

DINING

Season's Eatings

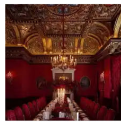
NOVEMBER 18, 2013 · 7 MINUTE READ



What to do when you don't want to have Christmas Day. Ever again. Caroline Phillips puts on her party shoes to live it up in festive style....before or after Xmas.



Palm Court at The Ritz



William Kent Banquet Room



Restaurant Terrace at The Ritz

Christmas? Pah! It's hard to forget the childhood memories of my mother getting up in the night to baste the eight-hour-shrivelled turkey. And those moments of sipping festively hot diesel - otherwise known as cherry brandy. Things are little different these days. Have you ever tried following Delia's culinary countdown, particularly on the day itself? I'd rather eat my own spleen. Even a boil-in-the-bag kipper tastes better than the fifteenth turkey serving of the month. And find me someone who says he likes Brussels sprouts, and I'll show you a liar.

It's not just that it's the season for playing happy families with relations who only put in an annual appearance, and the overdraft-tipping costs on presents that nobody needs. But tell me, hand on heart, do you really like stiflingly overheated homes and television specials? So why not simply avoid this all....and celebrate Christmas on a different day?

Let's get one thing clear. Christ's birthday - all 24 hours of it - should be spent in bed, asleep and wearing ear-plugs. Celebrating on the same day as the hoi polloi - on Christmas Day - is naff. Christmas Day should be celebrated either before or after the 25th December. Months before is fine.

The other essential point is: never do the Alternative Christmas at home. Who in their right mind would opt to peel potatoes and stir gravy instead of dining in a fine restaurant?

So it comes to pass that my husband and I opt to have our Alternative Christmas in The Ritz and the Dorchester in January. We swish through the revolving doors of the latter a few days after everyone else's Christmas Day. We still get an immediate and ample dose of bauble fever and berry-entwined Xmas garlands in their final days in the Dorchester's lovely central promenade - and we haven't had to hang the decorations ourselves. There are also Nigella-style old-fashioned sweets still on offer in the hotel's grotto; and, under the tree, a winter wonderland with presents that I haven't had to wrap. It's just the right level of Christmas without its being Christmas Day.

There's no need to pester family to help with the washing up - charming staff just appear from everywhere; and we know that we won't at any point have to deal with the Twelfth Night after Xmas: taking down a tree that's dropping more needles than a smack junkie. Nor with one of those buying-just-to-pull-down-a-few-days-later thingies: the Christmas wreath.

There isn't a wreath on our suite door at The Dorchester. But it is seasonably chintzy. It has the look of a place where the festively-decked ghost of Barbara Cartland might appear. In fact they haven't actually done anything to it: it's like that year-round. Plus there's note-paper as thick as trees, pints of Floris toiletries and a bath tub big enough to swim in. If we want to go up a few notches, there's the hotel's Oliver Messel Suite - once favoured by Marlene Dietrich and still a fave of Sylvester Stallone. It's available for most Alternative Christmas Days - yet another plus point for those wishing to celebrate as above, given that it has to be booked light years in advance for Christmas Day proper.

We start our Alternative Christmas celebrations by walking a few minutes down the road to have lunch at The Ritz. It's the prettiest dining room in London with mirrored walls and chandeliers, and acres of pink, swirly carpets and swagged curtains. Plus a hand-painted ceiling. It's one of those places with old-fashioned snowy linen and heavy, solid almost-silverware. Courses leap off the page, vying to be ordered: roast langoustines, calves head and quince.

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Jerusalem artichoke veloute. Cornish turbot, truffled chestnut and celeriac. Vairnona chocolate and coffee marquise. Could anything ever be better?

Well, yes. There are no cards, no hampers and no crackers; and we don't have to eat sickly Christmas pudding (although it's on offer if we want it). Instead we have the joy of waiters in morning coats and white bow ties gliding around, and Old Money and old-fashioned guests in silk and satin blouses, and elegant Christmas decorations held up by cherubs. And theatre: with a flourish the waiters take off silver serving bells to reveal the food – which make me swoon with happiness, even though I've seen Bette Davis and Joan Crawford in Whatever Happened to Baby Jane. But underneath our cloche there's a pithivier of duck. I thank God that it's not turkey.

