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102 Things to do in Winter

Written by Alex Quick

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102
THINGS TO DO IN WINTER

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1.

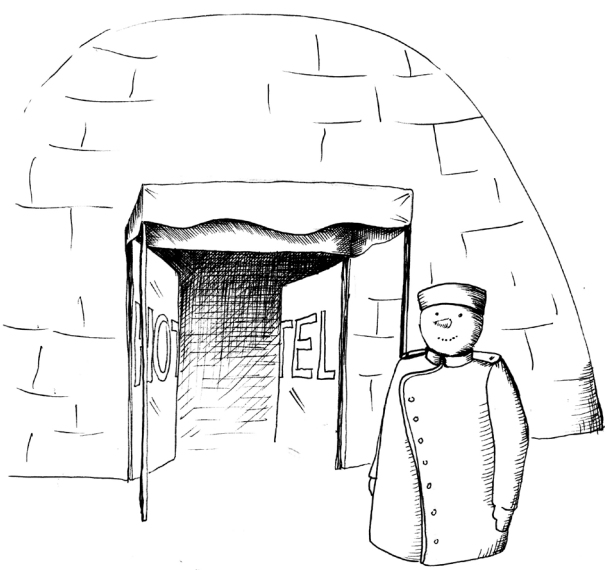
STAY AT AN ICE HOTEL

You might think you could stay at an ice hotel at any old time of the year. In fact, ice hotels are only created and run in winter. Artificial refrigeration is too expensive to keep on in summer, and ice hotels rely on the winter weather to stop the establishment melting and drowning the guests.

In an ice hotel you stay in rooms made of ice with doors, walls, ceilings and furniture of ice, on a bed of ice. Although the bed is a hard block of frozen water, your night's sleep is made possible with the use of furs and sleeping bags. For your convenience there may be a trouser-press made of ice. There are no hot showers, however.

Downstairs in the ice bar, surrounded by ice sculptures, you sip icy drinks from glasses made of ice (a drink 'in the rocks' rather than 'on the rocks') and exchange icy small-talk and icy glances.

Ice hotels are found in many parts of the world, such as the USA, Canada, Scandinavia and Japan, but the first ice hotel was in Sweden, in the village of Jukkasjärvi: it opened in 1990 and is seasonally reconstructed every year with a different design. Alongside the hotel (with rooms for 100 guests) is an ice church with ice pews and an altar of ice, in which worshippers are exhorted to open their freezing hearts.



2.

GO SLEDDING

This is the most democratic of the winter sports. Babies on tea-trays; geriatrics on plastic bags. Anything that will slide down snow. In fact, the more basic types of conveyance are sometimes faster. A piece of plastic sheeting held up at the front can outpace an old-fashioned sled with steel runners.

Sledding is not an exact science (though it's more exact than snow tubing – see §52), and steering may be a problem. A good way to steer is to use the feet. Bearing down on the snow on one side creates drag and inclines the sled to that side, so if you want to go left, put your foot down left, and if right, right. (However, if despite your efforts you look like you're going to crash into a telephone pole, fence, tree or polar cow, I'd advise you to bail out and take whatever contusions are coming to you rather than endure a head-on impact.)

To increase speed at the start, take a run-up at your sled and throw yourself onto it. Actually this is a good way to start a sled race. Take up positions a short distance behind your sleds and then, on a signal, run towards your vehicles. If you don't do this, sled races tend to begin in a rather lustreless manner, with everyone waiting for gravity to start working.

One type of sledding that you may not care to try is Hawaiian lava sledding (or he'ehōlua). This involves riding a twenty-foot war sled down a lava field at speeds of up to 70 miles per hour (110 km/h), emitting savage cries to honour Pele, the goddess of fire.



3.

GO TO AN ICE SCULPTURE FESTIVAL

Ice sculpture is the closest the decorative arts get to the condition of music: no sooner do you experience it than it melts away. Ice is a material both solid and ethereal, which is the key to its fascination.

Modern ice sculpture began with a legendary Parisian, the chef Auguste Escoffier, who made swans from ice to amaze his dinner guests. Since then, ice swans have become rather passé. Ice sculptures can be anything, from human figures to swarms of bees, or even entire buildings that can be walked on and in. Occasionally sculptures are made from different colours of ice (created using dyes), sometimes with lights frozen inside so they are illuminated from within.

There are festivals, ice-carving competitions and ice

sculpture trails in many major cities throughout the world. One of the biggest festivals is the International Ice and Snow Sculpture Festival at Harbin in China, where an entire city is created every year from ice and snow and lit up by lasers. Harbin freezes solid every winter, so there is no shortage of raw materials.

At some festivals there are workshops where you can try your hand yourself, although since most large sculptures are roughed out with chainsaws, you'll need to serve an apprenticeship.

4.

