

The Ultimate Guide to Christmas in Arizona

Written by Ericah Whitmill

Wednesday, 24 October 2018 14:32 - Last Updated Tuesday, 13 November 2018 16:58



Santa Suite VIP Experience at Fairmont Scottsdale Princess

Welcome to the hap-happiest season of all! From epic light shows to towering Christmas trees to ice skating smackdab in the desert, these festive Valley events will have you feeling all sorts of merry and bright.



Christmas at the Princess (pictured)

Kicking off Nov. 20 with its beloved public tree lighting is the annual holiday celebration of Christmas at the Princess. Through New Year's Eve, revelers are invited to step into the holiday splendor with Fairmont Scottsdale Princess' four-story musical tree, the Desert Ice Skating Rink (made of real ice), S'mores Land with the Polar Ice Glide and a Build-A-Bear Workshop, 4 million dazzling Lagoon Lights, Santa's Secret Headquarters and festive friends like Peppermint Penguin, Princess Noel, Graham the S'more, Shivers the Yeti and Selfie Elfie. The resort also offers special holiday vacation packages with added extras and exclusive character meet and greets, with a portion of the proceeds benefiting the Cox Charities and the #LoveUp Foundation for foster children. scottsdaleprincess.com.

The Suite Escape: New this year at Christmas at the Princess, Mr. and Mrs. Claus are inviting guests to stay overnight in their new high-end home-away-from-home with the Santa Suite VIP Experience. Guests can savor a full holiday experience with a full-size Christmas tree, personalized stockings hung by the chimney with care, a tea and hot cocoa set, holiday bedding, Santa's turntable with a private selection of Christmas classics on vinyl, sweet treats galore, storybooks from Mrs. Claus and much more. Rates from \$1,499.

ZooLights

This annual event is a family and Valley tradition that happens to be one of the largest light shows in the Southwest. Millions of lights are showcased throughout Phoenix Zoo as visitors admire the sights while savoring hot chocolate and kettle corn under the stars. (Don't miss the scene-stealing musical trees!) A couple new additions this year include live reindeer and a 200-ft.-long Polar Slide. This holiday classic is running from Nov. 21 to Jan. 13, 5:30 to 10:30 p.m., every night. phoenixzoo.org.

The Hometown Christmas Parade

The adored Hometown Christmas Parade honors a benevolent cause and allows spectators to donate non-perishable food items for Hope for Hunger, a Glendale-based food bank. This parade is taking place on Dec. 8 at 11 a.m., and it begins at 52nd Avenue heading west on Glendale to 58th Avenue. hctparade.org.

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Fantasy of Lights Parade and Boat Parade

Start ringing in the holiday season in Downtown Tempe on Friday, Nov. 23, from 5 to 9 p.m. with the Fantasy of Lights Opening Night Parade. Attendees can expect live entertainment, selfies with Santa, shopping at the Holiday Market and a tree lighting ceremony at Centerpoint Plaza following the parade. All of this and more can be enjoyed while watching the city brighten up for winter on Mill Avenue and 3rd Street, with the parade starting at 6 p.m. Special guest Sarah Sellers, second-place finisher of the Boston Marathon, will be in attendance as well as the parade's Grand Marshall. The festivities continue on Saturday, Dec. 8, with the Fantasy of Lights Boat Parade at Tempe Town Lake that features more than 50 festively decorated boats. This bash will start at 4 p.m. when you can enjoy on-site food trucks, beer and wine, the Holiday Market and live entertainment before tuning in to the parade at 7 p.m. downtowntempe.com.

Holiday Events at Omni Scottsdale Resort & Spa at Montelucia (pictured)

Omni Scottsdale Resort & Spa at Montelucia is here to help spread some holiday cheer with a couple of events to please the entire family. Kick off the merrymaking on Nov. 27 for the Annual Holiday Tree Lighting Ceremony from 5 to 8 p.m., which includes holiday-inspired cuisine, activities for the kiddos like holiday cookie decorating, complimentary photos with Santa and on-site pet adoptions in support of the Arizona Animal Welfare. (Entry is free.) Have a pup in tow? On Dec. 12 from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m., enjoy the Yappy Hour Howl'aday Party. Bring your pet in their best holiday threads in hopes of winning a special box of Harry Baker treats and picture frames for the star of the show—and a bottle of Montelucia wine for you! It's \$15 to enter, and a portion of the proceeds will benefit the Lucky Paws Foundation. omnimontelucia.com.

Jingle Bell Hike

Bring the entire family to the Thunderbird Conservation Park on Dec. 8 for a free Jingle Bell Hike from 9 to 11 a.m. Before hitting the trails, kids will be able to create a bell craft to jolly up the mountain and ring in the holidays. Water will be provided for this moderate hike, and the man with the bag will be waiting at the top. glendaleaz.com/parksandrecreation.



