

THINK BIG

Make 2021 the year to check out the best overwater villas in the Maldives

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BLUER PLANET

Cruise the Raj Ampat archipelago in the wake of naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace

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KIRSTY GALLACHER

'I went on a school trip to Val d'Isère and was the only one who hadn't skied'

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Travel on Sunday



LIZ VON HOENE / TRUNKARCHIVE.COM

Christmas isn't cancelled!

Well, not yet – but whatever happens in December, there are still hotels and self-catering options left which, restrictions permitting, will help you end the year on a happier note, says Fiona Duncan

It's not going to be the same, that's for sure, but with a full lockdown imposed upon all of us until at least Dec 2, Christmas is certainly going to be curtailed this year. And even once the national lockdown has ended, there are sure to be varying restrictions around Britain. As before, it is possible that household mixing will be forbidden for many and gatherings of more than six for all, but if we are stoic, imaginative and

flexible we can still have a memorable, if very different, Christmas.

Since my husband and I are unlikely to be able to spend Christmas with our family, as that would make more than six, we have decided to spend it away – though admittedly not very far away – and it's a huge relief to have a plan in place, even though it all feels very strange.

On Sept 1 every year without fail, our dear

departed mum would call my sister and me "to talk about Christmas". Who would be coming, what exact time would we be arriving and leaving, who would sleep in which bed, should we brine the turkey or cook it upside down this year, or perhaps one of us could sleep on a camp bed by the Aga and baste it as it slow-roasted through the night? Who would bring the Neapolitan chocolates, cheese footballs, nuts and crackers? The

build-up was relentless and exhausting but the result, as a dozen or so of us crammed around the dining table, opening my mother's famously teasing table presents (the best being a series of tiny empty boxes, one inside the other, that finally revealed a much appreciated and very generous cheque) was always memorable and joyous.

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COVER STORY

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I don't know about you, but I don't mind getting to sit in our New Forest house on Christmas Day, looking dolefully at my husband across a stuffed turkey breast for two, dreaming of what might have been, even if my attempts at recreating my mother's no-holds-barred, no-detail-spared festivities have been poor substitutes for hers since she departed for her Christmas grotto in the sky.

So we've decided that we've made a plan. We've booked ourselves into a lovely local café with rooms, a fun, informal and affordable place called Spot in the Woods that also has divinely cosy shepherd's huts, one of which will be ours on Christmas night. Meanwhile, six of the family – one single son, one married son, his wife and their one-year-old plus my daughter-in-law and her sister – will all up the house. Three more – my sister, her husband and their son – have booked Thatched Eaves, a local luxury B&B, which is offering a Winter GLOW Christmas hamper as well as a slap-up breakfast.

All very well, but will we ever meet? Can we meet? Yes, we will and we can (restrictions allowing), on Boxing Day, albeit suitably masked and distanced. Off we go from Yarmouth to Yarmouth, from where we will walk on glorious Tennyson Down, pausing at the Needles Landmark Attraction en route, sadly Covid-closed this Christmas. Father Christmas won't be there in his grotto and the carousel will be stationary, but at least we can view the Needles from a distance, get down to the beach, peer into the Sand and Sweet Shops and use the loos.

Having walked to Freshwater Bay and back to charming Yarmouth through Alton Marsh and along the Yar, we'll share turkey sandwiches and Christmas cake, and table presents of course, on the ferry home. I'm hoping it will be a memorable day out, feel like a holiday; it will certainly be different.

As you can tell, Christmas for my family has always been about coming home. But while my mother firmly believed that bunking off at Christmas was as bad as not listening to the Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge at 3pm on Christmas Eve, or watching the Queen at 3pm on Christmas Day, others it's a chance to escape, to have a break and to recharge the batteries. And even she would surely admit that the circumstances in 2020 mean that this is the perfect year to ring the changes.

In this guide to Christmas Not Being Cancelled (hopefully), we have collated our selection of hotels that, at the time of going to press, still have available rooms in their self-catering properties. We also round up festivals and events that, hopefully, will still go ahead. Where advance bookings are required, always check the booking policy, in case of cancellation or date change.

Hotels always pull out all the stops at Christmas, but never more so than this year, when they will be heroically determined to offer you an unforgettable experience despite the stresses and restrictions caused by the pandemic. Wherever you choose, you'll find the highest standards and plenty of fun.

LET IT SNOW
Dreaming of a white Christmas at Stanbrook Abbey?



At the Five Arms in the Highlands of Scotland, for example, an Alpine Winter will be under way, with a four-day programme of snow-tubing, chestnut bars, a Christmas tea room serving stollen, mini-gingerbread houses and sprigged hot chocolate, a whisky and chocolate bar in the library and a garden transformed into a magical playground for adults and children.

At the Lord Crewe Arms in Northumberland, the hotel now has a cozy, snug, cosy lounge, hearty feasting and surprises under the twinkling trees, while at the Grosvenor Hotel in Stockbridge you can expect carol singing under the porte cochère on Christmas Eve, a string quartet and a star pianist on Christmas Day and a jazz duo at its Boxing Day party.

