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Millions of Xmas lights at Mission Inn

Mission Inn lights up for Christmas

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The turkey is barely cold on the plates in the dining room at the Mission Inn in Riverside before the blaze of Christmas lights is switched on.

The Friday after Thanksgiving has become the most anticipated night in the Inland Empire. The 108-year-old hotel in Riverside is wrapped in 3.5 million holiday lights, which are switched on the night after Thanksgiving and stay on through the holiday season.

People from around Southern California drive out to the Mission Inn for a day trip, after dark. Opening night is one big street party. Thousands line up on Mission Inn Avenue at sunset to count down to the ceremonial turning of a switch that illuminates millions of bulbs and starts up animated figures on the balconies and roofs. Fireworks top off the night, bathing the Spanish tile roof of Mission Inn in seasonal reds, greens and golds.

The guest list over the decades has included Albert Einstein and Teddy Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan and Helen Keller, Ozzy Osbourne and Henry Ford. All came to the Mission Inn because it was the palace-like resort in the middle of the citrus-turned-tract-home "empire" around Riverside.

The hotel is mostly the creation of Frank Miller, an eccentric showman who built the palace near the train tracks that ran from New York to Los Angeles and bade the well-heeled tourists to come enjoy the fresh air and wide-open space.

The hotel is a mixture of Spanish, Moorish, Japanese and Chinese influences – whatever the latest architectural fad that caught Miller's eye.

However, orchards gave way to developments, clean air to a thick summer layer of smog. Fancy hotels nearer the ocean pulled away the Mission Inn's guests. The hotel went into a long decline and closed in 1985.

But the Winter Palace had a white knight. Duane Roberts, a Laguna Beach millionaire who grew up in Riverside, bought the hotel in 1992.

The hotel now has top-rate restaurants and a wine bar. Roberts' wife, Kelly, created a spa. His daughter, Casey, opened a gourmet cupcake shop. The Mission Inn has been the centerpiece of a revival of downtown Riverside. The best day each year to see those changes is the beginning of the Festival of Lights.

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FILE PHOTO

Holiday lights on the Mission Inn in Riverside, a tradition that starts each season the day after Thanksgiving.

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