

BEST OF THE REST

SANTA'S GROTTO
AT DUDLEY ZOO

Families can visit Santa's grotto in his Winter Wonderland Christmas Castle at Dudley Zoo. There's also a magical train ride, surprise gift and Christmas show. Santa visit includes glow-in-the-dark puppet show lasting 20 mins and suitable for all ages.

Where: Dudley Zoo, Castle Hill DY1 4QF.
When: December 2 to 12, from 10am to 2.30pm, last admission 1.30pm; December 13 to 24, 10am to 3.30pm, last admission 2.30pm.
How much: Child £9.75, child under age one £4.25 (with Santa gift), child under age one £2 (no gift), adult £6.75. family ticket £29. Visits must be booked at least 24 hours in advance by calling 0844 474 2272. Tickets include zoo admission. Visit www.dudleyzoo.org.uk

SANTA SPECIAL AT ECHILLS
WOOD RAILWAY, KINGSBURY
WATER PARK

Take a return rail trip to Santa's Grotto – adults get hot drink and mince pie, children get a present – followed by unlimited travel on the service passenger trains on that day. Santa trains depart every 25 minutes.

Where: Echills Wood Railway, Kingsbury Water Park, Bodymoor Heath Road, Sutton Coldfield, B76 0DY.
When: December 6, 7, 13 and 14, with trains departing every 25 minutes starting at 10am.
How much: £8 for all travelling passengers, does not include entry to the park (which costs an additional £3.50 per car). Tickets are selling fast. Visit: www.ewr.org.uk

SANTA'S WINTER
WONDERLAND AT SNOWDOME

Winter Wonderland includes a Christmas snow trail through the enchanted forest with a sledge and walkway, plus the Santa's Got Talent stage show with Ernie the elf, Gobby the goblin and Florrie the fairy godmother. You can also meet Santa's real reindeer and other creatures in the animal village and drop your letter to Santa in his postbox.

Where: SnowDome, Leisure Island, River Drive, Tamworth, B79 7ND.
When: Runs until December 31.
How much: £12.95 per person on saver days, £16.95 per person on standard days. Children under two free. All children will receive a Thorntons chocolate gift. Visit www.snowdome.co.uk

ENCHANTED CHRISTMAS
KINGDOM AT HATTON
ADVENTURE WORLD

Come and meet Father Christmas in his magical grotto and receive a golden key to unlock his workshop where each child can choose a present off the shelves. Say hello to his reindeer and meet the animals starring in a traditional nativity story. Plus, there are funfair rides and children's shows making it a festive family day out – not forgetting a reindeer hunt with a prize for the children.

Where: Dark Lane, Hatton, Warwick, CV35 8XA
When: November 29 and 30, December 6, 7, 13, 14, 20 and 24.
How much: £7.15 for adults and children under two, children £13.45, families from £20.61. Visit www.hattonworld.com

Santa, old bean!

CADBURY WORLD'S CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION BOURNVILLE, BIRMINGHAM

ZOE CHAMBERLAIN

CADBURY World is hosting Christmas Celebration weekends where you can meet Santa and watch a pantomime.

The grotto is a lovely wooden cabin called Santa's Time Out and is complete with moving reindeer, owls and foxes in a pretty snow-capped setting. Father Christmas was lovely, chatting to each of our boys in turn and asking them to promise to be good on Christmas Eve.

We had a lovely photograph to mark the moment.

But this was by no means the end of our Christmas trip.

As Willy Wonka fans, our boys, aged seven and five, took great delight in going round a real chocolate factory, watching chocolate being tempered, moulded and packaged.

They loved the 4D cinema experience, especially as it began in a glass-roofed elevator, further fuelling their love of Roald Dahl's imaginary factory.

As the chairs in the theatre moved and they were wearing 3D glasses, they both said they felt like they'd been on a rollercoaster by the end of the film.

They also enjoyed the Cadabra 'beanmobile' ride around the chocolate wonderland and the walk around the Aztec jungle learning all about the origins of cocoa.

My husband and I relived our childhoods in Advertising Avenue (remember those Flake adverts?) and found the historic film about the company very interesting too.

