



# 12 Days

## OF A ROMAN CHRISTMAS

There's nowhere like Rome for the holidays. Tiffany Parks shares 12 ways to get into the festive spirit of the season.

**1 Deck the Halls!** Kick off the Advent season the Roman way, with a papal sighting. Every year on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on 8 December, the pope commemorates the proclamation of this most Catholic of all dogmas by placing a flowered wreath atop the eponymous column in Piazza Mignanelli (adjacent to Piazza di Spagna), with a little help from the fire department of course. The event takes place at noon, but be sure to get there early if you want a glimpse of Pope Francis in action.

**2 Baby, It's Cold Outside** Warm up from the inside out with a cup of rich hot chocolate. Forget any notion of a powdered mix zapped in the microwave; Italians drink their chocolate dark and thick, with a generous topping of whipped cream. The best place to find it is at Said, Rome's very own chocolate factory. It's well worth the trek to



the San Lorenzo neighborhood for a mug of decadence so thick you can eat it with a spoon. This large laboratory has been producing pralines, Easter eggs, cookies, and chocolate bars since 1923, and has now opened its own café and restaurant. Take a peek at the master chocolatiers at work inside their glassed-in workshop. Via Tiburtina, 135. [www.said.it](http://www.said.it)

**3 Candlelight Carol** Don the national colors of blue and yellow, and be an honorary Swede for a night at the Santa Lucia celebration on 13 December. According to tradition, in 3rd-century Rome, St. Lucy brought food to Christians hiding in the catacombs, wearing a wreath of candles on her head to light her way. In Scandinavian countries, this feast has become an event signaling the light that Christmas will bring to the long, dark winter. Stop by Piazza di Pietra for a small procession complete with traditional Swedish Christmas carols and generous helpings of *pepparkakor* (gingerbread cookies) and *glögg* (mulled wine).





**4 Winter Wonderland** The healthiest—and most effective—way to heat up on a cold winter night is with a bit of exercise. Lace up your skates (or rent a pair if you didn't happen to pack your own) and take to the open rink at the Auditorium Parco della Musica's Christmas Village. An outdoor ice skating rink is set up just for the holidays in the performance complex's evocative and thoroughly contemporary setting. [www.auditorium.com](http://www.auditorium.com)

**5 Christmas Carousel** There's no better time than Christmas to embrace your inner child. Head to Piazza Navona to do just that by taking part in the annual Christmas market, where vendors sell everything from cotton candy to oversized balloons to enormous stuffed animals. Carnival-style games, booths selling holiday ornaments and trinkets, and a carousel set up beside Bernini's world-famous fountain turn the already spectacular square into an urban playground for the whole family.

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Italians traditionally set up their Christmas trees on 8 Dec.

come by. They generally need to be booked in advance through your parish or diocese back home. But on the off chance, you can always stop by the square's so-called Bronze Doors (at the beginning of the colonnade on the right hand side as you face the church) and ask one of the Swiss Guards posted there if any tickets are still available. If you're lucky enough to snag some, be sure to show up at least a few hours before the event begins because the crowds are epic.

**7 It's Beginning to Look a Lot like Christmas** Want to ogle Christmas lights but still need to finish your shopping? Kill two birds with one stone with a walk down Via del Corso, a long majestic street that follows the route of the ancient Roman Via Lata and connects two of the city's most important squares, Piazza del Popolo and Piazza Venezia. Every yuletide, the straight-as-an-arrow street is hung with thousands of glittering lights. Superstores like Zara, Sephora, The Disney Store, the Gap, Nike, and Swarovski, located along its axis, mean you'll be sure to find something for everyone on your list.

**8 Eight Little Candles** Rome's Hanukkah revelries kick off on 24 December this year. The city's Jewish community celebrates the Festival of Lights with nightly lightings of a massive menorah in Piazza Barberini, and

other events take place in and around Rome's Jewish quarter. Based on a miracle involving long-burning oil, Hanukkah is also the feast of fried foods, so munch on hot sufganyot at Boccione (Portico d'Ottavia, 1). Visit [www.cittaebraica.it](http://www.cittaebraica.it) for details and a full schedule.

**9 Pas de Deux** Christmas just isn't Christmas without a visit from Clara, the Sugarplum Fairy and the Mouse King! The ballet corps of the Teatro dell'Opera enchants audiences with a staging of one of the world's most adored ballets, *The Nutcracker*, a timeless tale of a young girl's magical adventures during the night before Christmas. With its land of sugarplums and flurries of dancing snowflakes,

this whimsical performance is perfect for getting into the holiday spirit. 18–24 December. [www.operaroma.it](http://www.operaroma.it)

**10 O Tannenbaum!** There's no more iconic symbol of Christmas than a festively decorated pine tree, and the most spectacular one in the city can always be found right in the middle of St. Peter's Square. Every year since 1982, a magnificent fir tree is donated from a nearby European country, often Germany or Austria, or from a northern region of Italy. This year, the Vatican didn't have to look far; the lucky tree comes from a forest in the mountainous Italian region of Trentino. The great tree will be lit for the first time on 9 December at 4:30pm. Another enormous tree is set up in front of the Colosseum.

**11 What Child is This?** In Italy, the Christmas season doesn't end just because the 25th has passed. It continues all the way to Epiphany on 6 January! The day after Christmas brings another festive holiday, St. Stephen's Day. Tradition demands a visit to the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli (Scala di Arcicapitolina, 12) on this day, where a special procession honors a reportedly miraculous wooden statue of the Baby Jesus. According to legend, the statue was carved from the wood of an olive tree from the Garden of Gethsemane and painted by angels. In addition, it is believed to possess incredible powers, including the ability to cure the gravely ill and even bring people back from the dead! Sadly, the original disappeared in 1994, and in its place is a copy. It is nevertheless venerated every year on this day, accompanied by choruses of Adeste Fidelis.

**12 Away in a Manger** Little-known fact: the nativity scene was invented right here in Italy in 1223, by none other than St. Francis of Assisi. The tradition caught on big time in 18th-century Naples, when neighbors sought to outdo each other with ever more elaborate and enormous scenes. In addition to the stable with Holy Family, the magi, and the rest of the starring characters, the scenes were embellished to include palaces, shops, even entire villages, with nobility, artisans, and peasants, all dressed in contemporary garb. Most churches in town possess their own nativity scene, with the most important at Santi Quirico e Giulitta (Via Tor de' Conti, 31), Santa Maria Maggiore (Piazza Santa Maria Maggiore, 42), and Santi Cosma e Damiano (Via di Miranda, 10).

REBECCA BIANCHI NE LO SCHIACCIANOCI © YASUKO KAGEYAMA



**6 O Holy Night** For some, attending Christmas Eve Midnight Mass at St. Peter's is most important part of the whole holiday season. On Christmas morning, don't miss your chance to see Pope Francis appear from the benediction loggia (he only does this twice a year—Christmas and Easter—as well as the day he's elected) and get a special blessing. Tickets to mass are free, but not easy to