

wild, wacky christmas

Christmas isn't just a time for family and feasting. **LUCIANO DI GREGORIO** discovers some quirky yuletide traditions that involve shoe tossing, scare fests and food fights.

CZECH REPUBLIC

Cupolas, domes, and twin-steeple spires atop thousand-year-old churches; cobblestoned laneways lined with locals chatting animatedly: these are all images you'd associate with the enigmatic beauty of the Czech Republic. But old shoes catapulting through the air under the guise of the yuletide spirit? Traditionally, the most important day of celebration in the Czech Republic, Christmas Eve brings with it presents, an abundance of meat dishes and, you guessed it, shoe tossing. Single women all over the country, eager to find out if they will marry in the coming year, stand with their backs to the front doors and toss a shoe over their shoulders. If the

heel of the shoe points towards the door, it means she will remain single for yet another year. However, if the front of the shoe points squarely at the door, the lucky girl can start making wedding plans.

SLOVAKIA

Like the Czechs, the Slovaks involve themselves in a similar, if messier, Christmas ritual. When the Christmas Eve dinner revelries begin, make sure you've got on your protective clothing as the head of the family takes a spoonful of *lokša* (a Christmas delicacy made from bread, water and poppy seeds), prepares his best shot-put throw and gives the mixture a vigorous toss towards the ceiling. If the claggy concoction sticks to the ceiling, he will prosper and enjoy untold success in his career in the coming year. But if the mixture dribbles onto the heads of his guests, he may need to work on his curriculum vitae. Regardless of the outcome, it often provides the perfect excuse for a food fight!



VENEZUELA

Who'd have thought that going to church could be such a moving experience, literally? In the week leading up to Christmas, the Venezuelans hold what's known as *Misa de Aguinaldo*, or a mass in the wee hours of the morning. To fill the pews, the country's religious movers and shakers came up with something truly unique. For the week of 16th to 24th December, from dawn till 8am daily, the streets of the capital Caracas are closed off to traffic, allowing locals to roller-skate and rollerblade their way to church. If all this sounds like a recipe for pandemonium, just stand by the sidelines and marvel at this fun if off-the-wall custom as it rolls past your very eyes.

AUSTRIA

While the rest of the world celebrates the season with song, dance, food and pretty lights, Austrians are taking to the laneways and squares of towns and cities dressed in elaborate costumes, ostensibly to channel the sinister-looking Krampus. As the legend goes, Santa rewards the good kids while Krampus, as Santa's helper, punishes the bad ones. Eager to be in Santa's good books, locals take pains to look their scariest best so they can 'punish' those who've been naughty, and it pays off: On the streets, you'll hear the screams of terrified women and children, and we're told even buff Austrian men have been known to tremble at the frightful sight.

ILLUSTRATOR: ELENA TSAI/REGRADESKAYA



Elsewhere, similarly quirky activities abound. In Norway, all brooms are hidden away on Christmas Eve to prevent evil witches from stealing them and running amok, while Estonia's oldest Christmas tradition involves the entire family visiting a sauna on Christmas Eve. Over in the UK, plunging into frigid waters for an icy

swim on Christmas Day has been a long-standing tradition. On Cornwall's beaches, friends and family take a dip en masse in the icy waters before enjoying a pint together; while at Serpentine Lake in London's Hyde Park, members of the local swim club have been competing for the Peter Pan Cup since 1904. ❌

