



# A Christmas Story

An evening at the Brussels Christmas Market restores the spirit of the season for a self-confessed Scrooge.

— BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO —

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THE SMELL OF WARM SUGAR STOPPED us before we even made it to the Grand Place, Brussels' gilded and glorious main square, the epicenter of the city's annual Christmas Market. My nose twitched as I sniffed the air until the sweet source revealed itself. A man in short woolen jacket and hat with furry flaps over his ears stood on the street, flipping a black waffle iron that oozed batter drippings as it huffed and breathed sweet clouds into the cold night.

"*Deux gaufres, s'il vous plaît.*" Two waffles, please, I said to him.

With what looked like a stubby barbecue fork, he peeled the crenellated confections off the knobs of the iron, folded them between squares of wax paper and handed them to us one at a time. We cradled the waffles in our hands like pieces of fragile foreign glass. My daughter Chloe and I had only been in Brussels four months, having moved at the end of the summer for my husband's job. A new friend had enticed me to visit the market with her fond recollections of similar ones she'd visited as a young girl with her parents.

The waffle in my hand, I'd later learn, was called a *Liège* (pronounced lee-ezh) waffle, named for a city in the southwest of Belgium. This ginger brown, oblong gem, about the size of an iPhone, was nothing like the whipped cream-topped IHOP version I'd grown up with. We bit in, and the caramelized coating gave way to the chunks of pearl sugar

**Christmas tree surrounded by lights in Brussels' Grand Place.** burrowed in the chewy, vanilla-infused dough. We ate as we followed the heralding sound of brass horns down a cobblestone lane that opened onto the Grand Place.

Before us, a 30-foot fir tree was brilliantly lit, on its own an impressive sight. But beneath ancient gabled rooftops and the towering spire of an ornate square, once dubbed the most beautiful in Europe by Victor Hugo, we oohed and aahed as if we had just witnessed a miracle. Nearby, a band of eight merry men blew their golden trumpets until their cheeks glowed cherry red. Although we didn't recognize the song, the cheer was contagious, and even I bounced in time, caught up in the festivity; something I hadn't done, or wanted to do, for a long time.

Confession: I'm a recovering Christmas Scrooge.

For years, before the Halloween candy had even evaporated from store shelves, I was already dreaming of January—free from my neighbor's light-up lawn reindeers, poinsettias and party invites, and the relentless mall Muzak renditions of "Walking in a Winter Wonderland," the first notes of which could put me in a mood so foul, Ebenezer himself might nod to my curmudgeonly ways. For Chloe, I went through the motions. I bought eggnog; I forced "Merry Christmas" to strangers at the supermarket; I wrapped presents and stuffed stockings with the best of them.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC DANNIER





PHOTOS RIGHT AND BELOW BY CUBERDONS LEOPOLD



But inside, I marked each day of the season like tick marks on a prison wall.

I wasn't always this way. My memories of childhood holidays brim with Santa sightings and cuddled-up readings by the tree of *'Twas the Night Before Christmas* while eating my grandmother's chocolate chip cookies. But somewhere along the way, overcrowded agendas left no room for cookies and stories, and greedy wish lists replaced my footed-pajama, sugar plum visions. By the time my daughter was five, my Christmas spirit lay dormant beneath an icy layer of indifference.

But I found the antidote to my bah-humbug funk that night I bundled up my daughter—a child still full of Yuletide expectation—and took the short 15-minute drive from my house to the center of the city to the Christmas Market.

**CHRISTMAS MARKETS LIKE THE ONE** in Brussels are ubiquitous around Belgium and Europe, and date back hundreds of years in some cases. From small village fairs to citywide winter fests, each has its own distinct style and specialty. Nüremberg, Germany, is famous for its gingerbread and *rauschgoldengel*, golden foil angels with pleated skirts crafted from finely milled brass. The market in Strasbourg, France, draws hordes of visitors each season to taste *flammekueche*, a thin pizza of bacon, caramelized onion and crème

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Tray of cuberdons; family perusing a market chalet; Grande Roue in the distance; cuberdons.**

fraîche, or pick up a stuffed white stork, the city mascot. In Dresden, Germany, it's the world's largest nutcracker and an 8,000-pound *stollen*, or fruitcake, that attract curious and hungry visitors.