Glendale Glitters Spectacular Weekend

The award-winning, much-adored Glendale Glitters is back this year and will kick off with a weekend celebration Nov. 23 and Nov. 24 in Downtown Glendale from 5 to 10 p.m. Known as Arizona's largest free holiday light display, the celebratory weekend includes holiday entertainment, eats, seasonal gifts, a children's snowfield, holiday storytelling and, of course, Santa Claus himself. (Make sure to get there by 5:30 p.m. for the countdown to the Glendale Glitters stage show.) visitglendale.com.

Ballet Arizona's The Nutcracker

2018 marks the 33rd year of Ballet Arizona's most beloved show, The Nutcracker. Get your sights set for visions of sugar plum fairies, sparkling Swarovski crystals, a radiant falling snow scene and elegant ballerinas telling the classic holiday tale. The family-friendly show takes place Dec. 13 through Dec. 24 at Symphony Hall in Phoenix. Tickets range from \$25 to \$167. balletaz.org.

The Polar Express (pictured)

All aboard! The pages of Chris Van Allsburg's classic children's book come to life when both the young and young-at-heart come to relish in a holiday experience like no other. From Nov. 9 to Jan. 5, take a ride on the Grand Canyon Railway's Polar Express to indulge in hot chocolate and chocolate chip cookies while making your way to the North Pole. (Each child receives a special gift along the way, too.) For even more holiday fun, the Polar Express package is offered allowing guests to stay overnight at the Grand Canyon Railway Hotel. Tickets range from \$33

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to \$79, depending on select dates and packages. thetrain.com/polarexpress.



Scottsdazzle

Scottsdazzle is a month-long celebration put on by the City of Scottsdale to kick off the holiday season. It all starts on Nov. 24 with the Holiday Tree Lighting and Sing-Along (7 to 9 p.m.) at the Scottsdale Waterfront's Soleri Bridge and leads to the free inaugural Feliz Navidad Fiesta in Old Town (Dec. 1, 12 to 4 p.m.). On Dec. 8 from 3 to 7 p.m., 5th Avenue transforms into a fairytale village called Sugar Plum Avenue that features carriage rides, street tea parties and special ballet performances of The Nutcracker. On Dec. 13, holiday revelers can indulge in the city's finest galleries and art for the Gold Palette Artwalk (6:30 to 9 p.m.) on Main Street and Marshall Way and can enjoy carolers, live art exhibitions, holiday shopping, Santa and more. There will also be an event for wine and beer aficionados, Santa Wine Around and Ale Trail (Dec. 15, 6 to 9 p.m.), as well as one for coffee lovers, Java Jingle Crawl (Dec. 22, 8 to 11 a.m.), featuring tastings at six local coffee shops. scottsdazzle.com.

Holiday Events at Tempe Marketplace and Desert Ridge Marketplace

Tempe Marketplace and Desert Ridge Marketplace are set to put everyone in the holiday spirit. The fun begins with the Holiday Tree Lighting and First Snowfall from 6 to 8 p.m. at Tempe Marketplace (Nov. 21) and from 6 to 9 p.m. at Desert Ridge Marketplace (Nov. 19). Families and friends are invited to come back for ice skating (Tempe, Nov. 23 to Nov. 25), Nightly Snowfalls (Tempe and Desert Ridge, Nov. 20 to Dec. 31) and shows (Desert Ridge, Nov. 20 to Dec. 31). tempemarketplace.com; shopdesertridge.com.

North Pole Experience (pictured)

Hop aboard Santa's Magic Trolley at the Little America Hotel in Flagstaff and get transported through the Magic Portal to Santa's Grand Workshop in the North Pole. While at the North Pole, stop at the famous Toy Hall of Fame to help the elves build toys and visit Mrs. Claus' Bakery for her signature hot cocoa and tasty treats. And, of course, you can't leave without stopping by the mail room to write a personal letter to Santa and visit the top-secret hanger to see his newest sleigh. The North Pole Experience takes place from Nov. 16 to Dec. 28 with ticket prices ranging from \$39 to \$65. northpoleexperience.com.

North Pole Experience celebrates 10 years!



CitySkate

Arizona's largest real outdoor ice rink is back this year, taking over Central Avenue right along CityScape Phoenix. Start your winter off right and revel in the joy the season brings by ice skating in the heart of Downtown Phoenix—under the twinkling night sky. The rink opens on Nov. 21 and the grand opening party takes place on Black Friday, Nov. 23. The party is free and will include a professional figure skating routine, a tree lighting ceremony, Downtown Phoenix history tours and—new this year—a public art installation inspired by a Christmas tree. The rink will be open until Jan. 6 with tickets ranging from \$10 to \$30 (skate rental included). phxicerink.com.

