditions and plenty of smoked herring. Its parade in honour of Saint Nicolas is on 8 December.
Tel: (Fr) 3 21 10 88 10
www.tourisme-boulogne-surmer.com

beautiful town looks even more appealing under the soft glow of Christmas lights.
Tel: (Fr) 3 44 40 01 00
www.compiègne-tourisme.fr

Noël au Touquet

December
The northern seaside resort of Le Touquet is celebrating its centenary in 2012 with Christmas festivities, lights, markets and a Saint Nicolas parade.
Tel: (Fr) 3 21 06 72 00
www.letouquet.com
(See page 73 for more on *Le Touquet's centenary*).

Fête de la Dinde, Licques

8-10 December
This small town just south of Calais is famous for its Christmas turkeys, and locals celebrate with a festival where the ill-fated birds are walked through the streets (pictured above).
Tel: (Fr) 3 21 35 73 73
www.tourisme-3pays.fr

Marché de Noël de Béthune

1-29 December
A small, but popular affair, this charming market (pictured below) is in the form of a Christmas village complete with ice skating rink, carousel and 40 chalets.
Tel: (Fr) 3 21 52 50 00
www.ville-bethune.fr

Marché de Noël à Compiègne

(Dates to be confirmed)
Just an hour's drive from Paris, this





ABOVE: Shoppers look for gifts at Lille's Christmas market



queuing to take a ride. The square made an impressive winter scene, with buildings covered in fake snow and a giant Christmas tree.

After a refreshing ride through the cold night air, we continued to the market in Place Rihour, where we promptly picked up the obligatory cup of *vin chaud* and joined the line of people filing through the stalls. There were some repeats from the other markets (more soap and Santa hats), but there were plenty of things unique to Lille, from hand-crafted ornaments and decorations to local specialities and, this being Lille, plenty of *gaufres*.

The Alsatian influence was apparent everywhere we went. In Lille, there was even a dedicated chalet for Maison Fortwenger, the celebrated Alsatian gingerbread makers. But other regions were represented as well, with Normandy calvados and Savoyard specialities. There was also a strong international presence, including a Canadian stall selling maple sugar products and a Russian doll stand. In spite of the multi-cultural presence, each Christmas market managed to maintain a local flavour.

Satisfied with our purchases, we finally gave in to the tempting smell of roasted chestnuts and bought a bag to share. We settled down on the steps of the opera house to enjoy our Christmas treat and take in the sights and sounds of the Place du Théâtre with its colourful carousel and *crèche*, or Nativity scene. Although this tends to be a little quieter than other areas, the square becomes the centre of attention during the famous *descente du Père Noël*, when Father Christmas and his elves come rappelling down from the belfry of the *hôtel de ville*. Usually held on the last weekend before Christmas, this event draws throngs of excited children who hope to catch a glimpse of this rather sporty Santa Claus and pick up a few of the bonbons he throws out to the crowd.

Sadly we hadn't timed our trip for this momentous occasion, so we settled for another ride on the *Grande Roue* before calling it a day. Our Christmas market marathon had been a success; we had found gifts for most people on our shopping list without setting foot in a mall and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves into the bargain. 🍷

FRANCOFILE

Planning your trip to the Christmas markets

GETTING THERE

Alison Weeks travelled with P&O Ferries from Dover to Calais.
Tel: 0871 664 2121
www.poferries.com

WHERE TO VISIT

Marché de Noël d'Amiens
24 Nov to 31 Dec
Tel: (Fr) 3 22 71 60 50
www.amiens-tourisme.com

Marché de Noël d'Arras
30 Nov to 24 Dec

Tel: (Fr) 3 21 51 26 95
www.ot-arras.fr

Marché de Noël de Lille

21 Nov to 30 Dec
Tel: (Fr) 3 59 57 94 00
www.lilletourism.com

WHERE TO STAY

Mercure Amiens Cathédrale
21-23 Rue Flatters
80000 Amiens
Tel: (Fr) 3 22 80 60 60
www.mercure.com
Doubles from €102.

La Corne d'Or

1 Place Guy Mollet
62000 Arras
Tel: (Fr) 3 21 58 85 94
www.lamaisondhotes.com. Doubles from €82.

Hôtel Kanai

10 Rue de Béthune
59000 Lille
Tel: (Fr) 3 20 57 14 78
www.hotelkanai.com
Doubles from €70.

WHERE TO EAT

Au Relais des Orfèvres
14 Rue des Orfèvres

80000 Amiens
Tel: (Fr) 3 22 92 36 01
www.restaurant-relais-orfevres.fr

La Clef des Sens

60-62 Place des Héros
62000 Arras
Tel: (Fr) 3 21 51 00 50
www.laclefdesens.com

Brasserie André

71 Rue de Béthune
59000 Lille
Tel: (Fr) 3 20 54 75 51
www.brasserie-andre.blogspot.co.uk



REGIONAL TOURIST BOARDS

Nord-Pas-de-Calais
Tel: (Fr) 3 20 14 57 57
www.tourisme-nordpasdecalais.fr

Picardy

Tel: (Fr) 3 22 22 33 66
www.picardie-tourisme.com

PHOTOGRAPHS: TIM WEEKS