



LONDON WITH KIDS AT CHRISTMAS

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There's definitely something magical about London at Christmas. Sparkling lights, huge Christmas trees, festive markets and oversized ornament sculptures all help to create a magical atmosphere at every turn.

A Christmassy city break is a great way to soak up the season as a family, and as the age-old saying goes, there's something for all ages. Landing in Gatwick, London City, or Southampton means you can be on a train to London in no time. We've been to London several times in December, and every visit feels like stepping straight into a Christmas movie.

There's no better way to start than with London's famous lights. Oxford Street, Bond Street, and Regent Street with its iconic angels, all have huge overhead displays which will leave the kids (of all ages) wide-eyed in awe. There's twinkling magic in every direction, and you can even take a lights tour on an open-top bus for a fantastic view without the walking.

Christmas at Kew will always be top of the wish list in the

IslandFamilies household. Huge immersive light installations use millions of lights to guide you through the grounds, with each scene better than the last. The Christmas Cathedral – essentially a tunnel of fairy lights – is the perfect spot for family photos (or selfies for the teens). Add to that the most incredible light show featuring the fountains at the Palm House, and you're really in for a treat. There are food stations along the way too – we highly recommend the hash browns with peri peri mayo and jalapeños!

This year, Hampstead Heath is home to a brand-new winter lights trail, Neverland at Kenwood. Running from 21 November through to 3 January, the grounds will be transformed into a breathtaking outdoor light trail inspired by the tale of Peter Pan, inviting visitors to follow Tinkerbell's fairy dust path from the rooftops of London to the heart of Neverland, all in aid of Great Ormond Street Hospital.

Both light trails offer the chance to meet the man in red himself. We seem to have little ones who are

terrified of Santa, but he's always lovely to speak to and often has some of his elves with him too – a perfect photo opportunity again.

We also found Santa at Battersea Power Station, which has become somewhat of a family destination with its riverside skating rink, fairy light filled Engine Room, play area, and Peppa Pig play shop. We went for the Chimney Lift experience and its 360-degree views of London but discovered huge Christmas trees, oversized bauble sculptures and of course, a winter market with pick and mix sweets! We topped off our visit with a stop at Bounce, a brilliant family-friendly ping pong bar where the kids burnt off some sugar before dinner.

Another festive experience we thoroughly enjoyed is Winter Wonderland in Hyde Park. It's loud, bright and pretty full-on, but it's got everything from ice skating and fairground rides to Christmas markets and circus shows. Our big two loved tubing down the real ice slide, and The Magical Ice Kingdom exceeded any expectations we went in with. It's a walk-through world made entirely

OPPOSITE PAGE L-R: VIEW FROM THE LIFT AT BATTERSEA; INSIDE BATTERSEA POWER STATION; SOUTH BANK CAROUSEL. ABOVE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: THE LANGHAM CHRISTMAS AFTERNOON TEA; HYDE PARK WINTER WONDERLAND; CHRISTMAS AT KEW; THE FOUNTAINS AT THE PALM HOUSE, KEW. ALL IMAGES ©ISLAND FAMILIES.

WE'VE BEEN TO LONDON SEVERAL TIMES IN DECEMBER, AND EVERY VISIT FEELS LIKE STEPPING STRAIGHT INTO A CHRISTMAS MOVIE.

of ice sculptures (and yes, gloves are essential). There's so much to eat in the Bavarian Village, from bratwurst and pizza, to nachos, schnitzel and the most delicious churros. If you've got young children, it's best to head in early in the day to avoid the crowds.

For more entertainment, Christmas is the perfect time to head to the theatre. We particularly loved the Lion King, Wicked, and Matilda, but the festive season brings pantomimes too, as well as plenty of kids' theatre with The Snowman, Stick Man, and The Gruffalo's Child all showing this year. Make sure you book in advance through as theatres fill up fast, and please remember that each one will have its own rules when it comes to minimum age and lap babies so do always check first.

Sometimes though, the best moments are the spontaneous ones. An evening stroll along the South Bank leads you past light-wrapped trees, street performers and the London Eye. The Winter Market there is full of alpine-style chalets selling everything from sausages and mulled wine to Dutch

pancakes and strawberries dipped in melted chocolate. You can listen to live music as you eat and finish off with a spin on the traditional carousel overlooking the Thames.

And while we're on the subject of food, I feel like everyone should know that London's hotels go all-out for Christmas afternoon tea, with many now catering beautifully for families. This year the Langham has a Hamleys-themed Christmas afternoon tea, complete with a gingerbread rocking horse and mousse train!

If you're hoping to do a little retail therapy while you're there, Christmas shopping in London is an experience in itself. If your children have mastered the 'look, don't touch' stage (or your breakages budget is as big as your festive enthusiasm), then Harrods' Christmas floor and Liberty London's decorations are worth a wander. Harrods' toy department alone is an experience!

And of course, no festive trip is complete without a visit to Hamleys on Regent Street. Yes, it's busy and yes, it's noisy, but it's seven floors of toy-filled wonder,

with demonstrations and mini shows happening all day long. We've never left empty-handed, though the challenge is keeping spending under control.

London at Christmas as a family can be a little overwhelming, especially with prams or buggies to navigate the crowds. My best advice? Don't try to do everything. Pick a few highlights, wrap up warm, and let yourself get swept up in the atmosphere. There's always a market, carol singers, or a window display waiting to surprise you around the next corner.

In a nutshell, Christmas in London with kids can only be described as chaotic, sparkly and completely unforgettable!

IslandFamilies is a vibrant hub of information, and home to the popular Community Club, helping families get most out of life in the Bailliwick. Visit islandfamilies.com for more information on things to do, places to go, and money to be saved along the way.

