

## Best Christmas Traditions in San Francisco

November 20, 2023 by Heather Flett One Comment

We love our favorite annual traditions for **Christmas in San Francisco**. Here's our go-to list of events and activities that add a little extra sparkle to family memories each year.

*Thank you to the San Francisco Symphony for sponsoring our guide to family-friendly holiday outings in San Francisco. Join the San Francisco Symphony to ring in the holidays with festive family concerts throughout December.*



Step into the magical world of *A Charlie Brown Christmas—Live!* where the timeless tale comes to life on stage; with live child actors. | Photo: Kristen Loken

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## Holiday & Winter Traditions for Families in San Francisco

Planning a Christmas visit to San Francisco to take in some extra holiday cheer? We got you! Whether you BART, ferry, or drive, there are so many ways to make a day of it by celebrating Christmas in the City.



Macy's holiday window display features real pets you can adopt! | Photo: Sally Mason

**Christmas windows!** Did you know that Macy's holiday window displays include live animals that can be adopted? From **Nov. 17 to Dec. 31** from Thursday to Sunday noon to 5 pm (except Thanksgiving and Christmas), the SPCA brings adorable kittens and puppies available to adopt from Macy's the same day. Find out more or watch the live cam >

**Cable car and cocoa.** Wear a scarf and this classic mode of transportation feels extra Christmasy. From Union Square (or Powell & Market), hop on either the Powell/Hyde or Powell/Mason lines and take them to the end of the line. Refuel at Starbucks with hot chocolate right at the turnaround.

*Pro tip:* for really little ones, I always get child-size cocoas and an extra cup to split the drink and cut them further with cool milk.



Look but don't touch the enormous sugar castle at the Westin St. Francis | Photo: The Westin St. Francis

**Enormous Sugar Castle, beginning November 22 at 11 am.** Right off Union Square, the Westin St. Francis features a 12-foot rotating holiday sugar castle in the grand lobby of the hotel.

**Ticket alert: San Francisco Holiday Performances**



## Spotlight on the San Francisco Symphony

Enter the winter wonderland of a decked-out Davies Symphony Hall and ring in the holidays with festive family concerts throughout December. Enjoy the classic storybook fable of *Peter and the Wolf*; holiday films with live orchestra; ballet dancers, holiday characters, and carols at the Symphony's beloved annual favorite, Deck the Hall; and more.



Join SF Symphony for a magical holiday experience at [Deck The Hall](#) where your child can play with instruments and meet Santa himself! | Photo: Kristen Loken

### San Francisco Symphony presents *The Nightmare Before Christmas* with live orchestration

The film will be on screen as the score is played by the orchestra live.

**Where:** Davies Symphony Hall, 201 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco

**When:** Nov. 30 & Dec. 1 at 7:30 pm

Tickets are here >

### San Francisco Symphony Orchestra presents *Deck the Hall*

Treat your family to a concert of holiday favorites and sing-alongs led by conductor Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser with members of the San Francisco Symphony, guest artists, and beloved costumed characters.

**Where:** Davies Symphony Hall, 201 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco

**When:** Sunday, December 3 at 11 am or 3 pm

Tickets are here >

### San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra presents *Peter and the Wolf*

Sergei Prokofiev's timeless tale of a boy and his animal friends' bravery is brought to life with guest narrator, Tom Kenny (AKA SpongeBob SquarePants).

**Where:** Davies Symphony Hall, 201 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco

**When:** Sunday, December 10 at 2 pm

Tickets are here >

### San Francisco Symphony presents *A Charlie Brown Christmas — Live!*

Enjoy a new twist on a holiday classic with live actors on stage against an animated backdrop while the score is played by the orchestra live.

**Where:** Davies Symphony Hall, 201 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco

**When:** December 20-23 (times vary)

Tickets are here >

### San Francisco Symphony presents *Home Alone* with live orchestration

The film will be on screen as the score is played by the orchestra live.

**Where:** Davies Symphony Hall, 201 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco

**When:** Dec. 22-23 (times vary)

Tickets are here >



Start a holiday tradition with your little one this merry season! Watch their eyes light up as they experience the wonder of live performance! | Photo: Maureen Burke

## Nutcrackers and More Holiday Shows in San Francisco

**Presidio Theatre** presents *Sleeping Beauty*

Panto rendition of *Sleeping Beauty* includes wild costumes and funny musical mashups with renditions of popular songs thrown in the mix. Recommended for 10+

**Where:** Presidio Theater in San Francisco

**When:** Nov. 25-Dec. 30 with performances at 1 pm and 6 pm

Ticket link >

### Reindeer Games

Circus tricks and interactive games make this family-friendly show engaging for all ages.