GO TO MIDNIGHT MASS

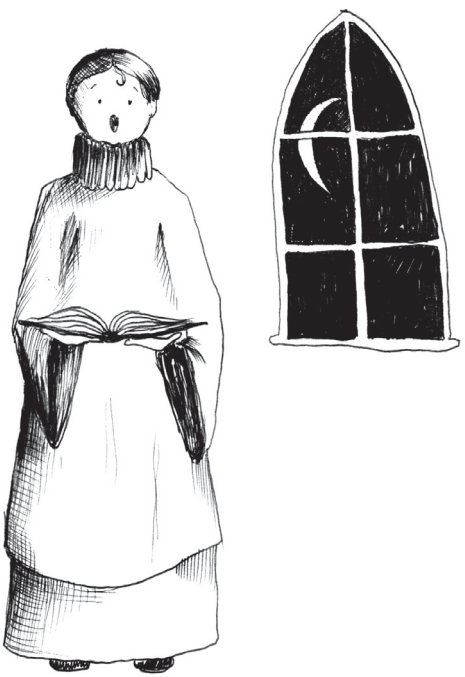
It's a shame that most people no longer go to church at Christmas. Even in a post-Christian society, Christmas is still a Christian feast, and without some understanding of the Christmas story, Christmas is just a depressing means of gaining extra fat.

Standing for a couple of hours in a church, if nothing else, gives you the space to reflect on the passing year. In the immortal and non-denominational words of John Lennon: 'So this is Christmas… and what have you done?'

Or think of it this way: a typical congregation, not just on Christmas Eve but on any normal Sunday, is as much a communion of doubt as a communion of faith. Those who attend church fit somewhere in the spectrum from fervent conviction to dyed-in the-wool scepticism. If you attend church with no beliefs, it doesn't mean you don't belong: it merely means that

you represent the atheist end of the spectrum.

What's so stirring about midnight mass is that is mixes the sacred and the profane. Easter is arguably a more significant festival, because it represents the moment (Christians believe) that Christ redeemed mankind, but Easter is perhaps only fully accessible by the faithful. Christmas Eve, in contrast, is about something everyone can relate to: the moment when a baby was born in poverty and loved by ordinary people, and about the sanctity, innocence and beauty of a new human life.



5.

COMMEMORATE THE EGGNOG RIOT

The Eggnog Riot took place at the US military academy of West Point in 1826. Angered at a decree that their Christmas was to be alcohol-free, the cadets smuggled cases of whiskey into the academy, made eggnog with it, and then, according to a contemporary account, 'reeled through the barracks shouting, some with swords, some with muskets, some with bayonets; one fired a musket; another threw a log at an officer.'

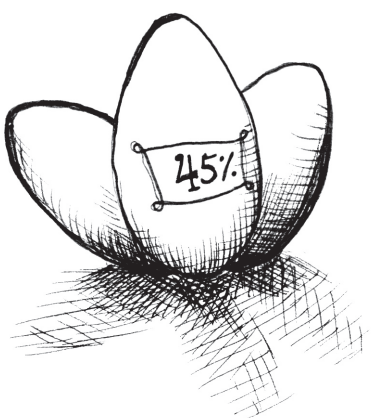
How strange that they chose eggnog. To most of us it is associated with sleepy post-prandial uncles. There is something tranquil about it, combining as it does the comforting and maternal ingredients of eggs and milk. You can even make it without alcohol, practically as a drink of the nursery.

But let's say you want to make some with a hint of Christmas tonic.

To serve four people, take two eggs and separate them into yolks and whites. Beat the whites until they are foamy, then mix them back with the yolks. Now take half a cup of whipping cream and beat that until it is stiff. Fold two tablespoons of caster sugar (don't use ordinary granulated sugar or the mixture will be grainy) into the cream. Stir in the eggs, then a cup of milk and half a cup of the alcohol. Eggnog should be thick and creamy, so make sure you fold all the ingredients together by hand: an electric mixer will dispel all the air bubbles.

And that's it: eggnog, or as they say in France, 'Lait de Poule'.

If you're allergic to milk, try a 'Soy nog' or even a 'Tofu nog' (with creamed tofu instead of dairy cream).



6.

MAKE MULLED WINE

Another seasonal grog-cup is mulled wine. You can buy this ready-prepared in bottles, but it is always bland and unexciting, an 'all things to all men' sort of drink, and not really in tune with the spirit of the season. Home-made mulled wine is much tastier and more aromatic.

First, get a couple of bottles of red wine – not too cheap, because even covered up with tons of cloves, a really cheap red wine can be quite disgusting – pour them in a large pan and add three oranges cut into segments. Do the same with a lemon and a lime, leaving a couple of thin slices for garnish. Add about eight cloves, plus a cinnamon stick, some grated nutmeg and about six tablespoons of sugar. Other flavours such as ginger and bay leaves work well. Now heat the mixture up. But don't allow it to boil! Boiling will evaporate off the alcohol, and instead of

intoxicating wine you'll have intoxicating wallpaper. Heat only to a gentle simmer for about ten minutes. Then take the mixture off and allow it to steep. Steeping lets the hot wine, spices and citrus flavours interpenetrate.

