

Insight Vacations features an array of Christmas market tours. Pictured, Berlin.



# WINTER WANDERINGS

## TOUR OPERATORS ARE EXPANDING THEIR OFFERINGS FOR WINTER HOLIDAY AND OFF-PEAK TRAVEL PERIODS

By David Cogswell

**T**he winter holiday season has a special appeal. Travelers are able to avoid the summer crush, when destinations are more crowded and more expensive. Things are quieter, more private – and there are special attractions that can only be experienced in winter.

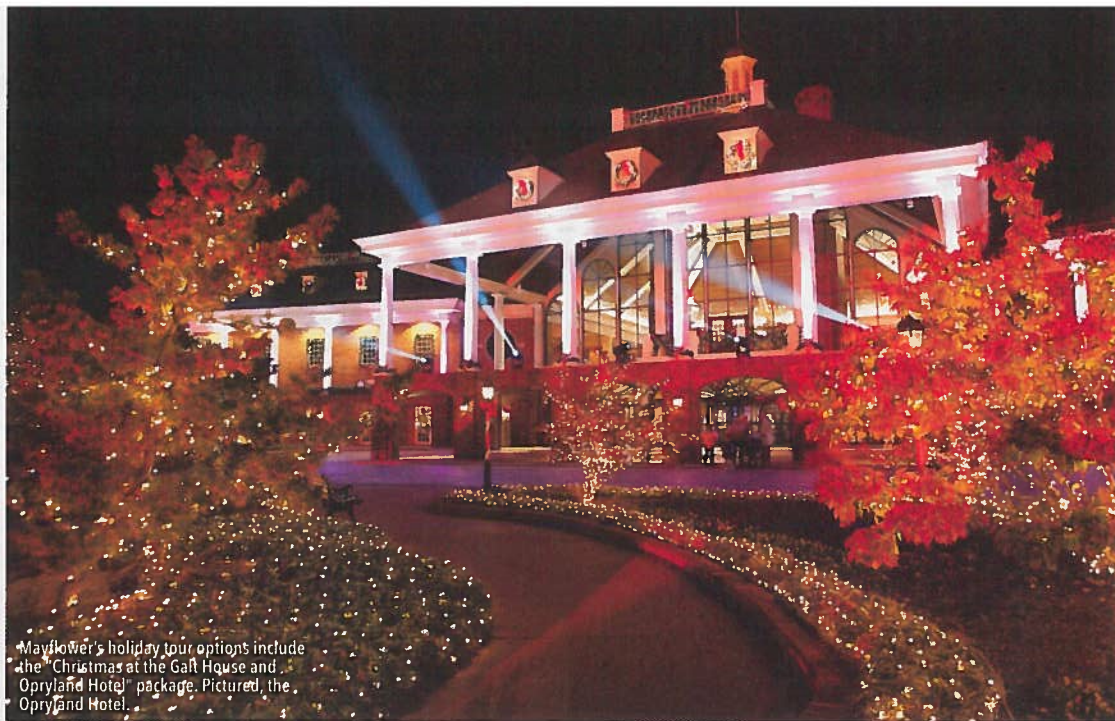
Many experienced travelers have caught onto the advantages of traveling in the low travel season. In response to that demand, tour operators have increased their winter vacation offerings.

**Insight Vacations** is targeting the off-season travel market with “Europe in Fall, Winter and Spring” programs, which actually extend beyond Europe.

The programs include a selection of Insight’s favorite fall, winter and spring travel programs, including tours of Christmas markets in Europe and Iceland, and of Italy, Morocco, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Egypt and Jordan.

“Historically, winter vacations have been beach vacations in warm-weather destinations, but travelers are expanding their horizons,” says Dan Austin, president of **Austin Adventures**. “While the overall trend continues to be . . . destinations like Costa Rica, Nicaragua or Belize, we are seeing a growth in our winter domestic programs like ‘Winter in Yellowstone’ – so much so that we have been adding new programs and dates. It’s a great time





Mayflower's holiday tour options include the "Christmas at the Galt House and Opryland Hotel" package. Pictured, the Opryland Hotel.

**Collette** features a selection of winter holiday packages, including "Spotlight on New York City," "Spotlight on San Antonio," "Southern Charm Holiday" programs in Georgia and South Carolina, "Christmas on the Danube," "Christmas in London" and "Classic Christmas Markets" packages.

**Abercrombie & Kent (A&K)** offers a five-night river cruise on the Rhine, visiting Christmas markets in Germany and France. The company also features a "Christmas Markets on the Danube" itinerary that includes one night each in Vienna and Munich in centrally located hotels and an onboard concert. For a more exotic winter holiday, A&K recommends the "Cruising the Mekong: Siam, Saigon and Angkor Wat" itinerary – and for the most exotic of all winter holidays, the "Antarctica, South Georgia & the Falkland Islands" package.

In the winter, most clients want to head to warm-weather destinations, notes John Stachnik, president of **Mayflower Tours**. "Popular trips include Tournament of Roses Parade, New Orleans Pre-Mardi Gras, [and such destinations as] Hawaii, Cuba, Australia and Africa, to name a few," he says. "The big exception is our Christmas Market River Cruise on the Danube – shoppers will shop in any weather." The company also offers such festive package options as the four-day "Christmas at the Galt House and Opryland Hotel" in Tennessee, which begins at the Galt House in Louisville and then continues on to Nashville and the Opryland Hotel.

**SITA World Tours** says clients are opting for the summer heat in the middle of winter with programs such as

"Affordable Brazil," "Spectacular Iguassu Falls," "Amazon Brazil – Ecopark Jungle Lodge," "Exotic Argentina and Brazil," "Splendors of Chile," "Essence of Chile and Argentina," "Patagonia Panorama" and "Ecuador and Its Galapagos Islands."

**Tauck** also notes that most of its most popular winter itineraries are in warm-weather destinations. They include "Cuba – A Cultural Odyssey," "Cuba – Connecting with People and Culture," "Essence of South America," "Costa Rica – Pura Vida," "Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand," "Northern India and Nepal," "A Portrait of India," "Kenya and Tanzania: A Classic Safari" and "South Africa – An Elegant Adventure."

"Traditionally, many people have chosen to escape the cold by going to destinations such as Central and South America or Southeast Asia, for their winter holiday vacations," says Harry Dalgaard, president of **Avanti Destinations**. "But in the past two years we've also seen an increasing number of travelers who are looking to celebrate the cold weather and head in the opposite direction, to places like Iceland, Norway and Finland, far above the Arctic Circle."

Avanti is responding to the increased demand by offering some new activities and tours to some of those colder destinations. "In Tromso, we offer dog sledding, reindeer sledding or a Northern Lights safari. There's snowshoe hiking and a fjord safari in Flam, Norway. In Iceland, we have a caving and snorkeling tour, under the ice, and another one combining glacier trekking and hot springs," Dalgaard says. "And in Rovaniemi, Finland, you can book a reindeer safari to Santa's Village or a family safari with Huskies. Bring on the winter!"

to see a different side of the parks, without the crowds."

**Globus** is promoting its "Best of Spain" program in November and early December, when there are fewer crowds and the heat is less intense. For those who are not concerned with escaping the cold, the company recommends its "Canadian Rockies Winter Adventure" from Vancouver to Calgary. On the Jan. 9 departure, clients can experience Lake Louise during the Ice Magic Festival, which features ice sculptors at work.

**Big Five Tours & Expeditions** is offering its winter clients the chance to spend a week at Morgan's Rock exploring volcanoes – including Masaya, which has become active – through its "Custom Costa Rica & Nicaragua" tour.