

Europe stretches holidays into January



Rick Steves

Traveling during the holidays in Europe, you'll find the season marked not by the number of shopping days left until Christmas, but by a long series of winter festivals — both pagan and Christian — that stretch from late November until early January.

Advent (stretching four Sundays before Christmas) starts things off, as people begin to anticipate the arrival (or advent) of the baby Jesus. (In Europe, this is truly the start of Christmas. While some American-style early commercialization has begun to bleed through, for the most part, European advertisers seem reluctant to market the season any earlier.)

Next up is the Feast of St. Nicholas, celebrated mostly in Catholic countries with gift giving on Dec. 5 and 6. In some countries, St. Nicholas' feast is even bigger than Christmas Day. Dec. 13 then brings Santa Lucia Day, a logical highlight in Europe's darkest corner — Scandinavia — where young girls decked out in candles lead processions promising the return of the light.

Dec. 25 is generally a day of quiet celebration and happy reunions with relatives and friends.

Christmas in some European countries — including Italy and France — kicks off 12 more days of religious observance: the famous Twelve Days of Christmas. They end on Jan. 6 with the Epiphany holiday, when the Three Wise Men were said to have finally brought their gifts to the baby Jesus.

In Italy, Epiphany is the time of "La Befana," the legendary Good Witch of Christmas, who



A seller holds a doll showing La Befana, the Good Witch of Christmas celebrated on Epiphany, at Piazza Navona in Rome. ANDREAS SOLARO/GETTY-AFP 2012

gives gifts to children. My Roman friend, Francesca, explained to me. "On the night before Jan. 6, La Befana flies over the rooftops of Rome on her broom, and brings gifts to the good children or coal for the bad ones. (These days the 'coal' is a crunchy black candy you buy from street-corner carts.) In return, Roman children leave her a gift of soft ricotta cheese, since she has hardly any teeth!"

According to Italian legend, the Three Wise Men stopped to ask La Befana for directions to Bethlehem and the Christ child, but she was too busy to help.

As time passed, La Befana kept thinking about the strange visitors and their quest. With a

sack filled with bread, she set out to find Jesus too. Whenever La Befana saw a baby boy, she broke off a crust of bread and gave it to him, hoping he might be the Christ child.

Befana — whose name means "gift-bringer" — still wanders, searching through Italy each Christmas season, leaving little goodies for the children.

The legend of La Befana may stretch back to pagan times. She first appeared in ancient Roman winter festivals as an aging Mother Nature, delivering her last gifts.

Today, a good place to meet La Befana in person is at Rome's lively square, Piazza Navona, at the Christmas bazaar known locally as the Befana Market.

France, not surprisingly, celebrates Epiphany in an edible way.

For several days, from Christmas until the Feast of Epiphany, the French line up at bakeries to buy galette des rois, or the "Cake of Kings." They bring these to dinner parties, and enjoy them as snacks and with mid-afternoon tea. The tradition of the treat dates back to the 14th century.

Each region in France has its own version of the galette des rois. In the north of France, galettes are puff-pastry cakes, usually filled with fragrant almond frangipane, a kind of custard. In Brittany, they resemble shortcake.

And in the south of France, galettes are brioche — a sweet bread decorated with candied fruit, and

flavored with brandy or orange-flower water.

What's the reason for this enormous amount of pastry consumption? (Although honestly, who needs a reason to eat pastry?)

Inside each galette hides a tiny trinket, usually made of porcelain. While these once had religious significance, today they range from miniature paintings of Picasso's "Guernica" or Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" to figurines of Zorro or even Harry Potter.

The trinkets hidden inside each galette are called fèves, named for the fava beans that were the original prizes. Today, fèves are highly collectible.

Traditionally, the cake is cut while the youngest child at the table designates

who will get each piece (so there's no cheating). Everyone takes careful bites of the pastry until someone finds the fève. The excited winner gets the fève, as well as a golden paper or plastic crown that tops the cake — and becomes king or queen for the day.

While the history of traditions like La Befana and galettes des rois may be clouded by myth, this much is true: The French and the Italians make Epiphany a delightful celebration, filled with goodies more fun than frankincense and myrrh.

Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European travel guidebooks and hosts travel shows on public television and public radio. Email him at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.

CELEBRITY TRAVEL

For indie rock star, music is memory

By Jae-Ha Kim
Tribune Content Agency

Indie rock musician Meaningful Stone, the stage name of Kim Jimin, recently finished a tour of Asia and played a showcase in Mexico. But she's hoping that she will play more concerts around the world, including shows in the United States.

"As long as I get the visa," she said, laughing from her home in Seoul.

Her latest album is "Angel drop (Live)."