Illumination: Symphony of Light (pictured)

The world's largest animated holiday drive-through light spectacular is back for a second year in North Phoenix—and is adding a second location. Illumination: Symphony of Light will return to its original location off the I-17 and Jomax Road (opening Nov. 14) as well as make its debut at Tempe's Diablo Stadium (opening Nov. 16). The Phoenix outpost also features an expanded Holiday Boulevard Marketplace with

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snacking, sips and gifts from local vendors. Illumination will dazzle and delight guests with nearly two million glittering lights, including dancing candy canes, twirling gingerbread men and giant fluttering snowflakes synchronized to holiday tunes and festive hits played over cars' FM dials. The drive-through portion is 25 minutes long; due to popular demand, it is recommended that guests reserve a date and time for either experience through the Web site. Tickets are \$29 in advance; \$35 per car at the door. worldofillumination.com.

The North Phoenix location hosts the world's largest Christmas-themed inflatable obstacle course at its Holiday Boulevard Marketplace. Measuring 350 linear feet, the U-shaped, 19-ft.-tall inflatable behemoth can accommodate four racers at one time and provides obstacles from pillars, tunnels and slides to climbing walls, a maze and carousel for children to run, jump, crawl and bounce their way to the finish line.

GPGLCC's 10th Annual Festival of Trees

Step into the season with serious style. Greater Phoenix Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce's 10th Annual Festival of Trees takes place at Ballet Arizona on Dec. 1 from 7 to 10 p.m. The evening will include a showcase of decked-out holiday trees, wreaths, menorahs and other displays—all up for auction and sale. Plus, there is one special travel tree, which is raffled off and includes an all-expense paid trip to Amsterdam. Tickets are \$75 for general admission; \$100 for VIP tickets. festivaloftreesphoenix.org.



Sedona Northern Lights

Sedona's massive holiday light show is back for its second year starting Dec. 13, and it runs for four consecutive nights. It is touted as the country's largest 3D light show on a natural canvas--the area's famous red rocks, of course. They are transformed with stunning holiday video projections, and the best seat in the house is available at [Amara Resort](http://AmaraResort) and its SaltRock Southwest Kitchen. From Dec. 13 to Dec. 16, a nightly stay at Amara Resort starts at \$199 per night. A three-course tasting menu at SaltRock is \$55 per person (reservations highly recommended). Before or after taking in Sedona Northern Lights, families can spend time together in the cool air enjoying lawn games, cozying up fireside with a cocktail and roasting marshmallows over outdoor fireplaces with the resort's s'mores kits. sedonanorthernlights.com.

McCormick-Stillman Railroad Park

McCormick-Stillman Railroad Park hosts its beloved annual winter wonderland of lights and displays through Jan. 6 each evening from 6:30 to 9 p.m. Tip: To save some time, purchase a Fast Pass now to eliminate long waits to ride the Holiday Lights Train Ride. The Fast Pass is \$15 per person per train ride for guests ages 3 and older. (Kids ages 2 and under are free with a paying adult.) therailroadpark.com.

Las Noches de Las Luminarias (pictured)

During the evenings of Dec. 1 through Dec. 28 (except Christmas Eve and Day), Las Noches de Las Luminarias lights up the night at Desert Botanical Garden. This year, the Electric Desert | A Light and Sound Experience by Klip Collective sets the stage for true holiday magic with more than 8,000 hand-lit luminaria bags, thousands of twinkle lights and the pulse of Electric Desert. Tickets starts at about \$30 for members and about \$35 for the general public. dbg.org.



Have Spirit, Will Travel

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Here's how cities across the state are celebrating the season.

Nov. 17 WINSLOW: **72nd Annual Christmas Parade** winslowarizona.org.

Nov. 22 JEROME: **7th Annual Light Up the Mountain** jeromechamber.com.

Nov. 23 LAKE HAVASU CITY: **Swim Race Across the Bridgewater Channel and Festival of Lights** londonbridgeresort.com.

Nov. 23 through Jan. 5 LAKE HAVASU CITY: **22nd Annual Festival of Lights** golakehavasus.com.

Dec. 1 GLOBE/MIAMI: **31st Annual Festival of Lights** globeaz.gov.

Dec. 1 LAKE HAVASU CITY: **36th Annual Boat Parade of Lights** golakehavasus.com.

Dec. 1 PRESCOTT **38th Annual Prescott Chamber Christmas Parade and 64th Annual Christmas Yavapai County Courthouse Lighting** visit-prescott.com.

Dec. 1 through Dec. 23 CLARKDALE: **Canyon Christmas Train** verdecanyonrr.com. (pictured)

Dec. 8 SEDONA: **45th Annual Festival of Lights** tlaq.com.

Dec. 14 WICKENBURG: **23rd Annual Christmas Parade of Lights** wickenburgchamber.com.