

Life *Almanac*

From glittering castles and magical train rides to gifts that last longer than wrapping paper – here's everything sparkling, cultural and joy-sparking happening this December.

Noted & noteworthy

December's quiet wonder

The hedgerows may be bare, but the world twinkles. Fairy lights in windows, carols floating on frosty air, the slow crunch of boots on frozen ground – December is when ordinary life gets dressed in sequins. It's a month that reminds us: magic isn't just for children.



WORDS: CAROLINE BLIGHT & EMMA COXON. IMAGES: SLEEPING BEAUTY: LAURENT-LIOTARDO; TRESPASSES: CHANNEL 4; BAMBURGH CASTLE: STUART BOULTON; RBG KEW; NUREMBERG: SCOTT GARFIELD; OTHELLO: OLIVER ROSSER; WES ANDERSON: THIERRY STEFANOPOULOS; & SHUTTERSTOCK.

This month in history

December in the '90s meant more than festive shopping – it was the golden age of the Christmas TV special.

From *Only Fools and Horses* pulling in record audiences to the John Lewis ad still being a twinkle in a marketer's eye, we gathered round the box with Quality Street and no remote wars (until someone suggested *The Queen's Speech*). Proof that sometimes, the best festive traditions happened on the sofa.

MUST-WATCH

Trespases, Channel 4

Louise Kennedy's award-winning novel moves to the small screen in this stunning four-part adaptation. Set in the political tensions of 1970s Northern Ireland, it follows the story of young Catholic teacher, Cushla (Lola Petticrew), and married Protestant barrister, Michael (Tom Cullen). They discover opposites really can attract – but danger surrounds their unexpected romance. Gillian Anderson executive produces and plays Cushla's mum, Gina. 'I fell in love with Louise's stunning book,' reveals Gillian. 'I was immediately drawn to the tragi-comic creation that is Gina and couldn't resist when Louise asked me to play her.'

FORBIDDEN LOVE



Podcast Pick of the Month

This warm-hearted podcast dives into the stories behind our favourite festive traditions: the old legends, the odd little superstitions, the why of wreaths over doors, carols in the choir stalls. Hosted by Brian Earl, *Christmas Past* blends deep-dive history with listener memories, making it perfect for winter evenings when you want something nostalgic and meaningful rather than just merry and bright. Available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify and all good podcast platforms.



Stage spotlight

Othello – Shakespeare's tragedy following the downfall of Othello returns to the West End with an all-star cast, including David Harewood (Othello), Toby Jones (Iago) and Caitlin FitzGerald (Desdemona). Directed by Tony Award-winner Tom Morris with music by PJ Harvey, this classic story of manipulation, jealousy and toxic masculinity explores the darker side of power, rage and desire. And David is thrilled to be stepping back into the role almost 30 years after he first played Othello as the first black actor at the National Theatre. 'Most of the lines I already remembered, which was extraordinary,' he says. 'They're sort of imprinted in my brain.' *Othello*, Theatre Royal Haymarket until 17 January. trh.co.uk

DESCENT INTO DARKNESS

CULTURE FIX

Icon celebrated: The world of Wes

The Design Museum is celebrating the work of iconic creative Wes Anderson with a unique exhibition bringing together his journey through film, featuring original props, costumes and personal artefacts. From his 1990s experiments to his Oscar-winning masterpieces, 600 objects have been brought together with the help of Anderson himself, including the enormous candy-pink model of the Grand Budapest Hotel and stop-motion puppets. The show follows a broadly chronological survey of his career, with each section dedicated to one of his films. This personal insight includes original storyboards, polaroids, sketches, paintings and even Anderson's handwritten notebooks, which illustrate his meticulous approach to filmmaking.

Wes Anderson: The Archives, The Design Museum, 21 November – 4 May.

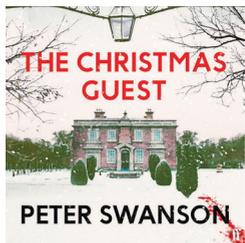


AUDIOBOOK SPOTLIGHT

An unmissable listen to light up long winter nights

The Christmas Guest by Peter Swanson (Faber & Faber)

A country house, a festive invitation, and a creeping sense that something isn't quite right... This dark little gem is equal parts cosy and chilling – perfect for evenings when the fairy lights are twinkling but you want a touch of suspense with your mulled wine. Available from Audible, Apple Books and all good audiobook platforms.



