

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Bay Area holiday lights 2023: Here are the best tree lightings and live events

By Anne Schrager

Nov 22, 2023

 Gift Article



All around town, lights are twinkling and there's a hint of winter in the air. Enjoy the seasonal glow on display in local shopping corridors such as [Fourth Street in West Berkeley](#), [Santana Row in San Jose](#), and [Union Square in San Francisco](#) with its tremendous Christmas tree, giant menorah and festive ice skating rink.

Fancy hotels get in the spirit with special things to see and do: Visit the massive gingerbread house on display and sip holiday tea at the [Fairmont](#) in San Francisco or make a reservation for the popular Teddy Bear and Santa teas at the city's [Ritz-Carlton](#) and [Palace](#) hotels. Add outdoor venues and parks to the mix and there is ample opportunity to enjoy merry and bright light shows, large-scale illuminated displays, and tree lighting events with hot drinks, live entertainment, caroling and more.

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Take A Survey

Check out the Chronicle's guide to the best holiday events and attractions happening around the Bay Area through December.



The Ritz-Carlton in San Francisco offers its fanciful Teddy Bear Tea through Dec. 22.
Ritz-Carlton San Francisco

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Happier Holidays at Pier 39

This nightly holiday show features a 60-foot-tall Christmas tree decked out with thousands of ornaments and glittery lights with special effects synchronized to music.

Every half hour between 5 and 10 p.m. nightly. Through Jan. 7. Free. Pier 39, S.F. 415-981-7437. www.pier39.com

Glow: Discover the Art of Light

Luminous sculptures radiate as part of the Exploratorium's light-focused exhibition's seasonal expansion. [Explore the galleries for dramatic light art](#) from Robin Baumgarten, Collectif Scale, Maria Constanza Ferreira, Luke Jerram, Chaco Kato, Masary Studios and Daniel Rozin and others. Complementing the exhibition's theme will be a [“Storytime Science for Kids: Glow—Garden of Delights \(Nov. 26\),”](#) [“After Dark: Glow at the Museum \(Nov. 30\)”](#) and [“After Dark: Go with the Glow \(Dec. 7\)”](#) as well as [“Saturday Cinema: The Art and Science of Luminous Animations”](#) film screenings on Dec. 9, 16, Jan. 6, 13 and 20.

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10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; noon-5 pm. Sunday; 6-10 p.m. Thursday. Through Jan. 29. \$19.95-\$39.95, [reservations required](#). Exploratorium, Pier 15, S.F. 415-528-4444. exploratorium.edu

More From Anne Schrager

Bay Area turkey trots 2023: Work off extra pie before Thanksgiving dinner



The best Bay Area fairs and festivals to grab gifts this holiday season



Holidays at Filoli

The historic house and garden, which recently hosted President Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping, transforms into a festive holiday wonderland with abundant illuminated installations and decorations inside the house and out in the garden. Fire pits and warming holiday refreshments enhance the atmosphere. Santa Days, docent-led tours and Holiday tea times are scheduled for select dates.

10 a.m.-9 p.m. daily. Through Jan. 7. \$25-\$43, kids under 5 free; reservations recommended. Filoli House and Garden, 6 Cañada Road, Woodside. 650-364-8300. <https://filoli.org>



Holiday time at Filoli House and Garden offers extensive seasonal decorations including a tunnel of lights (pictured) and cozy fire pits.

Filoli House and Garden

IlluminOdyssey Interactive Winter Light Experience

Inspired by the beauty and science of light, this family-friendly exhibition offers interactive light science and glowing art. Explore activities about light, photoluminescence, color, waves, fluorescence and more.

10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Through Jan. 28. \$21.95-\$25.95, reservations recommended. CuriOdyssey, 1651 Coyote Point Dr., San Mateo. 650-342-7755. curiodyssey.org

Ruth Bancroft Garden of D'Lights

Using thousands of lights and lasers, the garden comes alive at night as colorful displays are formed from illuminated cacti, succulents and trees. Wander through meandering paths and experience the garden in a new way this holiday season.

Opens Friday, Nov. 24. 5:30-8:30 p.m. Thursday-Sunday Nov. 24-Dec. 10; Tuesday-Sunday, Dec. 12-Jan. 6. \$16-\$29, under 5 free; reservations required. Ruth Bancroft Garden, 1552 Bancroft Road, Walnut Creek. 925-542-9444.

www.ruthbancroftgarden.org

Christmas Lights at Oakland's Temple Hill

Enjoy a large-scale holiday lights installation with city views and scheduled live theatrical, dance and music performances, including productions of "The Nutcracker," a Handel's "Messiah" sing-along and more.

