Courtesy of the Milnes

Christmas Down Under

Kiwis and Aussies make it merry with barbecues and sailing and lots of faux snow.

A Year and A World
By Larissa and Michael Milne

AUCKLAND, New Zealand — We stood on the sidewalk waiting for the Santa Parade on Queen Street and took in the crowd around us; it was the usual mix of families, old-timers, and teens traveling in packs. One thing was different, though, for a December activity: Almost everyone was wearing T-shirts and shorts. This was our first Christmas season Down Under, where the calendar is turning the page from spring to summer and the holidays take place beneath palm trees and sunny blue skies.

Christmas Day traditions include having a barbecue, sailing on the turquoise-tinged waters of the harbor, or playing a game of cricket in the park. That may not be much different than in Miami, San Diego, or other warm places Stateside; but we

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Here come Santa Clauses: The Santa Run takes place in seven cities throughout New Zealand. For a $30 fee, each runner is given a red felt Santa suit to wear; the money goes to the KidsCan charity.

Personal Journey

Into the darkness: Journeying to regions where few have gone

By Gregory Banecker
FOR THE INQUIRER

We are conditioned to fear darkness. It is a state so imbued with disquieting connotations that even as an adult, when your mind can logically distinguish between the bogeyman and the simple absence of light, you still get that uneasy feeling when it's midnight, a spoon falls in the kitchen, and your girlfriend asks you to go to see what that noise was.

Recently I traveled to darkness at a sensory exhibit titled "Dialogue in the Dark." Participants are led through several rooms in complete darkness by a blind guide in order to realize the limitations of the human

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Merry Christmas to all

PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVAIS / Associated Press

The National Christmas Tree on the Ellipse, south of the White House, and the Pathway of Peace, 56 smaller trees representing all 50 states, five territories, and the District of Columbia, are lit nightly till 11 p.m. through Jan. 1. Musical performances are 6-8:30 p.m. on weekdays, and 4-8:30 p.m. on weekends.

CAROL LEIBY / McClatchy Tribune

The Viking Prestige docked at Regensburg, Germany. The ship can carry 188 passengers, offering an intimate experience compared to ocean liners. Six land excursions are included in the 8-day Danube trip.

History, beauty along the Danube

An 8-day cruise from Budapest to Nuremberg visits fairy-tale towns, lush landscapes.

By Luaine Lee
McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

BUDAPEST, Hungary — There's an easier way to see Europe than being crammed into tour buses or crowded hostels. A river cruise is one of the most relaxing and picturesque ways to view the wonders of the Continent up close.

While many cruise operators prowl the waterways, one of the most comprehensive is Viking River Cruises, which boasts 19 ships (six more next year) and explores most of the navigable rivers in Europe, plus parts of Asia and Africa.

Of these, the eight-day Danube cruise embarks in the historic city of Budapest and weaves its way slowly down the green margins of the Danube, through flamboyant Vienna; fairy-tale towns such as Germany's Regensburg; the lush vineyards of Austria; and, finally, Hitler's favorite city, Nuremberg. (Or the reverse itin-

See **DANUBE** on N4

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Top 10

The Caribbean isn't known to be cheap, but you can stretch your dollar on these islands, shermanstravel.com says. Look for all-inclusives or locally owned villas and inns.

1. Aruba
2. The Bahamas
3. Dominican Republic
4. Jamaica
5. Montserrat
6. Puerto Rico
7. St. Kitts
8. St. Maarten
9. Trinidad & Tobago
10. St. Thomas, USVI

Geoquiz

Question: Where is Equatorial Guinea?

— *Chicago Tribune*

Answer below

Gadget Guru

A closet on a roll

No need to unpack the Move Mobile Closet when you get to your destination. Just unzip the molded polycarbonate wheeled bag and hang it by its attached hook. Behold, a built-in system of cantilevered shelves, zippered compartments, and mesh pockets, each labeled with pictures depicting a suggested use (pants, shoes, folded shirts, toiletries, etc.). The storage system is integrated into the Move's lining, which can be unzipped from the bag and hung separately, leaving you with an empty case for use at your destination, or an alternative packing space. Hanging clothes can be hung from a plastic loop on the inside top of the bag behind the zip-out lining. The 22-inch-wide Move meets most carry-on-dimension limits, but its slim, squarish shape might make it a questionable fit in shallow overhead compartments. The bag has four spinner wheels, a telescoping pull handle, and a carry handle.
Move Mobile Closet in red or black is $450 at www.maxmirani.com.

Web Buzz

Plan with aplomb

Plan your next vacation as if you were designing a feature story in a glossy travel magazine.

Name: Travel by Handstand

Available for: iPad

What it does: The app highlights travel destinations with original content, photos, advice, and curated news features from around the Web.

Cost: Free.