There was still more Christmas fun to be had at the live panto, Snow White and the Chuckle Beans. This was great fun, complete with water pistols, song and lots of smoke and laughter.

Cost: £15.15 for adults, £11.12 for children (family tickets £46.36).

Value for money: Although pricey, Cadbury World is great value for money as it offers a whole day's fun rather than just 10 minutes in a grotto with Father Christmas.

Parking: Yes, lots of it.

Time spent at the grotto: 10 minutes plus half an hour at the panto and the whole day enjoying Cadbury World.



■ Cadbury World's Christmas Celebration includes a live panto. There's also a 4D cinema (below)



Food and drink included: Yes, lots of chocolate bars and tastings throughout the attraction, Christmas dinner is available at the Cadbury Cafe at £25 for a family meal deal including drinks.

Photograph included: No, you have to buy these.

Gift included: One pack of Cadbury World pencils, sharpener and rubber per child.

Anything else?: Yes, lots as there's the Cadabra ride, the 4D chocolate adventure and the pantomime. Tickets must be pre-booked to guarantee entry as it gets very busy. There may be queues. Christmas Celebration Weekends run each weekend until December 21.

Address: Cadbury World, Linden Road, Bournville, Birmingham B30 1JR (0844 880 7667). Website: www.cadburyworld.co.uk



GROTTOS

BEST OF THE REST

SEARCH FOR SANTA AT
AVONCROFT MUSEUM

Father Christmas is staying in one of the museum's historic buildings. Join one of the search teams to help find him but beware of mischievous elves trying to put you off the trail.

Where: Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings, Stoke Heath, Bromsgrove, B60 4JR.

When: December 13, 14, 20 and 21.
How much: Adults £10, children £7 (Members: Adults £5, children £4). Pre-booking essential on 01527 831363 or www.avoncroft.org.uk. A present for each child included is in the ticket price.

SANTA AT THE
SERVANTS' QUARTERS AT
SHUGBOROUGH ESTATE

Santa will be in the festively-decorated Victorian servants' quarters. Entrance includes a visit to Santa and a gift. Children can meet Mrs Claus, stir the Christmas pudding and make a wish; a train ride around the estate grounds on the Christmas Land Train; Christmas craft activities and face painting for the children; and a festive trail around the formal gardens, snow showers and a live nativity scene.

Where: Shugborough Estate, Stafford, ST17 0XB.
When: December 6, 7, 13, 14, 20, 21 and 22, from 10am to 4pm.
How much: Children £8.80, adults £5.50. Book on 0845 459 8900. No booking fees. Free parking. Visit www.shugborough.org.uk

SANTA SPECIAL AT
DUDLEY CANAL TRUST

Visit Santa by boat in his magical underground grotto deep in Dudley Caverns. There will be carols, hot drinks, mince pies, seasonal entertainment and gifts for all the children. Trips last an hour.

Where: Dudley Canal and Limestone Mines, A4123 Birmingham New Road, Dudley DY1 4SB.
When: December 7, 13, 14, 21 and 22. 10am to 5pm, trips every 30 minutes.
How much: Tickets £10.80. Places limited, early booking advised via www.dudleycanaltrust.org.uk/

VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS
AT BLISTS HILL VICTORIAN
TOWN

You can visit Father Christmas in his grotto as part of the Victorian Christmas activities that have the atmosphere of traditional celebrations from the 1800s. The activities also include Mr Morton's Christmas Party with a mini-panto of Little Red Riding Hood, a Punch & Judy show and a magician, brass bands, carol singers, gift shops, donkey rides, a horse and carriage ride and a Victorian school lesson.

Where: Blists Hill Victorian Town, Madeley, near Ironbridge, TF7 5DU.
When: December 6 and 7, 13 and 14.
How much: General admission is adults £16.50, over-60s £13, child £11, family £48. Visit to grotto costs an additional £3.50 per child and includes a gift. Book on 01952 433424 or visit www.ironbridge.org.uk



■ Santa presses the camera's remote control to take a picture of Adrian Caffery, wife Jayne and children Cerys, four, and Owen, five months, Below: fireworks and snow

Full steam ahead

DRAYTON MANOR'S MAGICAL CHRISTMAS NEAR TAMWORTH

ADRIAN CAFFERY

ALTOGETHER now, Thomas the red-nosed steam train...