Self-catering means doing Christmas your way. We're on the Isle of Wight. We're on the gorgeous East Afton Farmhouse on the Isle of Wight; we've booked in elsewhere but have noted it for another year. As we are a largely Scottish family, The Old Millhouse in Dalkeith would have been fun, with the promise of Hogmanay in nearby Edinburgh at the end of the Christmas period. All the other end-of-the-period, cosy National Trust Rose Castle Cottage in the Lake District also appeals.

As for family events, there are still plenty around if you know where to look, from Santa Steam Trains to ice skating at Hampton Court. All is not lost; here's the definitive list. Wrap up warm and please don't let it rain!

UK TRAVEL ADVICE

As a result of the travel restrictions introduced in England this week, overnight stays and holidays away from primary residences are not allowed until Dec 2.

This year, holidays abroad and in the UK are five-star system. For Scotland on Nov 2 and residents should check their regional restrictions before travel. The Wales travel bubble, covering all of Wales, is essential travel, is due to end tomorrow.

Three nights all-inclusive from £3,900 (clivedenhouse.co.uk)

CLARIDGE'S LONDON

Nowhere does Christmas in London quite like Claridge's. The art-deco grand dame is offering a three-night package that as well as breakfast and Christmas lunch (excluding alcohol), includes a bottle of champagne on arrival, in-suit Christmas trees and a host of magical touches: children's story-telling, mince pies and carrots for Father Christmas and his reindeer, a

STANBROOK ABBEY HOTEL WORCESTERSHIRE

Christmas Eve carols will be extra special here, in the original church at the centre of the hotel. You'll wonder why you haven't concluded every Christmas Day breakfast with a falconry display. Later, work off the five-course tasting menu with wine pairings with a 140-step climb up the Grade II-listed Bell Tower.

Two nights from £830 (handpickedhotels.co.uk/stanbrookabbey)

THE MITRE HAMPTON COURT

The recently opened Mitre, by the popular behind-the-scenes tour, is housed in a building dating back to 1665 to accommodate the courtiers of Charles II. "Stay like a King" is the apt name of its Christmas package, including, in addition to all meals (even a Boltinger afternoon tea), a service at The Chapel Royal in Hampton Court Palace, gourmet hamper for Christmas Day night, British yoga or Thames boat trip and tickets for the Hampton Court Palace Ice Rink.

Two nights £3,000 (mitrehamptoncourt.com)

Prices are based on two sharing, unless stated otherwise

Rachel Cranshaw

THE LYON ARMS COTSWOLDS

A hotel for the holiday. The Lygon Arms, main; Christmas cocktails at Cliveden, below



A HOTEL FOR THE HOLIDAY

If you've never spent Christmas in a hotel before, this may well be the perfect time to try it. From sheer unbridled decadence to cosy country chic, here are 10 of our favourite options that still have availability.

SPOT IN THE WOODS NEW FOREST

This stylish B&B with five shepherd's huts features a lively cafe and tempting deli/sausage and bread veranda over looks a secluded garden. Two and three-night packages are available, kicking off with welcome drinks and nibbles on Christmas Eve.

Two nights from £660; three from £980 (spotinthewoods.co.uk)

LORD CREWE ARMS NORTHERN ENGLAND

A lord-of-the-manor building, in a picture-perfect village, that oozes atmosphere at every stone-flagged turn. A reputation for honest British cooking, plus the rural location, makes it popular with walkers and foodies. For Christmas, expect Buzz fizz, board games by roaring fires and plenty of feasting.

Two nights from £359 (lordcrewearnsholland.co.uk)

THE FIFE ARMS SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

The delight is in the detail at this wildly romantic, sublimely comfortable, uniquely fascinating passion project from international art dealers Hauser & Wirth. It's going all out for Christmas this year, with a full programme of events including Christmas Eve using forged ingredients, and a stocking on the door of each room the next morning.

From £434pn (thefifearms.com)

THE GROSVENOR AT STOCKBRIDGE HAMPSHIRE

This historic fish-frying hotel is now a most comfortable and elegant place to stay; fun and thoughtful, traditional yet colourful. Yuletide celebrations will include a Christmas Eve afternoon tea to enjoy while being serenaded (safely) by carol singers.

Three nights from £685pp (thegrosvenorstockbridge.com)

THE LYON ARMS COTSWOLDS

The renowned Lygon Arms is one of Britain's most historic inns, on the doorstep to beautiful walks and with a terrific spa. Christmas Eve here will also see socially distanced carol singers, and four-legged guests will be welcome to join in the festive treats for them.

From £435 per night (lygonarmshotel.co.uk)

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THE LYON ARMS COTSWOLDS

main; Christmas cocktails at Cliveden, below

YULE LOVE IT HERE

The Lygon Arms,

main; Christmas

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