

Episode 11: Christmas Markets

Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about the tradition of Christmas markets in Europe. They discuss several Christmas markets that they have visited, their experiences at the markets, and why they like them.

Transcript

Nick: Well it's nearly time for Christmas in the countries that celebrate Christmas, and Wendy, one of the things we have experienced since we've been living in Europe are the different Christmas markets that you have in different cities around Europe, uhh, in the lead-up to Christmas, usually for about a month before Christmas. And something that we always like to go and check out when we have the chance.

Wendy: Yeah, it's, uhh, it's definitely a big part of the Christmas tradition and the build-up, you know, in the lead-up towards Christmas. It's part of what gets everyone excited because they know that Christmas is coming, uhh, once the markets start popping up¹.

Nick: Right, and that's an interesting contrast I think to where both of us are from, you from the United States and me from Australia, is that we ... when we realise that Christmas is getting closer, it's when the department stores start to have their huge Christmas displays, uhh, and here it's more when these markets start. And of course you still have some department stores with their Christmas displays here as well.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: But, yeah, the Christmas markets, which begin right around the end of November, usually around the 25th, and then they last for about a month, uhh, up until Christmas, means that, yeah, Christmas is coming.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, and it's an exciting time.

¹ popping up (phrasal verb: to pop up): appearing, seemingly out of nowhere

Nick: I think it's, umm, a tradition that's largely a Germanic tradition, and it's very big in Germany and in the Germanic countries. And so where we live, uhh, you know, in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, we're kind of in this, umm, sliver² between the Germanic part, uhh, of Europe, and France, essentially. And so we have this influence of Germany as well, so if you look at some of the other Christmas markets, umm, for example Strasbourg in France has a very big one. And that's in France but it's in an area that's historically been disputed³ and it used to be part of Germany as well. And so because we live in Switzerland, even though we're in the French-speaking part, I think they have that influence because there's Christmas markets in the German-speaking part.

Wendy: Yeah, and I would say that even in Switzerland, the best markets are probably also in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and not in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. There are a few in the French-speaking part, uhh, there's one in Montreux, uhh, which we've been to quite a few times because that's the closest one to Geneva, where we live. But, for example, Geneva - even though it's a very important city in, uhh, *Suisse Romande*, in the French-speaking part of Switzerland - uhh, it doesn't really have its own market. It has a very, very small one, but, uhh, not anything on the scale of what you see in some of the German-speaking cities.

Nick: Yeah, I think Montreux which you mentioned is really the one I can think of ... the only significant one I can think of in the French-speaking part. But I think if you look at ... basically all the major German cities in Switzerland have, uhh, have a market or at least have something a lot bigger than on the scale that we have in Geneva.

But the Montreux one is really cool. We go more or less every year, and it just takes over⁴ the entire town, because it's not a big town really. And so you have all of these stalls set up, and it's really quite beautiful because it's along the lakeside. Umm, and it's always packed. So if you don't like crowds, it's maybe not the best place to go. Umm, but you just wander⁵ and you see all these different stalls selling all kinds of things, umm, from different types of food but also different, umm, items, handicrafts or artisanal items that you can buy, decorations for trees, uhh, or for nativity scenes⁶, and whatever you can imagine, really.

² sliver: a small and narrow piece of something; in this case, a piece of Europe between Germany and France.

³ disputed: fought over, not agreed upon

⁴ takes over (phrasal verb: to take over): takes control of, dominates

⁵ wander (verb): to walk without a set aim or destination

⁶ nativity scenes: displays showing the birth of Jesus

Wendy: Yeah, lots of arts of crafts. Umm, I think it's a place where people generally go when they're Christmas shopping, right, when they're looking for gifts that they want to give to their friends and family. And so it's a lot of types of things that you would typically buy as a gift, umm, you know, not so much practical things but more of, yeah, little artsy things - something that you would like to put on a shelf and show on display.

Nick: And the one at Montreux, it has, I think, five different sites within the actual Christmas market. So there's a kind of a main area that we go to where all the shops and the stalls are, and there's food and things like that. But there's also other places. There's one where you can go by train to Santa Claus' village, to the north pole, uhh, which is a place that's a little bit higher up and so there's usually snow around there. And so that's something that families like to go to, or children like to go to, and then there's a castle which is near Montreux called the Château de Chillon and they have a special medieval, umm, section or a medieval fair, if you like, at this castle. We've actually never been to that section of the Christmas market but we're hoping to go this year.

Wendy: Yes, we've tried a couple of times to go and, uhh, yeah, it seems like the hours are a bit funny. It's not open for the same hours as the market. The market is open pretty much all the time, uhh, for, like, one month straight. I think it's open every single day until pretty late at night. But the specific medieval part of the market that's inside the castle, inside the Château de Chillon, is not open that often and so when we've tried, it's been just about to close or we just haven't made it there at the right time. But we're going to be diligent about it this year and make sure that we do actually get there, because it looks really cool.

Nick: Yeah, usually we don't make it past all the food and drink stalls I guess. Umm, and one of the things that they have there which is kind of interesting is a kind of warm beer or hot beer that I've had a couple of times because we're very used to having what we called mulled wine, umm, which is a wine that's warmed up and it has, kind of, Christmas spices added to it, things like cinnamon and...

Wendy: Cloves.

Nick: And cloves, and these other kind of spices. So that's very common, but they have this warm beer that I've had once or twice there and that's really good as well.

Wendy: Yeah I don't drink beer, so warm beer I think sounds particularly disgusting to me, but I definitely enjoy the mulled wine.