Opens Friday, Nov. 24. 9 a.m.-9 p.m. daily. Through Dec. 31. Free. Temple Hill, 4770 Lincoln Ave., Oakland. 510-328-0044. <https://templehill.org>



The S.F. Boys Chorus will perform carols and holiday music before Santa arrives to light up Ghirardelli Square for the holidays.

Ghirardelli Square

Santa Lights the Square

The S.F. Boys Chorus will perform carols and holiday music before Santa arrives to switch on the square's holiday lights display. Visit with Santa in the carillon for photos and a chocolate treat. There will be holiday concerts with Deutscher Musikverein (Dec. 17) and Homestead High School Holiday Program (Dec. 22). Santa will be visiting the square throughout the month on Peppermint Bark Day (Dec. 1), on Dec. 8 and during the concerts.

4:30-8 p.m. Friday, Nov. 24. Free. Ghirardelli Square, 900 North Point St., S.F. 415-775-5500. www.ghirardellisq.com

San Jose Christmas in the Park

A community favorite attraction since the 1950s, the holiday walk-through event will offer fresh light displays, a 60-foot tall Christmas tree and more. Food and drinks available for purchase. Nearby the downtown roller skating rink and [Winter Wonderland](#) offer carnival rides and family-friendly fun. A [drive-thru light show](#) is available on select dates.

Noon-11 p.m. daily. Through Jan. 1. Free. Plaza de Cesar Chavez Park, 194 S. Market St., San Jose. 408-271-9627. www.christmasinthepark.com

Oakland Zoo Glowfari: A Wildly Illuminating Lantern Festival

Take an illuminated stroll and experience the decked-out zoo with new themes and larger-than-life glowing animal lanterns. Top off the evening visiting with Santa and having a ride on the zoo train.

5-9 p.m. Nov. 24-26 and 29-30, Dec. 1-23, 26-31, 2023; Jan. 1-7, 10-14, 17-21, 24-28. \$22-\$26, [reservations required](#). Oakland Zoo, 9777 Golf Links Road, Oakland. 510-632-9525. www.oaklandzoo.org



Stroll through the Oakland Zoo's "Glowfari" holiday lights installation.
Oakland Zoo

Roaring Camp Holiday Lights Train

The seasonal favorite features a round-trip evening train ride with colorful lights on board and on the festively lit homes along the route. It includes a holiday sing-along with live music, hot cider and a visit from Santa.

Friday-Saturday, Nov. 24-25; Saturday-Sunday, Dec. 2-3, Dec. 9-10 and daily Dec. 16-23. See website for departure times. \$34.95-\$64.95, kids under 2 free; reservations required. In front of Neptune's Kingdom, 400 Beach St., Santa Cruz. 831-335-4484. <https://roaringcamp.com>

San Rafael Holiday of Lights and Winter Wonderland

Enjoy a small town holiday event set to include an artisan marketplace, a snow globe photo booth, Youth in Arts ornament-making activity, live music, DJ sets and entertainment, food trucks, jumpy houses, a toy drive and more. Join the

downtown [Elf Hunt](#) on Shop Small Saturday. Local merchants offer treats and

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11:00 a.m. Saturday, Nov. 26. Free. Fourth St., San Rafael. 415-813-1071.

<https://downtownsanrafael.org>

Annual Carousel Lighting Event and Ceremony

Join the Children's Creativity Museum and the Yerba Buena Gardens Conservancy for a holiday celebration with a sneak peak of the upcoming holiday show, "Reindeer Games," live performance by Kariktan Dance Company, holiday lights, craft activities, sweet treats, free carousel rides and a sunset carousel-lighting ceremony.

4-6 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 25. Free. Carousel Plaza, 221 Fourth St., S.F. 415-820-3320.

<https://creativity.org>

Walnut Creek Holiday Parade of Lights and Tree Lighting Celebration

The holiday season kick-off event will include a holiday parade, live music, meet and greets with the Grinch, Jack Frost, Elsa and Anna, refreshments and a tree-lighting ceremony with Santa.

