



Merry Christmas, from Vienna

To everything THERE IS A SEASON

Every year in early December, my three sisters-in-law gather from around the world (Prague, Dubai and Toronto) at the Christmas markets in Vienna (Nov. 15 to Dec. 26) to shop, drink *Glühwein* and be jolly. It's got to the point where the season just wouldn't be the same without their gifts of handmade Austrian bric-a-brac.

At this time of year, Europe brims with sleighfuls of festive offerings. From the Tivoli Gardens market in Copenhagen (Nov. 13 to Dec. 30) — with more than six kilometres of twinkling lights invented by a Tiffany & Co. designer — to midnight masses, Dresden's elaborately iced gingerbread and its 8,000-pound fruitcake that lands in the main square on Dec. 5, Europe does up the season the way it was meant to be: full of tradition, the air redolent with roasting chestnuts, stalls brimming with handcrafted treasures and everyone outside smiling at one another.

But there's more to the holidays than Santa. Here are a few offbeat winter offerings to tempt you....

WINTER SOLSTICE CELEBRATIONS

When the sun reaches its annual nadir, the Kalasha people in **Pakistan** believe an ancient demigod comes to collect prayers and deliver them to their most-revered being, Deza. During these pagan celebrations, females purify themselves in ritual baths; while holding a piece of bread aloft, the men pour water over the women's heads. The men then bathe and cannot be seated until their faces

are sprinkled with goat's blood at sunset. Once purification is complete, singing, dancing, bonfires and feasting on goat tripe begin. The two-week festival kicks off Dec. 7.

CHINESE NEW YEAR NIGHT PARADE

There is one surefire way to prolong New Year's celebrations for those of us on the Gregorian calendar, and that's by heading to **Hong Kong**, where the Year of the Tiger roars in Feb. 14.

That evening, the city puts on a show with marching bands, dancing dragons, illuminated floats and fire-eaters from around the world. The Chinese New Year Fiesta continues for a week as streets fill with stage performances and outlandish costumes. The famous flower markets, meanwhile, take place in Victoria and Fa Hui parks, with their kumquat trees, peach blossoms and tan-

gerine plants. A few days earlier, at the Hong Kong Salsa Festival (Feb. 1 to 7), swinging hips and hot, tangy music are guaranteed to banish the winter blues.

NIGHT OF THE RADISHES

On Dec. 23 in Oaxaca, **Mexico**, this ordinary red root morphs into massive sculptures taking over the city's main square. Witness a towering Madonna carved from a single vegetable, and various red-and-white scenes depicting everything from a fully attended nativity to an animated salsa band.

BUTTER SCULPTURE FESTIVAL

To help celebrate the new year in **Tibet**, Buddhist monks fashion elaborate yak-butter sculptures depicting various fables, religious stories or deities. The most famous are at the Kumbum monastery. Painted in vibrant colours, these high-cholesterol carvings soar several metres and, on Feb. 28, are illuminated with hundreds of yak-butter lamps. The monks' creations are then destroyed before dawn — testament to the Buddhist belief in the impermanence of all things.



Extend your New Year's to Hong Kong.



This sculpture is radish-ing.