When party time comes, give the liquid another warm-up and serve immediately. If serving in glasses, you can create a garnish from the remaining orange, lemon or lime slices, studded with cloves and perched on the rim. If ladling from the bowl, include a slice or two of fruit in the glass.



7.

MAKE A SPICED APPLE CHRISTMAS CAKE

Christmas cake comes in a variety of types. In fact, any cake you wish to call a Christmas cake is a Christmas cake, even a sponge cake with strawberries on top (that's what they call a Christmas cake in Japan).

Most Christmas cakes, though, it's fair to say, are rich in fruit and very dark and heavy. Spiced apple cake, on the other hand, is lighter and more digestible, and can be served with custard, cream, ice cream or eggnog custard at the end of a hefty Christmas dinner.

To make the cake you need to combine the following ingredients (it doesn't matter much in what order as long as the eggs don't curdle): a cup of muscovado sugar, four eggs, a cup of butter, two cups of plain flour, a cup and a half of peeled, finely-chopped apple, a teaspoon of baking powder, a half cup of softened

raisins, a tablespoon of honey, a tablespoon of milk, a teaspoon of vanilla extract, and spices to taste (about half a teaspoon each of cinnamon, nutmeg and ground cloves makes a nice combination). Pour the mixture into a ring-shaped tin if you have one, or into a large baking tin. Bake at 350 degrees (gas mark 4) for 30 minutes.

This is a treat that needs no special ingredients and can be whipped up in an hour, but is perfect for Christmas. Dust with icing sugar and serve with a sprig of holly on top if desired.



8.

GO WOK RACING

This is similar to bobsledding, except you put your bottom in a wok. The hands and feet dangle outside, though they may be protected by being fitted with ladles (you see the culinary connection).

For those suspecting I have made this up for the purpose of filling the pages of this book, it is a real sport, though it has not yet been given the imprimatur of a Winter Olympic event. It started in Germany in the early 2000s as a stunt for the German TV show *Wetten, dass..?* (Rough translation: 'You wanna bet?') The show co-opted various hard-bottomed German TV personalities to race each other in woks on a bobsled track. The idea caught on, and wok-racing championships began to be held annually, though they were always won by the same man, George Hackl, who happens to be an Olympic luge champion. (A British version of this phenomenon occurred when

Stirling Moss persisted in winning the all the trophies in lawnmower racing.) Hackl is also known as the 'Speeding Weisswurst', because he looks like a white sausage in his shining silver bodysuit.

Team events are also held, utilizing four woks welded together onto a frame.

The woks themselves are ordinary kitchen woks, slightly modified for safety: the edge of a wok can be rather sharp, and therefore not necessarily a good thing to have close to your posterior when travelling at high speed. Accordingly they are fitted with rubber rims.



9.

PLAY SNOW SNAKE

Snow Snake is a traditional game of various Native American nations, among them the Iroquois and Sioux. It involves throwing a length of wood down a specially-prepared track in the snow. The length of wood that goes furthest is the winner. Snow snake has a particular cultural significance for native Americans. It's a 'medicine' that promotes social good and initiates young boys into the tribe.

The creation of the track is the complicated bit. It's made by piling up snow into a long bank, a couple of feet high but hundreds of yards long: the finished product looks like an embankment for a model railway. Running down the centre is a groove or trough, about 5 inches (12 cm) deep and the same wide. This is the channel down which the 'snakes' run, a sort of bobsled track for sticks.

The type of stick used is part of the art: sticks can

be various lengths, from little ones a few inches long to poles as long as a spear. The poles are covered in varnish to make them glide faster and further, and are fitted with a lead tip: often the sticks are handed down from father to son. Teams take it in turns to throw their sticks down the channel. Stories of sticks travelling hundreds of yards are common.



10.

BECOME A POLAR BEAR OR A WALRUS

… by going swimming in winter. In the USA, winter swimmers are known as 'polar bears', and 'polar bear clubs', which meet to take a dip on New Year's Day or Christmas Day, are popular in many states. In Russia the same people are called 'walruses'.

The activity is not limited to these two countries. Winter swimming has a global fan base, particularly in very cold countries such as Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Why people don't swim in freezing water in Rome or Seville isn't immediately clear, but perhaps they just have more sense.

In London the best-known winter swimming is to be had at Highgate Ponds in Hampstead and at the Serpentine in Hyde Park. The latter hosts the annual Peter Pan Christmas Day race, inaugurated in 1904

by JM Barrie, the creator of the eponymous never-growing-up boy.

Swimming in really freezing conditions (where ice is beginning to form) can be dangerous and should only be attempted by people who swim regularly in very cold open water. Hypothermia is a real possibility. Having said that, many 'ice-swimmers' swear by its health benefits.

It also provides an excellent excuse to built up a layer of subcutaneous fat.