For the Alternative Christmas, The Ritz offers the grand world of Escoffier – a universe of truffled cream, champagne sauce and trolleys galore: a cheese trolley, liqueur trolley and champagne trolley. Even a crepe Suzette trolley. It offers a great sense of occasion. If we do fancy giving presents, we don't even need to go shopping: the hotel will deliver beautifully-wrapped gifts to our table – presents like leather trinket trays and silk scarves commissioned by Asprey. We don't have to tread the streets of London, pushing through Oxford Street, facing the crowds of Bond Street. This service at The Ritz saves us walking even the 100 steps to hotel's gift shop.

Afterwards, instead of terminal games of Scrabble and Monopoly, we hot-foot it to the Dorchester spa. When was the last time anyone visited one of those on Xmas Day, eh? They're always closed. Yet another of the advantages of the Alternative Christmas is that the spa is always open. It has a 1930s vibe – and is fashioned from deep blues, ivory, velvet, silk and leather. Plus there's a fabbo shower with nine dials to control heat and light. And a chandelier of 72,000 south Pacific pearls. The beauticians are clad in navy with pearls; and they put a pearl bracelet instead of a funereal Christmas wreath on the door. There's so much pearly stuff everywhere that it's like hanging out in a big oyster shell.



The Spa at The Dorchester

My therapist gives me a signature Carol Joy facial – which includes real diamond dust. The therapy room doesn't look like Santa's workshop. There's not a whiff of reindeer, Advent calendars or carols by candlelight. With cooling pads over my eyes, I reach Heaven: a place in which there are no elves, Father Christmas or Rudolph. When I look in the mirror afterwards, a radiant and luminous face greets me: not my usual Christmas stressed one.

Afterwards it's time for afternoon tea in The Dorchester's, The Promenade. There we find civilised people eating finger sandwiches on dainty white china – including ones made of the dirty T bird (that's turkey) which we decline gracefully. There's no pressure to eat Yule log, Christmas cookies, or mince pies. Just pickings from an old-fashioned cake-stand laden with pretty pastries and scones. There are also Arabs, ladies down from the country and 26 different types of teas.

We can sneak next door to the Dorchester's Grill Room if we want to get even more un-festive. There we get tartaned-out on a comfy tartan banquette surrounded by frescoes of kilt-wearing Scotsmen and tartan carpet. There waiters scrape our crumbs off the table – a table sporting a silver-style teapot, sugar cellar and tongs. And there are no bloody crackers.





The Grill at The Dorchester

But if you still want to celebrate Christmas Day:

Whether feasting on a classic Christmas Day meal under the frescoed ceiling of The Ritz Restaurant; indulging in a festive Champagne Afternoon Tea, whilst being serenaded by The Ritz Choir within the garlanded columns of The Palm Court; or enjoying a warming tippie whilst soaking up the revelry of The Rivoli Bar, The Ritz London provides unsurpassed Christmas experiences and creates magical memories that will last a lifetime. Christmas Afternoon Tea is priced from £65 per person, Christmas Lunch in the Ritz Restaurant is priced from £390 per person, and rooms are priced from £315 inclusive of VAT. www.theritzlondon.com.

Throughout the festive season The Dorchester will be offering a variety of ways to celebrate Christmas from festive-themed menus at The Grill at The Dorchester to Christmas Carols Afternoon Tea, priced at £35 per child aged 5 – 11 and £65 per adult, which includes a glass of champagne. From Sunday 18 November 2013 to Thursday 31 January 2014 guests can enjoy a range of Christmas packages from "Festive Wreath" package to "Festive Collection", where guests will be spoilt for choice with the opportunity to embellish their room with a Christmas wreath, Christmas tree, and The Dorchester mince pies amenities. Guest rooms will be available from £486 per night including VAT and breakfast and suites from £834 per night, including VAT and breakfast. Reservations for the two night stay must be prepaid and is subject to availability. For more information or to make a booking, please contact reservations.TDL@dorchestercollection.com / +44 (0) 20 7317 6504.

If you're still stuck on what to buy that special someone this Christmas, Dorchester Collection's new eGift cards (with a choice of value ranging from £50 to £2,000) are valid across all nine Dorchester Collection hotels as payment for any of the hotels' luxury products and services.

Caroline Phillips (www.carolinephillips.net) is an award-winning journalist who has written for the Financial Times, Sunday Times, The Times, Observer, Guardian, Independent, Mail on Sunday, Daily Mail and Evening Standard. Additionally she has been published in a variety of magazines, from the colour supplements to Tatler, Harpers Bazaar and Vanity Fair. She is a consultant for Globalista – website for the discerning traveller – and contributing editor of Country & Town House. She is also contributing editor of Spear's and co-editor of their Spa Guide.

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