Nick: No I think it was cherry flavoured or something. It doesn't taste like beer at all. It's a nice drink, 'cause it's, you know, it's very cold when we're walking outside when we're in these markets.

And so we decided a couple of years ago that we wanted to see some other Christmas markets as well. And so we had this kind of little rule that we instituted for two years I think where we said we would go to a different market. And so we went to two in Germany that are in places in Germany that are quite close to the Swiss border so that we could travel by train and you could go just for the day or for one night, I think we did. But it's not that far away, and so we went to one in Konstanz, uhh, which is close to the north-east of Switzerland, and then one in Freiburg, which is more the north, north-west of Switzerland, but again in Germany. Umm, and so there you see it, you know, it's just really part of the lives of these cities, that right in the middle of these, you know, historic cities, they just get completely taken over by the Christmas market.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, it's true. And, uhh, they also had pretty big crowds there, from what I could recall. Umm, so yeah, it's definitely a very big tradition, something that, uhh, I think the townspeople probably look forward to⁷ and I imagine that lots of people, uhh, are travelling there from other places as well, like we did.

Nick: Yeah, I think they're ... it's becoming now so much easier to travel around Europe. Uhh, these are becoming attractions. They used to be very much localised to their particular town but now people are coming from different places to check them out⁸. And it's funny because in, umm, Switzerland they have deals that you can get with the train network where if you travel to one of these Christmas markets you get a little gift. Usually it's a little mug⁹ for coffee or something like that, or a little mug and you get one glass of mulled wine and that's just a little bonus you get with your train ticket. But when we went to Konstanz, umm, we also .. it said on our ticket that you got a little gift or something like that, and so you have to go to the stall and then you wait for your gift. And so we went there expecting that we would just get this glass of mulled wine, and they gave us all these bottles of stuff to drink, right?

Wendy: Yeah, yeah.

Nick: And so they gave us two huge bottles each, glass bottles, and these bags to carry them in. And it was crazy because they were really heavy and we had to carry them around everywhere, and we didn't expect the gift to be so much. Umm...

Wendy: Luckily we were travelling by train and not by plane because then we wouldn't have been able to take them, because usually when we travel by plane we

⁷ look forward to (phrasal verb): to anticipate with pleasure, to be excited about. Note: if another verb follows this phrasal verb, the second verb will *always* be in the -ing form. The 'to' is the second preposition of the phrasal verb and not part of the infinitive of the next verb.

⁸ check (them) out (phrasal verb): to look at and evaluate something, such as a new restaurant

⁹ mug: a cup for drinking hot drinks (coffee, hot chocolate etc) with a handle so you can hold it

just travel with carry-on luggage¹⁰, and so you're not allowed to bring liquids with you. Umm, but, uhh, we did manage to get all four of those bottles into our bags and take them back with us. Uhh, so yeah, it was a nice surprise but definitely unexpected.

Nick: Yeah I think one of them was ... one each was wine and then one each was a kind of juice or some kind of...

Wendy: It was a punch. It was a non-alcoholic, uhh, drink that was, you know, kind of similar to mulled wine but just without alcohol.

Nick: And so it's ... just going to these Christmas markets is another way that we can get into the spirit and get into the seasons. For me it's always interesting to have Christmas in cold weather because it's not what I had when I was growing up. Umm, and so it's fun to go these markets and walk around and be cold and drink nice warm drinks to warm you up and, umm, have a nice time.

Wendy: Yeah, and I came from a pretty warm climate, so even though, you know, it was ... being in cold weather was part of the tradition of Christmas that was ... that I always saw on TV, but it wasn't really my reality, so I now I also enjoy being cold at Christmas time 'cause it feels like it's the way it's supposed to be.

Nick: Right, and the markets now become part of the tradition of what we think of us Christmas now.

Wendy: Yep.

¹⁰ carry-on luggage: a bag you can take onto the plane with you, as opposed to checked luggage

Comprehension Questions

1. According to Nick, which country has the best Christmas market tradition?
2. Which part of the Montreux Christmas market are Nick and Wendy hoping to go to this year?
3. Why were Nick and Wendy surprised with the gift they received at the Konstanz Christmas market?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. There are a couple of new shops in town. I'd like to _____.
2. If you're only taking _____ onto the plane, you need to make sure it meets the airline's requirements for size and/or weight.
3. Many people _____ going to Christmas markets every year.
4. When you visit a new city for the first time, it can be fun to just _____ the streets to get a feel for the place.
5. Some international borders, such as the one between India and Pakistan, remain _____.
6. In western countries, new cafés seem to be _____ all over the place.
7. In many Christian countries, people put up Christmas trees to celebrate. In Italy, however, people prefer to have _____.
8. If you go on holiday and you don't know what to buy as gifts for friends and family, a souvenir _____ is always an option.
9. I don't want a large slice of cake, just a tiny _____.
10. On Saturday (and some other days), the Portobello Road Market in London completely _____ the streets of the neighbourhood.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Do you have Christmas markets where you're from? If so, what are they like?
2. Do you like getting into the spirit of Christmas or do you think it's too commercial? Explain your reasons.
3. Do you have special Christmas food or drink in your region such as the mulled wine that Nick and Wendy referred to?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Germany.
2. The medieval fair at the Château de Chillon castle.
3. They were surprised because they received four large bottles of Christmas drinks rather than the much smaller mugs they were expecting.

Exercises

1. check them out
2. carry-on luggage
3. look forward to
4. wander
5. disputed
6. popping up
7. nativity scenes
8. mug
9. sliver
10. takes over