

Why some European kids are good all year

The ancient celebration of Krampus, an annual ritual that is as much a part of Christmas here as St. Nicolas, wanders European streets and keeps kids in line

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In Salzburg, Austria, before Christmas, characters in the ancient celebration of Krampus prowl the streets looking for misbehaving children. (Photo for the Tribune by Michaela Urban)

If you happen to step out of a shop or restaurant in Salzburg, Austria, during the holiday season and find the street has been taken over by large, furry, goat-like creatures with bloody fangs and rattling rusty chains and ringing cow bells, you might think that you've descended into the ninth circle of Dante's Inferno.

The truth is you've stepped into the ancient celebration of Krampus, an annual ritual that is as much a part of Christmas here as St. Nicolas. For the greater part of December, large, drunken, hairy creatures roam the streets and even visit people's homes in search of bad little boys and girls. You know that part of the song, "He's going to find out who's naughty or nice"? Well, for kids in the eastern Alps, this carries some serious weight.

In the days leading up to Christmas, St. Nicholas and Krampus visit people in homes to check up on how well kids have behaved. Legend has it that the good children will get nuts and sweets, and the bad kids will be beaten, put in a sack and carried off to Krampus' lair. Obviously, most kids get candy, and even the bad ones only get a bit of a scare; but trust me, the children who grow up in these parts are pretty well behaved.

The tradition of Krampus originated hundreds of years ago and is still alive and well in Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia and parts of Germany and Italy. And though the evening of Dec. 5 is the official Krampus night, these goatlike beings could be found roaming streets, shops, restaurants and people's homes throughout the month before Christmas.

And while the event has grown in scope and size, don't get the idea that it's evolved into a harmless tourist attraction; these guys are very serious and scary. And if you happen to encounter a pack of these creatures roaming the streets, you'd better run fast. These boozy, crazed hooligans will not hesitate to whack you with a whip, regardless of your age.