

Festive feeling is priceless

Manchester's Christmas markets stand accused of charging over the odds for their festive fare.

Simon Donohue soaks up the sights, sounds and smells of the only attraction to seemingly defy the gloom of the credit crunch

RAY Cummings sums up the entrepreneurial spirit of Manchester's Christmas markets better than most. For the past five years, the housing support officer from Northal- lerton, north Yorkshire, has helped out a friend on the market.

This year, however, Ray is getting into the spirit of things himself. Having looked on the internet for pictures of authentic Victorian street vendors, the 55-year-old bolted together a Heath Robinson-style roast chestnut stall using a chimenea and some bicycle wheels and is literally doing a roaring trade when I arrive at his Brazennose Street pitch.

"I'm struggling to keep up with demand," explains Ray, a larger than life figure who re-

moves his heat-proof gloved hand from the fire just long enough to pass me a £2.50 bag of delicacies.

Cummings, dressed from head to toe in Victorian garb, adds: "It's easily going to be worth my while - people seem to love it."

He's not wrong. Now in its 10th year, Manchester's Christmas markets are bigger than ever before - with 150 stalls spread across sites in Brazen- nose Street, Albert Square and St Ann's Square.

I'm paying a visit on Sunday afternoon, with the thermome- ter teetering below freezing point, and still thousands of people have come into town, perhaps tempted by the notion of a brief respite from talk of financial chaos in the real world.

It's possibly a good thing that they've put notions of economic meltdown to one side given that there have been suggestions that traders here are cashing in on the festive feel-good factor with sky high prices.

It's fair to say that it takes a cup or two of gluhwein to limber up the spending muscles when it costs £4.50 for a cho- rizo sausage that would be half the price in a supermarket.

But if it is expensive, the punters don't seem to mind.

It could be the combined smells of succulent roasted meats, perfumed candles and sweet and steaming alcoholic punch, but those milling around seem to have been caught up in the intoxicating Christmasness of the place.

Or maybe it's the bright lights and mistletoe.

The traders I speak to say that people are happily spend- ing and insist that their prices are no higher than they would normally charge at other Eu- ropean markets throughout the year.

Mike Alexander has brought



QUACKING TIME Mike Alexander on the duck stall



TASTY Frans Van Happen manning the Dutch Donut stall

BETTER THAN SOCKS...

HERE are Simon's favourite Christmas market finds.

■ A natty cardigan like no granny would knit from Priya Trading - unless she's an authentic Nepalese person living in the Himalayas. Price: £39.

■ AS many carved wooden ducks as your garden will take are available from World Of

Ducks. There's a range of prices depending on size and style.

■ Fantastically colourful hand-made hand puppets from Twixie-Pixie, right, - prices start at around £15.

■ A hand-made leather drinking tankard - sealed with brewer's pitch - and priced at £30 from Hide Bound.



► **FESTIVE FORAY** Taking time to browse the annual Christmas markets in the city centre. The stalls in Albert Square always prove a big draw as the event has grown over the past 10 years

his Indonesian imported carved ducks to Manchester for a fifth time and says that the Christmas markets are always his most lucrative.

But he charges the same amount year round and has too because he also sells them on the internet.

Mike, who is based in Ches- ter, says that he has tried all sorts of animals, "pigs, sheep, etc", but people seem to prefer the ducks.

Dutch doughnut and cookie man Evert Veldhuizen, who is also trading in Brazennose Street, suggests that the euro is impacting on the profit he is able to make - something I don't quite understand - but says that the Manchester crowd seems to be spending just as enthusiastically as ever.

Gesturing in a downward sweeping motion, he says that customers in some cities have started to spend less.

"But in Manchester..." he adds - and draws an imaginary line to represent record sales.

He's full of praise for Man- chester's Christmas Markets and says that they leave traders every bit as delighted as visitors.

"They are very well orga- nised," he says. "And there are lots of visitors."

In fact, that is the basis of the only criticism I hear while tour- ing Albert Square.

One trader points to the con- gestion in the aisles and is con- cerned what might happen if there was a fire. He suggests a one-way system and one-in, one-out ticketing.

It's a nice problem for a trader to have, but he might have a point.

Some are here for the food - a mouth-watering mix from across Europe, which includes pancakes, hog roasts, brat- wurst, burgers, and, closer to home, Lancashire hot pot and black pudding.

Some are here for the alco- hol, even at £3.50 for a pint of lager (plus glass deposit).

But some are perhaps look- ing for alternatives to the usual socks and handkerchiefs. (See panel).

It's impossible to walk more than a few paces without some- body saying how amazing the atmosphere is and they're right.

Is it expensive? A little. But for just a few hours, touring Manchester's Christmas mar- kets makes the credit crunch feel like it's happening in another world. And, like the magic of Christmas itself, that feeling is ... absolutely priceless.



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