

HOLIDAYS: Riverside's Festival of Lights illuminates downtown Friday



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People in the Inland area know the holidays arrive when the Mission Inn Hotel and Spa turns the Christmas lights on.

And come 5:15 p.m. Friday, the switch will be turned on and fireworks will take to the sky as millions of lights in and around the hotel illuminate for the first time. The Festival of Lights returns.

The festival created by Mission Inn Hotel and Spa owner Duane Roberts, now in its 19th year, started as a way to give back to his hometown.

"Back when I bought the Inn, I felt I needed something to pay back to the community," he said in a recent phone interview.

The idea came from Roberts' childhood in Riverside. He said he remembers as a child, The Press-Enterprise listed lighting displays in the newspaper. His family would then take tour of all of the listed homes.

"As a kid seeing all the lights and characters; it was an exciting time," he said. "It was family."

During the festival, the Mission Inn is decorated with more than 3.6 million lights and 400 different characters like the panda musicians on Main Street.

"Every year it expands with more lights and characters," he said.

The festival also includes an ice skating rink, vendors, reindeer and photos with Santa Claus.

"It turned into something people can enjoy without spending any money," he said. "It's like Disneyland without paying for the tickets."

New this year will be falling snow on the weekends. At certain points around the front of the hotel, machines will spray snow down.

"It's going to be a fantastic experience," Roberts said. "We're going to be at the top of our game."

"It's way beyond any image I could have thought," he said.

Guests staying at the Mission Inn Hotel and Spa are in for even more treats as the hotel has a number of holiday related goodies. New this year is the Santa Suite, which is a two bedroom suite with a Christmas tree, stockings, decorations, lights and other festive items. The suite special also includes a dinner for four, a breakfast and a visit from Santa Claus.

Santa isn't visiting just the guests in the suite. The Mission Inn also offers a special Santa tuck, where the jolly man himself will come to tuck young guests into their beds.

"It's good for the children," Mission Inn General Manager Diana Rosure said. "It's all about keeping the spirit of Christmas alive."

Staying at the hotel also provides access to areas off-limits to non-guests like the pool, which is lit up with swans and lights.

"It's the most romantic area," Rosure said.

This year the Festival of Lights will be extended an extra week to Jan. 8.

In the end, Roberts said the money, crowds and effort are worth it when he sees children enjoying the festival.

"When their eyes turn into saucers, it just warms my heart," he said.

Check back Friday on PE.com for photos and video of the "Switch-On" ceremony at the Festival of Lights.

FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

WHEN: Friday through Jan. 8.

WHERE: Downtown Riverside.

TICKETS: Free.

INFORMATION:  951-683-7100  or www.riversideca.gov/fol.

OUTDOOR ICE SKATING

WHEN: noon-11 p.m. Friday, Saturday-Dec. 19: 4-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 4-11 p.m. Friday, noon-11 p.m. Saturday, noon-10 p.m. Sunday. Dec. 20-Jan. 8: noon-11 p.m. Monday-Sunday. Noon-9 p.m. Dec. 24.

WHERE: Main Street between University and Mission Inn avenues.

TICKETS: \$10 per hour per person, \$3 skate rental. \$50 frequent skater cards.

INFORMATION:  951-826-5586 .