What's hot: I love the drag-and-drop layout for customizing your journey. Go to "hst journeys," create a new journey, then insert maps, notes, and photos. You can even use it as a wish list with maps, photos, and to-dos for a longer trip — not just one destination. Don't miss "Points of Interest," which not only directs you, on a map, to must-see places, but also integrates insider tips.

What's not: You can access some parts of the site offline, but if you want to dig into its "Must Read" section within a destination, you'll have to be online to link to the full feature.

Worth it: Nothing beats free. But make sure you bookmark this app as one to watch. It's thin with just Luxor, Egypt, as its first destination, but Handstand will be adding more destinations, with Palm Springs and Naoshima, Japan, up next.

— *Jen Leo, Los Angeles Times*

Answer: The country (about the size of Massachusetts) lies on the west coast of Africa, bordered by Cameroon on the [illegible] and five islands.

Courtesy the Milnes

The traditional symbol of New Zealand, the kiwi bird, makes a big impression in the Auckland Santa Parade.

Warm weather, warm wishes Down Under

NEW ZEALAND from N1

doubt that the highlight of those cities' Christmas parades is a giant balloon of a kiwi bird wearing a Santa Claus hat.

We joined the crowd in cheering the floats featuring beach and surfing scenes. But when it came time for the big guy, Santa himself, the palm trees were just a memory. His float was covered in white with "snow"-covered trees and a castle. Even Down Under, the dream of a white Christmas lives.

Many smaller towns have Santa Parades as well. Dunedin on the South Island featured that old Christmas chestnut, Snoopy and longtime nemesis the Red Baron, engaged in a dogfight down the main drag. We're not sure what it had to do with Christmas, but the kids seemed to eat it up.

A more recent annual event is the Santa Run to raise money for the KidsCan charity. The race takes place in seven cities throughout New Zealand. For a $30 fee, each runner is given a red felt Santa suit to wear. Race veterans often show up in homemade outfits as elves or reindeer. The run in Dunedin takes place on the beach with the starting line just across from the local pub. There was clearly a party atmosphere, but fortunately the race, if it can be called that, was mercifully short so casualties were few.

A nod to the Kiwis' British heritage is the celebration of Boxing Day on Dec. 26. Traditionally it was the time when the lords and ladies of the manor would box up the leftovers for the servants. Today it's a way of extending the holiday by another day, and who wants to work the day after Christmas anyway? Since the stores are all closed on Boxing Day, there is no waking up early to rush to the stores at 4 a.m. for markdowns or gift returns. What a wonderful idea, and a great treat for retail workers.

New Zealanders also include customs of the first settlers of this land, the Maori people. Christmas cards and decorations bear Maori motifs, while many dig into a Maori treat called a hangi. Similar to a Hawaiian luau, hot stones are placed in a hole in the ground, and then lamb, potatoes, and whatever else strikes the chef's fancy are placed on top of the stones to bake. A warm *Meri Kirihimete* is wished: that's Maori for *Merry Christmas.* Not so different from the Hawaiian *Mele Kalikimaka.*

Across the Tasman Sea, the Aussies have put a unique spin on Santa's flight path. Apparently it's too hot in the outback for reindeer, so Santa is propelled by six white "boomers," also known as kangaroos. One bush-country resident, [illegible] weather, stores are decorated with [illegible] winter scenes. [illegible] when many Aussies and Kiwis celebrate Christmas in July. Snow is in abundance for ski vacations on the South Island and [illegible] north.

The season is a poignant time in Christchurch this year. The city suffered a devastating earthquake in February that destroyed the downtown and killed 181 people. There was talk of canceling the annual Santa Parade due to lack of a sponsor and the traditional parade route's being closed off for safety reasons. However, a shopping center stepped in to provide funding and the parade was rerouted.

More than 100,000 people, one-quarter of the town's population, turned out for the event. We spoke with one woman, a nurse who was preparing a patient for surgery at St. George's Hospital when the quake struck. "It's certainly been a challenging year," she said. "But we'll survive and rise above it."

The town Christmas tree was lit, and, in a new custom, visitors were encouraged to bring gifts to place under the tree. They will be distributed to Christchurch children who have had a particularly difficult time.

The international symbol of the devastation wrought on the city was the heavily damaged Christchurch Cathedral. At Christmastime last year, three larger-than-life sculptures of angels were hung from the ceiling. However, the quake made the building unsafe (it will be rebuilt, in a form yet to be determined), so this year the angels are suspended from construction cranes. The angels represent consolation, comfort, and hope. What fitting symbols to watch over the residents of Christchurch during this season of birth and renewal.

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Lara and Mike Milne are traveling around the world for a year and will be reporting regularly about their journey. You can follow them at www.ChangesInLongitude.com.

The Maori, the original inhabitants of New Zealand, parade on a float with a traditional waka, or canoe.

In earthquake-devastated Christchurch, an angel sculpture is suspended from a crane in a work zone: Representing consolation, comfort, hope.