

USA TODAY TRAVEL | GRENADA'S AQUATIC ART GALLERY

GO ESCAPE

WINTER 2017

120 WINTER *Wonders*

PACK
YOUR
BAGS!



COLORADO
SANS SKIS

A TASTE OF
VERMONT

UNEXPECTED
EUROPE

THE LURE OF
PORTUGAL

El Yunque National
Forest, Puerto Rico



BERGDORF GOODMAN HOLIDAY WINDOW
New York City



A M E R I C A ' S T O P

HOLIDAY T O W N S

EXPLORE VERY MERRY VILLAGES THAT EMBODY

THE SPIRIT OF THE SEASON

BY ALEXIS KORMAN

THIS YEAR, SKIP THE MALL SANTA and hit the road — these jolly spots make for sublime winter journeys. From millions of twinkling lights to miles of gingerbread houses, our decked-out holiday destinations from coast to coast know a thing or two about making Christmas magic. Along the way, stop at a couple of festivals that continue the seasonal fun.

PACIFIC

TOWN

Leavenworth, Wash.

Nestled against the Cascade Mountains, Leavenworth transforms into a postcard-perfect Bavarian village come holiday time. Think horse-drawn sleigh rides through snow-topped trees, sled dog races and an awe-inspiring amount of Christmas lights (half a million, to be exact). Concerts featuring carolers, handbells and harps add to the vivacious holiday vibe. Visitors can scope last-minute gifts on Nov. 25 and 26 at the Christkindlmarkt, an Old World-inspired holiday market with Glühwein (a mulled wine) and costumed characters, or enjoy 26 kilometers of groomed ski trails within 10 miles of town. Don't miss the Christmas Lighting Festival, held over three consecutive weekends beginning Dec. 2.

► leavenworth.org

FESTIVAL

WINTERFEST

Sausalito, Calif.

Famous for its houseboats and Victorian charm, Sausalito's spin on the 12 Days of Christmas — which begins Dec. 1 — lasts a couple of days longer and includes a lighted boat parade with fireworks over the water on Dec. 17. Insider tip: Book a room at Casa Madrona, a historic mansion-turned-luxury-hotel, and take in stellar views of the holiday harbor procession while sipping spiked hot cocoa and enjoying a roaring fire.

► oursausalito.com
 ► casamadrona.com





CHRISTMAS LIGHTING
FESTIVAL
Leavenworth, Wash.

DEBRA MURPHY

NORTHEAST

TOWN

New York City

The Big Apple celebrates Christmas in a big way — and it's easy to organize a trip to coincide with one of Manhattan's famous outdoor extravaganzas, such as the 90th annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on Nov. 24, or the star-studded Rockefeller Center Christmas tree lighting Nov. 30. Unique attractions — such as the 1,000-plus handmade gingerbread houses at the New York Hall of Science from Nov.

11 to Jan. 15, or the Holiday Train Show at the New York Botanical Garden from Nov. 19 to Jan. 16 — delight visitors of all ages. The New York City Ballet's iconic *Nutcracker*, which runs from Nov. 25 to Dec. 31, and the Radio City Christmas Spectacular, which lives up to its name between Nov. 11 and Jan. 2, are the season's must-see shows. For those on a strict budget, glimpses of elaborately decorated department store windows are free.

► nycgo.com/holidays

FESTIVAL

WASSAIL WEEKEND

Woodstock, Vt.

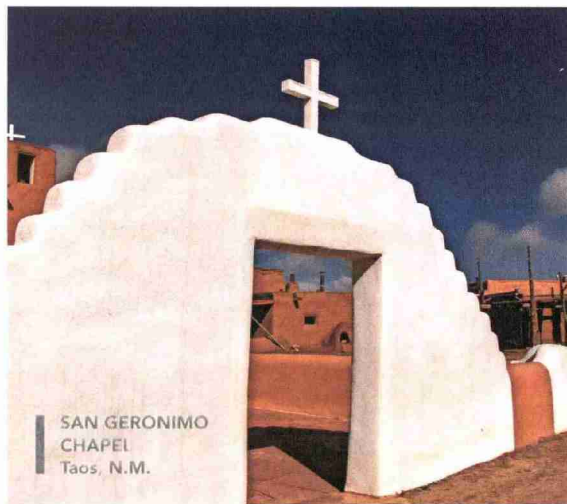
Experience the magic of a New England holiday during Wassail Weekend Dec. 9-11. The (hopefully) snowy landscape encourages skiing, snowball fights and horse-drawn sleigh rides through town, but the highlight is the Equestrian Parade, with more than 50 horses and riders clad in 19th-century holiday attire. Fun fact: Wassailing refers to a medieval ritual of song and drink thought to encourage a good harvest. Today, it ensures you'll help spread holiday cheer.

► woodstockvt.com





SKATING AT
WOLLMAN RINK
New York City



SAN GERONIMO
CHAPEL
Taos, N.M.