Drayton Manor is, of course, home to Thomas Land, the theme park within a theme park that's based on the popular children's TV series about the little blue engine and his friends.

Promotional posters for Drayton's Magical Christmas season show Thomas – complete with antlers and a red nose – pulling Santa's sleigh, usurping everyone's favourite reindeer, Rudolf.

Thomas was, however, conspicuous by his absence on the day we visited. His friends Rosie and Percy seemed to be doing all the toiling between Knapford Station and Tidmouth Halt.

But that failed to put a damper on our Thomas-loving daughter's day. Cerys, aged four, was able to go on all 12 rides in Thomas Land, including the Troublesome Trucks Coaster, Harold's Heli Tours and Terence's Driving School.

Thomas Land also boasts indoor and outdoor playgrounds plus a miniature railway the size of a badminton court that has some original models from the TV series.

The Fat Controller and his friends put on festive shows throughout the day and the flurries of snow at their conclusion left our Cerys wide-eyed.

Adding to the festive feel elsewhere in the park is a dazzling 30ft Christmas tree with dancing lights

and a stilt-walking Jack Frost and Ice Princess.

There's also a condensed, 15-minute version of the Polar Express movie in the 4D Cinema, which could not be more appropriate for Thomas fans at this time of year.

Drayton's moated Castle of Dreams makes the perfect home for Santa.

After meeting elves in their workshop, we were ushered into the big bearded one's grotto, where Cerys and her baby brother received gifts and we had a group photo.

Then, in another part of the castle, Cerys took the reins of Santa's sleigh, crafted a wishing star for a Christmas tree and listened to a story read by medieval maids.

It was all very impressive, even for us grown-ups.

On the downside, Drayton's reindeer were difficult to track down then even harder to see through their fencing. The temporary ice rink also disappointed, being titchy and synthetic.

But any irritations were forgotten when the Castle of Dreams provided the perfect backdrop for a fireworks finale which set the seal on a truly magical day for our daughter.

Cost: Pre-booked tickets including a visit to Santa's Castle of Dreams – under-2s free; ages 2-3 £5; ages 4-11 £15; ages 12-59 £20; age 60+ £15. Pre-booked tickets excluding visit to Santa's Castle of Dreams – £5 less



than those above. Gate prices – under-2s free; ages 2-3 £5; ages 4-11 £20; ages 12-59 £30; age 60+ £20; On the day Castle of Dreams upgrade (subject to availability) £5 per person. Booking fee of £1.50 per transaction. Ice skating is an extra £2 per person, payable on the day.

Parking: Free.

Time spent at the grotto: About 30 mins. The elves and Santa were generous with their time and there was no rush to leave the Castle of Dreams.

Gift: Santa personally hands every child a nice little festive gift and tasty treat, made by his elves. Also included is a 'golden ticket' which admits one free child to Drayton Manor during the 2015 season when accompanied by a paying adult.

Photos: Drayton Manor's website says only officially taken photos of Santa are allowed in his grotto, which is pretty mean spirited considering its the festive season. Commemorative photos, baubles and snowglobes can be purchased for £10.

Anything else? Drayton Manor's white-knuckle rides are closed but the Jolly Bacaneer, The Dodgems, The Carousel, the Big Wheel, the Ben 10 rollercoaster and the zoo are all open. A free scratch card for every visitor offers savings on refreshments.

Value for money? Definitely. Thomas Land is aimed at children who still believe so it's the perfect place for Santa to set up home. A full day's entertainment is guaranteed for those aged eight and under. The extra £5 to visit Santa is an absolute must.

Open: Drayton Manor, near Tamworth, is open November 28-30, December 1, 5-8, 12-15, 19-23, 27-31. Gates open 9.45am. Rides 10.30am – 5pm (Mon-Fri) 6pm (weekends). Details: www.draytonmanor.co.uk, 0844 472 1950.