5:30-8:30 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 30. Free. 1275 Broadway Plaza, Walnut Creek. 925-948-8826. www.broadwayplaza.com



Let's Glow SF will present 10 days of large-scale holiday art projected on multiple downtown buildings, including the Landing at Leidesdorff.

Lets Glow SF

Let's Glow SF 2023

The DowntownSF sponsored annual exhibition of large-scale projective works is scheduled to return in 2023. The event will feature nightly music and visual works from local and international artists, projected onto the Ferry building, Salesforce tower and other Financial District buildings in celebration of the holiday season. A

Dec. 1 opening ceremony will offer live entertainment, GlowSF swag, hot cocoa and snacks.

Lighting ceremony and reception 6 p.m. Friday, Dec. 1; 5-10 p.m. daily Dec. 1-10.

Free. 525 Market St., S.F. 415-634-2251. <https://downtownsf.org>

Jack London Square Holiday Tree Lighting and Lighted Yacht Parade

With live entertainment, including a tree-lighting and laser light show with visits from Santa and friends, performances by the Oaktown Jazz Workshop, Lyric Performing Arts Academy ensembles and more. During the event the area's annual lighted yacht parade will be on display as it circles the adjacent Oakland/Alameda estuary.

5:45-8 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 2. Free. Jack London Square, 472 Water St, Oakland.

<https://jacklondonsquare.com>

Cornerstone Snowman and Tree Lighting

Feel the holiday spirit as Santa switches on the “Snowman tree” and holiday lights throughout the garden. Enjoy caroling, holiday craft activities, cookie decorating, hot cocoa and food vendors. Visit Santa’s workshop for wish deliveries and photo ops. Sip holiday-inspired cocktails and shop at a pop-up marketplace.

4-7 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 2. Free admission, reservations recommended. Cornerstone Sonoma, 23570 Arnold Drive, Sonoma. 707-933-3010.

www.cornerstonesonoma.com





The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence will bless the Tree of Hope, installed at Grace Cathedral, as part of its lighting ceremony.
Grace Cathedral

Tree of Hope Lighting at Grace Cathedral

Emcee Donna Sachet hosts the evening event with The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence blessing a ‘World Tree of Hope,’ adorned with thousands of hand-folded origami cranes and stars inscribed with wishes for the future of the world. The celebration is set to include hands-on origami with artist Linda Mihara, performances from the San Francisco Boys Chorus, pianist Tammy Lynne Hall, soprano Lerberta Loral and the Queer Chorus of San Francisco as well as appearances from Manny Yekutieli and others.

6:30-8 p.m. Monday, Dec. 4. Free, reservations recommended. Grace Cathedral, 1100 California St., S.F. www.worldtreeofhope.org

Civic Center Plaza Tree Lighting

The evening will include live entertainment, “snow” flurries, a makers village, Off the Grid food trucks, drinks from Best Beverage Catering, a book giveaway from the San Francisco Public Library, holiday craft activities with SF Etsy, plus a toy giveaway.

Set across from an illuminated City Hall in Civic Center Plaza, the evening’s entertainment lineup, led by Boxcar Theatre’s Artistic Director Nick A. Olivero, will include performances from Tap Dancing Christmas Trees, the Topman All Stars,

magician Josh Farenbaugh, singer Doris Bumpus and appearances by the Grinch and Santa. The lighting of the plaza's 50-foot noble fir by Mayor London Breed will take place at 5:30 p.m.

4-7 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 6. Free, reservations recommended. Civic Center Plaza, 355 McAllister St., S.F. 415-781-4700. <https://sfciviccenter.org>



This year's "Entwined" nature inspired large scale light sculpture installation will include a new sculpture that was originally constructed for the Burning Man Festival, "Elder Mother" (pictured), has interactive elements and a grand 30-foot scale.
San Francisco Rec and Park

'Entwined: Elder Mother' in Golden Gate Park

Since 2020 San Francisco artist Charles Gadeken's outdoor installation has annually graced Golden Gate park. With twisting paths and large, illuminated tree sculptures and other nature inspired light art, this year it will feature a 30-ft metal tree titled "Eldermother" that moves with the wind and allows attendees to control its lighting patterns.

The "Entwined" exhibition's lights will be switched concurrently on Thursday, Dec. 7, to the city sponsored holiday tree lighting ceremony at McLaren Lodge. Monthly events will be hosted at the installation.