**Where:** Children's Creativity Museum

**When:** December 15-23

Ticket link >

**SF Girls Chorus & Amateur Music Network** presents **Family Sing**

Great for children 10+ to sing holiday favorites en masse.

**Where:** Kanbar Center for the Performing Arts, 44 Page Street, San Francisco

**When:** Friday, December 1 at 6:30 pm

Find tickets here >

**San Francisco Youth Ballet** presents *Nutcracker*

**Where:** Chinese American International School, San Francisco

**When:** Dec. 2 – 3 with matinee and evening shows

Find tickets here >

**ODC** presents *The Velveteen Rabbit*

This 65-minute performance has one intermission.

**Where:** Blue Shield of California Theater at YBCA, San Francisco

**When:** Showtimes from December 2-10 at 11 am or 2 pm

Find tickets here >



**Mark Foehringer** presents *Nutcracker Sweets*

Great for small children and is only 50 minutes long.

**Where:** Cowell Theater at Pier 2, Fort Mason, San Francisco

**When:** Weekends from December 2-23

[Find tickets here >](#)

**San Francisco Symphony** presents *Cirque Nutcracker*

A family-friendly mix of cirque acrobatics, classical dance, and contemporary theater set to the San Francisco Symphony's music.

**Where:** Davies Symphony Hall, 201 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco

**When:** Dec. 5-6 at 7:30 pm

[Find tickets here >](#)

**A.C.T.** presents *A Christmas Carol*

This will be the final run of this classic show after many years. A new rendition is in the works for 2024.

**Where:** Toni Rembe Theater, 415 Geary Street, San Francisco

**When:** Dec. 6-24 with evening and matinee shows

[Tickets are here >](#)

**SF Girls Chorus** presents *Folk Songs of the World Winter Concert at Davies*

Annual holiday concert that showcases all ages of performers in the chorus.

**Where:** Davies Symphony Hall, 201 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco

**When:** Monday, December 11 at 7 pm

[Find tickets here >](#)

**San Francisco Ballet** presents *Nutcracker*

This show has a 2-hour run time with one intermission.

**Where:** War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco

**When:** December 13 – 30 (times vary)

[Tickets are here >](#)

**SMUIN Contemporary Ballet** presents *The Christmas Ballet*

This show has a 2-hour run time with one intermission.

**Where:** Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

**When:** Showtimes from December 14 – 24

[Find tickets here >](#)

**African-American Shakespeare Company** presents *Cinderella*

An uplifting re-telling of the classic fairytale, featuring all of the pageantry, hilarity, and charm of the original, but with a decidedly soulful twist.

**Where:** Herbst Theatre, 401 Van Ness Avenue

**When:** Showtimes from Dec. 15 – 17 with evening and matinee shows, this will sell out

[Find tickets here >](#)

**San Francisco Lesbian/Gay Freedom Band** presents *Dance-Along Nutcracker*

Part comedy musical, part dance-it-yourself ballet, and part symphonic concert, this version of the show is anything but ordinary.

**Where:** Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

**When:** December 16-17 (multiple)

[Find tickets here >](#)

**Grace Cathedral** presents *Sing You a Merry Christmas*

A family-friendly sing-a-long about the toys of St. Nick's workshop looking for the true meaning of Christmas. 60 minutes with no intermission.

**Where:** Grace Cathedral, 1100 California Street, San Francisco

**When:** Showtimes from Dec. 16, 21, 22, 23 (times vary)

[Find tickets here >](#)

**Talmi Entertainment** presents **NUTCRACKER! Magical Christmas Ballet**

Enjoy an international cast of Ukrainian Principal Artists performing at the peak of classical European Ballet. Be transported by the jaw-dropping acrobatics and puppets.

