



Festival

Mission Inn Festival of Lights Opens Friday in Riverside

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by Ed Fuentes

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Courtesy of Mission Inn Hotel and Spa

For the 19th straight year, the Festival of Lights will open the Inland region Christmas season by converting the Mission Inn into an illuminated Christmas stocking, stuffed with 3.6 million bulbs and 400 animated characters dancing above on alcoves and balconies.

The display of festive holiday decor lights up the landmark hotel that straddles eras; a modern resort with spas and steakhouses, yet keeps ties to its origins that had early 20th Century Angelenos retreat from Los Angeles, and be a mandatory stop for VIPs traveling from all points East.



Photo: Mission Inn Hotel and Spa

Mission Inn Hotel and Spa owners Duane and Kelly Roberts will flick on the symbolic switch at 5:15 PM. Friday, Nov. 25, cueing horse driven carriages to take guests around the city block sized inn, and Victorian-dressed carolers to stroll the sidewalks, all accompanied by fireworks. New this year is man-made snow drifting at the front entrance of the hotel on weekends, adding to a citywide Dickensian winter theme.

Duane Roberts, a well-known businessman who began amassing his fortune as the inventor of frozen burritos, came up with the idea of lights bringing in Christmas soon after purchasing the property in Dec. 1992. It was his way to welcome back locals to the hotel after being closed for 7 years of renovations and delays.

It is now a tradition expected to attract 250,000 visitors who want to find and stay in a holiday mood. That is one person for each bulb lit in the first Festival 19 years ago, the year a mere 250,000 lights were featured, and only 50 animated characters were used.

The idea for seasonal bling-and-sing came from his "childhood memories in Riverside," Roberts tells KCET by email. The holidays reminds him of his family touring homes with holiday light displays and wanted to share that childhood memories with "the children of Riverside and the surrounding communities."

Festival of Lights introduces potential guests to Mission Inn's Holiday stay specials, or its restaurants and bars that include Duane's Prime Steaks & Seafood Restaurant, High Tea in the outdoor Spanish Patio, or Casey's Cupcakes (a winner of the Food Network's "Cupcake Wars.") Locals also gravitate to nearby favorites, like Mario's Cafe for dinner, or grab a late lunch at Simple Simon's Bakery & Bistro.

Holiday entertainment is provided by 60 local community groups, schools and professional entertainers, say organizers. Retro-archivist and Ambassador of Americana Charles Phoenix will debut his 2011 kitsch slide show performance, exposing the darker side of holiday memories, at the Mission Inn on Nov. 27.

Then again, if you really want to get into proper holiday spirit, it may just take a few walks around the block.



Front entrance of the Mission Inn during Festival of Lights | Courtesy of Mission Inn Hotel and Spa

The 19th Annual Festival Of Lights begins at dusk each day from Friday Nov. 25 to Sunday Jan. 8 | The Mission Inn Hotel and Spa is located at 3649 Mission Inn Ave in Riverside, California, 55 miles east of Los Angeles | Metrolink Riverside Downtown Station is located at 4066 Vine Street, 6 blocks from The Mission Inn