On the Big Screen

Russell Crowe and Rami Malek go head-to-head as Hermann Göring, the commander-in-chief of the Luftwaffe, and Douglas Kelley, the psychiatrist who must determine if he is fit to take the stand at the Nuremberg trials. The sparring between them is electric as each carries their own agenda – Göring, to reinforce the Nazi ideals and go down as a martyr while taking no responsibility for the Holocaust, and Kelley, to write a book revealing what goes on in the minds of Nazis from his unique experience. With harrowing footage, which appeared at the actual trial, this moving account, directed by James Vanderbilt, is sure to attract awards.

Nuremberg is in cinemas from Friday 14 November.



Beautiful Ballet

Aurora en pointe

This fairytale ballet, told by the English National Ballet, takes to the road bringing its spellbinding magic to the UK. Baby Princess Aurora is cursed by the wicked Carabosse to prick her finger on her 16th birthday and die. Her godmother, the Lilac Fairy, alters the spell

so Aurora will instead sleep for 100 years – only to be woken by true love's kiss. With captivating choreography, sumptuous sets and lavish costumes, this production is a real feast for the eyes and ears thanks to one of Tchaikovsky's greatest ballet scores being played live by the English National Ballet Philharmonic.

Sleeping Beauty starts in Liverpool in October, before taking in Manchester and Southampton in November, and London next June.



All Together Now: the best Christmas experiences to share

This year, ditch the stuff and give the gift of togetherness with unforgettable festive experiences for family, friends and everyone in between.

1 CHRISTMAS LIGHT TRAILS – KEW GARDENS

14 November to 4 January
(selected evenings)

London's most enchanting after-dark walk returns: a mile-long trail through the Royal Botanic Gardens that shimmers with light tunnels (right), fire gardens and giant illuminated sculptures. Expect hot chocolate stalls, artisan churros and a festive soundtrack as you wander among the glowing trees. It's dazzling, otherworldly and guaranteed to thaw even the frostiest December mood. If you only do one light trail this year – make it Kew. kew.org



2

CAROLS BY CANDLELIGHT AT WELLS CATHEDRAL, SOMERSET

19, 20 & 21 December, 7pm each evening

This is Christmas distilled: soaring voices, timeless carols and a medieval cathedral lit entirely by candles. It's both intimate and awe-inspiring – and when the congregation joins in for *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, prepare for goosebumps. Tickets sell out fast, so book early. wells cathedral.org.uk

3 WINTER STARGAZING ESCAPE, TWICE BREWED INN, NORTHUMBERLAND

Selected nights September – December

Right in the heart of Northumberland's International Dark Sky Park, the cosy Twice Brewed Inn offers an evening of cosmic wonder. Expert astronomers lead small

groups to spot constellations, planets and – if you're lucky – the Northern Lights. After craning your neck at the Milky Way, retreat indoors for a drink by a crackling fire. Add an overnight stay and you'll wake to sweeping views of Hadrian's Wall – and the smug glow of having given yourself the stars for Christmas. twicebrewedinn.co.uk

4 THE POLAR EXPRESS TRAIN RIDE

Various locations across the UK – including Yorkshire and Devon

Step aboard for hot chocolate, carols, sleigh bells and a visit from Santa himself on this magical immersive ride based on the classic motion picture. Across two beloved venues:

● **Yorkshire (Wensleydale Railway):**

14 November to 23 December, via Leeming Bar Station. Book via yorkshiredalesthepolarexpressride.com

● **Devon (South Devon Railway):** 28 November to 23 December, at Buckfastleigh, Devon. Tickets via southdevonrailwaythepolarexpressride.com

After the ride, why not extend the magic of a festive winter train journey with a special gift? Hornby's train sets are perfect:

● **R1270M Valley Drifter Train Set (£99.99)** – Switch off from the day-to-day stresses and technology, and embark on a unique journey with this starter set for adults and older children – a gift that keeps on giving.

● **TT Scotsman (£249.99, below) or GWR HST (£169.99)** – The perfect tabletop hobby to keep any train-lover

happily occupied year round. Available from uk.hornby.com. See page 8 for a chance to win a Hornby Christmas Bundle, worth £353!