5-10 p.m. daily Dec. 7-April 28. Free. Peacock Meadow, Golden Gate Park, S.F. 415-621-3260. <https://sanfranciscoparksalliance.org>

Petaluma Lighted Boat Parade

Illuminated boats, kayaks and stand-up paddleboards share the spotlight along the Petaluma River in a spectacle of twinkling, reflected lights.

5:30 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 9. Free. Petaluma Marina, 11 English St., Petaluma. 707-765-9725. www.visitpetaluma.com

Sausalito Holiday by the Bay

The city of Sausalito's annual holiday event features a parade of brightly lit and decorated boats followed by a firework show (7:15 p.m.) over the Bay. Santa is scheduled to arrive by boat for a visit and to receive Christmas wishes from attendees.

5:30 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 9. Free, limited premium seats and after-party tickets available; reservations required. Gabrielson Park, Anchor St. and Humboldt Ave., Sausalito. www.winterfestsausalito.com



Downtown Petaluma will host a lighted boat parade on Dec. 9 as part of an impressive lineup of holiday events taking place in December.

Petaluma Downtown Association

Winter Wonderland Tree Lighting

As part of its seasonal Winter Wonderland programming, Thrive City's annual tree lighting ceremony will feature live entertainment, seasonal treats, holiday photo ops, festive multicultural activities and more. Live performances will include RUN DMC's Darryl McDaniels and others.

5-7 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 29. Free., reservations recommended. Thrive City, 1 Warriors Way, S.F. 888-479-4667. <https://chasecenter.com>

Newark Annual Tree Lighting

With family activities, tree-lighting ceremony (7 p.m.), live entertainment, craft activities, photo booth, hot cocoa and more.

5:30-7:30 p.m. Friday, Dec. 1 Free. Newark Civic Center, 37101 Newark Blvd., Newark. 510-578-4000. www.newark.org

Fantasy of Lights Walk and Drive-Thru

A 1.5-mile walk or ride filled with holiday lights and large animated displays, featuring holiday music. With more than 50 themed installations and a 90-foot twinkling tree, this year's annual event is bigger and responsibly bright, using environmentally friendly LED lighting.

Walk-through 4-9 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, Dec. 2-3; drive-through 6-10 p.m. Dec. 5-30, closed Dec. 25. \$7.50-\$100, reservations required. Vasona County Park, 333 Blossom Hill Road, Los Gatos. 408-355-2201. <https://parks.sccgov.org>

Hometown Holiday Parade and Tree Lighting

The parade will feature marching bands, floats and more. After the parade there will be a tree-lighting ceremony with a visit from Santa and live entertainment.

5-8 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 2. Free. Main Street, downtown Pleasanton. 925-931-5352. www.cityofpleasantonca.gov

Rockaway Beach Tree Lighting Festival

Free pony rides, “snow” flurries, vendor marketplace, holiday craft activities, live performances, a visit from Santa, food trucks and more.

4-7 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 3. Free. Dondee Way, Pacifica. 650-355-4122.

<https://business.pacificachamber.com>

It's a Wonderful Life in Lafayette: Holiday Tree Lighting Celebration

This year's family-friendly celebration includes a visit with Santa, train rides, holiday tree lighting, live music, craft activities, holiday treats, wreath sale, food and drinks for purchase and more. The official tree-lighting is planned for 5:30 p.m.

4:30-6:30 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 3. Free. Lafayette Plaza Park, corner of Mount Diablo Blvd. and Moraga Road, Lafayette. 925-284-7404. <https://lafayettechamber.org>

Mountain View Tree Lighting Celebration

Celebrate the season with live entertainment, refreshments, a train ride, games and craft activities, community tree-lighting and an appearance from Santa.

5:30-8 p.m. Monday, Dec. 4. Free. Civic Center Plaza, 500 Castro St., Mountain View. 650-903-6300. <https://www.mountainview.gov>

Tenderloin People's Holiday Tree Lighting

The annual tree lighting celebration will include special guests S.F. Mayor London Breed and California State Senator Scott Wiener. There will be live entertainment with performances from the Skywatchers, TCRA Choir and The Glidettes, a visit from Santa, raffle and more.

5 p.m. Friday, Dec. 15. Free. Boeddeker Park, 246 Eddy St., S.F. 415-831-2700.

www.sfrecpark.org

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By Anne Schrager

Top Of The News



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