This interview with Jimin was conducted in Korean and translated into English and has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: Because you're Korean, do foreigners automatically assume you are a K-pop idol instead of an indie artist?

A: (Laughs.) That's a fun question. I think that kind of stereotype naturally comes with being a Korean musician. As K-pop has become more globally popular, K-indie has also started gaining attention. We're even seeing more cases where the idol industry reaches out to collaborate with the indie scene first. Just as there are amazing people everywhere in the world, I think if you look at Korea with genuine interest, you'll naturally get to know many more musicians.

Q: Did you get to be a tourist during your recent work trip to Mexico?

A: Yes, actually. Outside of work, I spent more time sightseeing and hanging out with Mexican



Kim Jimin said that of all the places she has visited, she draws inspiration from Thailand. LEE SEONG RYUL

musicians. The most memorable place I visited was a small town called Tepoztlán.

Q: You were also in Los Angeles, right?

A: Yes, I had some tea time with a musician named Jay Som. It was a short visit, so we didn't have enough time to start a new project. But after returning to Korea, we continued discussing potential future collaboration. Since I've never worked with an artist outside of Korea before, it feels exciting to be setting something fun in motion.

Q: What do you remember about your first gig?

A: I think I was a bit shocked to realize that the fans who came to see me actually exist beyond the internet. The letters they brought were so much longer and warmer than the comments on YouTube. (Laughs.) Above all, I felt that being on stage is truly my calling.

Q: Have you written or worked on any songs while you were on the road?

A: Rather than actively working on songs, I mostly jotted down lyrics whenever I had a moment. After returning home, I would add melodies to those notes and complete the songs. Music stays with me as a memory. I've been visiting Thailand often recently. The music I

heard there seems to have become the kind of sound I want to resemble the most. Traveling has always been a major source of inspiration for me, so these days I'm trying to change my work environment and test what feels the most fun and fresh for myself.

Q: Do you have free time built into your tours?

A: When I went on the Tokyo tour, I happened to get a message from a well-known photographer and ended up doing a photo shoot. They've photographed musicians I really like, so I was looking forward to it a lot. And in Ochanomizu, the famous instrument district, I bought a Fender Jazzmaster I'd been wanting.

Q: What is your bucket-list venue that you have yet to perform in?

A: I'd love to perform on channels I really admire, like KEXP and NPR's Tiny Desk Concert. I also want to play at various festivals such as Primavera Sound (in Barcelona), Glastonbury (in Somerset, England) and Fuji Rock (in Japan).

Q: Where would you like to go that you have never been to before?

A: Hawaii! I've heard the nature there is unbelievably beautiful.

For more from the reporter, visit www.jaehakim.com.

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Budget waits 18 days to charge renter \$450 for dirty floor mats

By Christopher Elliott | King Features Syndicate

I rented a van from Budget for a family trip this past September. When I returned it, the agent checked the vehicle and said nothing about dirt.

But 18 days later, Budget inspected the vehicle again and charged me \$450 for "excessive dirt and sand," claiming that the floor mats needed cleaning.

They sent photos of the mats but didn't explain how they calculated the fee. I'm a retired auto professional, and I'd never mistreat a rental. My group was all seniors in their 70s and 80s!

Budget's contract says they can charge a "reasonable" fee, but \$450 for vacuuming?

I disputed the charge on my credit card, but my bank has sided with Budget. I also contacted the Better Business Bureau, but it refuses to help.

How can Budget charge me weeks later without proof?

— Michael Margulis, Valencia, California

A: Budget should have inspected the van when you returned it and quickly given you a detailed invoice explaining the \$450 fee. Budget's own policy states that its cleaning charges will be "reasonable" (although it reserves the right to determine what is reasonable). California's Consumer Legal Remedies Act also prohibits deceptive claims, including vague fees.

You should've taken photos of the van at pickup and return, even if you thought nothing was wrong — and even if the agent left you with the impression that nothing was amiss. Based on the photos and invoice that Budget provided, it looks as if it documented your dirty van more than two

weeks after you returned it. This is an enormous red flag.

As I read the correspondence between you and Budget, it appears Budget thought that the excessive time lag was absolutely fine.

But if a vehicle is so dirty that a \$450 deep cleaning is required, it's something that an agent should have noticed at the time of your return.

The problem with a long lag time between a return and an invoice is that anything could have happened between this time. The van might have been rented to someone else, who might have returned it in less-than-perfect shape. An employee could have taken it for a joyride. We just

don't know.

You might have escalated this to one of the Budget executives whose names I list on my consumer advocacy site, Elliott.org. Even if the charge stuck, I think you were entitled to a better explanation for the cleaning fee.

Your case had too many problems, including the van shuttling seniors around and the 18-day gap. I contacted Budget on your behalf, and it refunded your cleaning fee.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.