**Where:** *Golden Gate Theatre, San Francisco*

**When:** December 19 at 3 pm and 7 pm

Save 20% with promo code JUMP >

**San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus** presents *Holiday Spectacular: Home for the Holidays*

**Where:** *Castro Theatre*

**When:** Dec. 24 with 3 performance times

Buy tickets in advance >

Find lots of *Nutcracker* and holiday performances >

## Book Ahead for Special Visits & Activities

**Santa Claus at Macy's Union Square.** Our sources say that the best Santa Claus experience in SF is Santaland at Macy's from Nov. 24 through Dec. 24 on the 6th floor of Macy's. Reservations open November 19 at 6:30 am. Looking for a Santa experience closer to home? Check out our [Where to Get Photos with Santa in the East Bay Guide](#). >

**Meet reindeer at Cal Academy.** At the new Welcome Winter Night event on **Dec. 6**, families will have a chance to meet two visiting reindeer, decorate cookies, make crafts, enjoy holiday magic and musical performances, and take part in other winter fun. Other winter wonderland activities will happen between Nov. 17 and Jan. 7. Learn more and reserve tickets >

**Ice skating in the City.** Lots of special outdoor ice rinks appear throughout the Bay Area, and San Francisco is no exception. Glide around the rink at Union Square (Nov. 1 to Jan. 15). The rink is open daily, plus there are special skating events scheduled throughout the season with fun themes. Find more places to ice skate in the Bay Area over the holidays >



Union Square San Francisco all lit up | Photo courtesy of Red Apple Photography

## Christmas High Tea in the City

High Tea at the holidays is a lovely, albeit pricey, tradition for some families of mostly well-behaved children. There are many places to try out your best outfits and shiny shoes for a morning or afternoon of goodies with pinkies out: The Fairmont Hotel (Nob Hill), Lovejoy's Tea Room (Noe Valley), Children's Magical Tea at Top of the Mark (Nob Hill), Sip Tea Room (Golden Gate Park), Teddy Bear Tea at The Ritz-Carlton (Nob Hill), Dollie + Me Holiday Tea at The Westin St. Francis (Union Square), and several others. Read about other charming Bay Area Christmastime tea services. >



Santa Brunch at Westin St. Francis includes stories, crafts, and food | Photo: Heather Flett

## Holiday lights and festive decorations to see and love

Whether you plan a stroll or stay cozy in the car for a drive-by, we love holiday lights to get in the Christmas spirit. Add hot chocolate and a twinkling tree, and I'm happy.

**Tree lighting celebrations.** Watch trees more than 50 feet tall light up across the city. Tree lighting and events traditionally take place at Golden Gate Park, Civic Center, Pier 39, Union Square, and Grace Cathedral. Many events include music and other family-friendly festivities. Others are casual and allow for visiting on your own schedule.

Find more Bay Area tree lighting ceremonies [here >](#)

**Friday, Dec. 15 Lighted Boat Parade.** From 6 – 8 pm, Fisherman's Wharf presents the oldest and largest lighted holiday boat parade on San Francisco Bay. Spectators can see it from Aquatic Park, PIER 39, Marina Green, and Crissy Field. FREE to watch. [Website >](#) There are more Bay Area lighted yacht parades, too.

**Giant gingerbread house.** Atop Nob Hill, Fairmont San Francisco's two-story, life-sized gingerbread house in the hotel's grand lobby is a wonderful holiday attraction. Debuting November 27 at 11 am, the gingerbread house is up through the entire holiday season. There's an impressive moving train and a giant Christmas tree, too.





Yours would not be the first children to sneak a little nibble of the giant gingerbread house at the Fairmont Hotel | Photo: Sally Mason

**Let's Glow SF.** Walk around downtown to see the country's largest holiday projection experience on six iconic buildings from 5-10 pm nightly. This year's display will be on The Ferry Building, Top of Salesforce Tower, and four more. Details here >

**Winter Wanderland.** Union Square comes alive with lights, skating, and all the hotel attractions (see below!) but also with its community performances, food trucks, family-friendly holiday activities, and all-around merriment of Winter Wanderland and specifically, Winter Walk from Dec. 25 to Dec. 24. No reservations are needed; it's free to visit but lots of things to spend money on.

**These holiday light displays in the East Bay (and beyond) are worth the drive >**



Davies Hall lobby is perfect for twirling before or after a show | Photo: Maureen

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# SF SYMPHONY

*What do you like to do in SF for the holidays? Find our East Bay Christmas bucket list over here >*

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## Holiday Fun Quick Link s

 Where to Get Santa Photos

 Holiday High Teas

 Bay Area Nutcrackers

 Best Christmas Lights

... and our Ultimate Guide to Holiday Fun For East Bay Families ---

 Filed Under: Grade Schoolers, Kids, Preschoolers, San Francisco, Sponsored, Tweens

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