

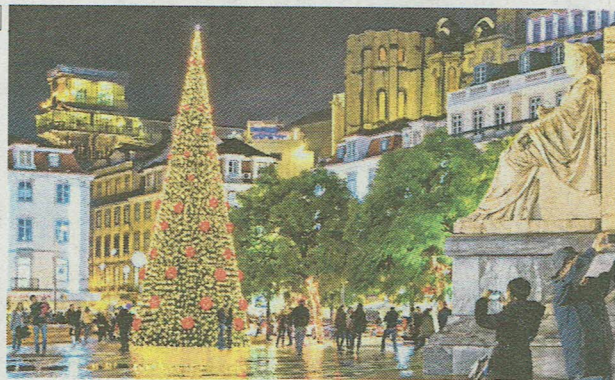
# COVER STORY

→ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

## LISBON

The Portuguese know how to throw a Christmas party and nowhere is this more obvious than in the 42 squares and cobbled streets of their capital, which are illuminated this year by around two million LEDs. It used to have the tallest artificial Christmas tree in Europe (making the *Guinness World Records* in 2005 and surpassing that in 2007, with a 249ft structure) but now it is more about elegance than elongation, with this year's tree a petite 98ft.

Every year at the end of November, fireworks above the city signify the turning on of the lights on the tree in beautiful 18th-century Praça do Comercio which opens out on to the Tagus river. It is not just here that Christmas is in evidence, though: it is in the smell from the bakers where the *Bolo-rei* is being baked, the traditional king's cake that we eat at this time, made from soft white bread with candied fruit and raisins;



and in the music that seeps out from under the church doors where Christmas concerts are held. I try to catch one in the 16th-century Church of Sao Roque, whose plain exterior gives no hint of the opulent baroque interiors ornate with lapis lazuli, gold, silver and agate, considered a masterpiece of European art.

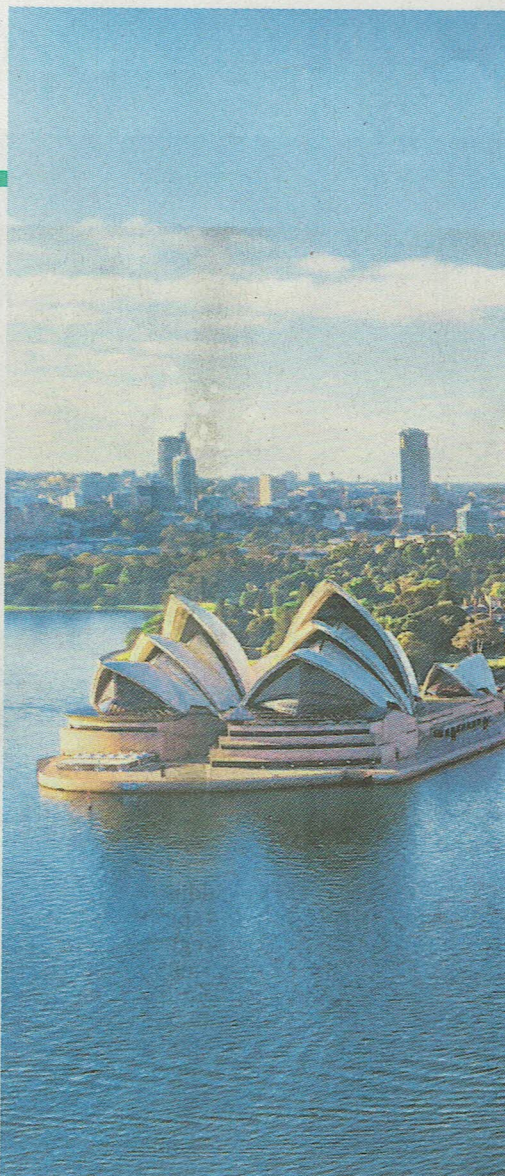
In the Praça de Luis de Camoes – named after Portugal's greatest poet, who lived in the 16th century – a huge Father Christmas stands guard beside a statue of Camoes himself. Children are allowed to stay up on

Christmas Eve, eating traditional *bacalhau* (dried cod) and a variety of cakes and pastries. The moment they long for arrives on their return from Midnight Mass where they find that baby Jesus has arrived in the crib and finally they can open their presents.

### Mary Lussiana

□ **Abercrombie & Kent** (01242 547703; [abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://abercrombiekent.co.uk)) offers a week-long trip to Lisbon, staying at the Pousada de Lisboa from £1,215pp including easyJet flights and private transfers, on a B&B basis.

GETTY IMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK



## HAUTE SAVOIE, FRANCE

There's no rest for the wicked in my food-obsessed village in France on Christmas Eve. Shopping for the grandest feast of the year – *Le Réveillon*, aka a Dec 24 all-nighter – beckons. And this being agricultural Haute-Savoie on the rural shores of Lake Geneva, there is exceptional local produce to be sampled at each titillating port of call.

Caviar pearls, scallops, fleshy white lake-caught féra, garlicky snails, guinea fowl or goose, and a chocolate log from the village boulangerie are *Réveillon* staples. The French pop briny Breton oysters like sweets at Christmas, and those with epicurean nous join the festive queue at a seasonal street kiosk that sprouts

slurp of plump mollusc before buying several dozen to take home.

On nearby rue Saint-Sébastien, aromatic wheels of Beaufort and Comté ripen in subterranean cellars at Fromagerie Bougon. Choosing from the 400 different cheeses, hand-churned butters, bowls of creamy fromage blanc and boutique Alpine cheeses – impossible to find elsewhere – is agony. No cheeseboard is complete without an incongruously ugly chunk of ginger-crust, green-veined Bleu de



Termignon, crafted from raw cow's milk by just five producers in the Alps.

From Thonon-les-Bains, the Christmas Eve trail tangoes south along the lake and inland, through vine-ribbed hills to duck farm La Mère Gaud. Savoyard hedonists have shopped here for velvety foie gras, gizzards, preserved duck confit, smoked duck breast and glass jars of duck fat for more than a century.

I succumb, yet again, to the sacrosanct pre-sale *degustation* (tasting) and vow to not eat another morsel until dinner... or my next stop at least.

### Nicola Williams

□ **Peak Retreats** (023 9283 9310; [peakretreats.co.uk](http://peakretreats.co.uk)) offers week-long trips to Évian-les-Bains from £100pp including a

## SYDNEY

Christmas in Australia is a sweaty affair. There's nothing white or cosy about it (save for repeated viewings of *Love, Actually*). The chardonnay flows and seafood is non-negotiable.

I experienced my first Australian Christmas aged 23 when my friend Jessica

invited me to her annual picnic at Beach. Growing in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, our tradition is to eat Chinese food on Christmas Day – the Yum Cha lunch and the promise of a cookie's fortune. Christmas means Crossing the S

## AMSTERDAM

Amsterdam makes a perfect retreat from the tired excesses of Christmas, while retaining a gentle air of festivity. Traditionally, the main Dutch seasonal celebrations are on Dec 5 (the eve of St Nicholas's Day). That's when *Sinterklaas* (with flowing white beard, in red cape and mitre hat – the ancestor of Father Christmas) leaves presents, and people compose frank poems about



behind the Rijksmuseum. Most cinemas, restaurants and