Despite Brussels' thousand-year history, the city's Christmas market was only begun in 2002; it has since grown into a life-sized snow globe display of winter wonderment, flocked with old world traditions. The market spreads its sparkle from the Grand Place, around the Bourse (Stock Exchange), up the fashion-forward Rue Antoine Dansaert, along Place Ste. Catherine, and finishes at the Fish Market, which is transformed into an ice skating rink capped by a dizzying 160-foot high Grande Roue (Ferris wheel). Along the way, 240 identical wooden chalets contoured with miles of twinkle lights bulge with crafts, edibles and souvenirs from around the world.

Our waffles devoured,

Chloe and I pin-balled from one chalet to another, winding up music boxes and opening and closing the mouths of wooden nutcrackers along the way. We picked out a few Belgian-themed ornaments for our tree and enjoyed practicing our French—*"Joyeux Noel!"*—with merchants who blew into their cupped, frost-nipped hands. With nary a Barbie doll or electronic game in sight, I felt my spirits rise.

"Mom, try this on," Chloe said, pointing to a red and white Santa hat with dangling braids of yellow yarn.

"Uh, no thanks."

"Come on. It'll be fun," she urged.

I pulled off my own faux-fur hat and replaced it with the new one. Chloe laughed and tried it on, too. We donned a few others, one with Viking horns and another with light-up stars. Chloe left wearing a simple hat, sans accoutrements.

But it is food—like my grandmother's cookies—that often has the deepest impact on one's holiday memories. In Brussels, it didn't take long for us to see (and taste and

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smell) that the big draw of the market was the local cuisine.

Bakeries and chocolate shops lined the streets, luring us in with garland-festooned window displays and the smell of warm *cougnot*, a Brioche-type bread shaped to resemble a swaddled baby Jesus. Traditional *speculoos*, a Belgian spice cookie that is found year round, is especially popular at Christmas, stamped with the form of St. Nicholas or *Sinterklaas*. New to me were *cuberdons*, a crunchy on the outside, gooey on the inside, cone-shaped candy, called “little noses” in Flemish. They are found all year long, but their discovery was like a holiday gift for us. I popped them into my mouth and wondered if Belgian children

**ABOVE: The Fish Market, transformed into an ice rink. BELOW: Musicians add to the atmosphere.**

used these “little noses” on their snowmen.

A collective boisterous laugh pierced the air, and we noticed a group of friends crowded around two tall tables, picking at steaming ceramic pots of *moules* (mussels) and *caricoles* (peppery whelks or sea snails). Teenagers lined up for paper cones stained with frying oil and piled high with golden *frites* (French fries), while squeals of delight pealed from the merry-go-round, where kids beamed atop spinning figures of giant sea creatures and toy planes. The smell of cinnamon and cloves led me to a smoldering cauldron of *glühwein* (hot mulled wine). Hot chocolate and *chocoretto*, an adult version seasoned with amaretto, were also up for grabs. We warmed our hands around our paper cups and licked chocolate off our upper lips after each sip.

Chloe opted for a chilly ride up the Ferris wheel in lieu of a twirl on the ice rink. We snuggled close against the icy air, and as the carriage dangled at the top, we sat in silence. We could hear the muted cacophony of the market and the metal skate blades cutting figure eights on the ice rink below. Chloe’s eyes widened as she stared out over our new home, and in them I could see the red and white lights that hung in distant trees. For the first time in years, I was back in my footed PJs, eating my grandma’s chocolate chip cookies and peering through the bedroom window, hoping for a glimpse of a toy-filled sleigh and a flying, red-nosed reindeer. [VisitBrussels.be](#) ❄️

## BELGIAN CHRISTMAS MARKETS

**Brussels:** November 30–January 6

**Bruges:** November 26–January 2

**Ghent:** December 7–December 30

**Antwerp:** December 8–January 6

**Liège:** November 30–December 30

## BELGIAN TREATS

**Cuberdons Léopold** sell beautifully packaged *cuberdons* at shops like Les Précieuse at Rue Antoine Dansaert, 83. They are also available online and they ship worldwide.

[CuberdonsLeopold.com](#)

For *speculoos* cookies, **Dandoy** is king, with a store just off Brussels’ Grand Place at Rue au Beurre, 31. [BiscuiterieDandoy.be](#)

*Pralines* (stuffed chocolate) and *ballotins* (decorative boxes) were created by Jean **Neuhaus**, whose original store is near the Grand Place at Galerie de la Reine, 25. [Neuhaus.be](#)