WEST

TOWN *Taos, N.M.*

Beyond red- or green-chile-topped everything, this famous New Mexico arts town is naturally full of holiday cheer, surrounded on all sides by ethereal snow-capped mountains (making it an excellent perch for ski bums). Visitors can sip wine or hot chocolate and stroll top art galleries during the Dec. 3 Lighting of Ledoux, in which Ledoux Street is illuminated with hundreds of small paper lanterns. Or observe Las Posadas, a Hispanic tradition re-enacting Joseph's and Mary's search for shelter in the days leading up to Christmas (this year, Dec. 16-24). The Christmas Eve Procession of the Virgin Mary at the 1,000-year-old Taos Pueblo — a UNESCO World Heritage Site — is a solemn ceremony in which a statue of Mary is returned to its resting place in San Geronimo Chapel.

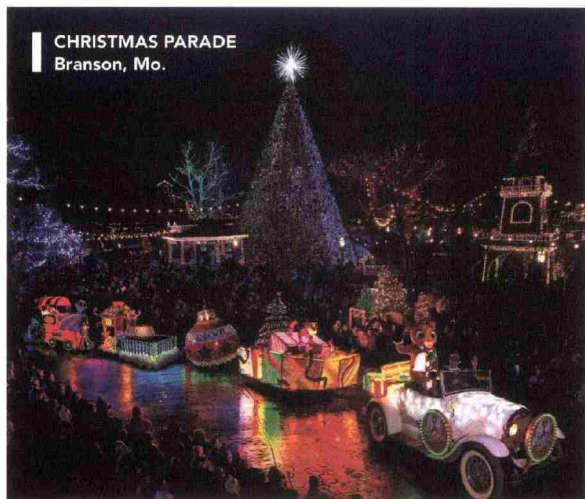
► taos.org
► taospueblo.com

FESTIVAL

SNOW SCULPTURE CHAMPIONSHIPS *Breckenridge, Colo.*

Snowman enthusiasts and serious artists alike flock to Breckenridge each winter, drawn by the chance to see and sculpt ornate sculptures from blocks of ice. On Saturdays during the championships (this winter, between Jan. 24 and Feb. 5), the laid-back ski town also presents a light show and plenty of fire pits to keep travelers warm after a day spent skiing, dogsledding and scoping out jaw-dropping frozen characters on display.

► gobreck.com/events/budweiser-international-snow-sculpture-championships



CHRISTMAS PARADE
Branson, Mo.

MIDWEST

TOWN *Branson, Mo.*

Branson's Ozark Mountain Christmas runs through Dec. 31 and captivates travelers with millions of glittering bulbs along the 2.5-mile Shepherd of the Hills Trail of Lights. One \$35 ticket covers a carload of up to eight people. Downtown, a giant nativity scene is a main attraction; the annual lighting of the 28-foot-tall display and Adoration Parade are scheduled for Dec. 4. The Old Time Christmas festival at the Silver Dollar City theme park just outside Branson continues daily through Dec. 30; it showcases a five-story Christmas tree complete with special effects, a musical version of *It's a Wonderful Life* plus Rudolph's Holly Jolly Christmas Lights Parade nightly, featuring floats covered in more than 200,000 lights.

► explorebranson.com/christmas

FESTIVAL

WINTER CARNIVAL St. Paul

Featuring fanciful ice palaces fit for a snow queen, the Saint Paul Winter Carnival — Jan. 26 to Feb. 5 — is the oldest in the U.S. Since 1886, when it was created by locals annoyed by out-of-town reporters' descriptions of the city as "another Siberia, unfit for human habitation," according to the carnival's website, it has extended the cool spirit of the season with ice sculptures, live music, parades, beer tastings and snowplow competitions. Buy a special button and register it online for special prizes.

► wintercarnival.com





SCOTTISH CHRISTMAS WALK
Alexandria, Va.

SOUTHEAST

TOWN *Alexandria, Va.*

Located just minutes by car or subway from Washington, D.C., visitors feel like time travelers to Christmas Past in Alexandria's quaint Old Town. The colonial-era brick-lined streets play host to numerous Christmas events, such as the annual Christmas tree lighting Nov. 25, hosted by the mayor with appearances by Santa and

Alexandria's own town crier. The 46th annual Scottish Christmas Walk Weekend that begins Dec. 2 includes a lavish parade Dec. 3 full of Scottie dogs, dancers and bagpipers and kilts. Ten miles south, revelers who visit George Washington's Mount Vernon on weekends between Nov. 25 and Dec. 18 can glimpse fireside caroling and candle-lit 18th-century dancing.

- ▶ visitalexandriava.com
- ▶ mountvernon.org/candlelight

FESTIVAL

CAJUN & CREOLE CHRISTMAS *Lafayette, La.*

Expect dozens of unique events with Acadian flair, like bayou boat parades and gumbo cook-offs, throughout November and December in and near Lafayette. Take a peek into the region's storied past during the Old-Time Christmas Dec. 13-21 at Lafayette's Vermilionville, a living history museum dotted with settlement structures dating from 1765. Festivities feature Cajun Christmas legend Papa Noël.

- ▶ lafayettettravel.com/events/holiday
- ▶ vermilionville.org