

Christmas in New York: 15 Festive Things to Do in NYC

We're all looking for silver linings these days—and we've got one for you. This Christmas season in New York City is sort of peaceful. There are fewer tourists crowding Midtown sidewalks, no social pressure to attend every holiday happy hour, and, more importantly, no Santa Con! One thing that hasn't changed, however, is that NYC in December holds the power to grow the hearts of the Grinchiest of us. Even this year, there is more than a little magic to be found. To help you find the best of it, we share travel editors favourite less 'touristy' Christmastime traditions - nostalgic standbys you'll recognize from the scenes of Elf, seasonal restaurant rituals, and neighbourhood celebrations that put them in the holiday spirit.

Devour Breads Bakery's Babka

Breads Bakery makes incredible baked goods all year round, but their holiday offerings are especially spectacular, from festive challah (made with things like sesame, nigella, sunflower) and cranberry gouda rolls over Thanksgiving to Linzer tarts and potato latkes for Christmas and Hanukkah. I was especially impressed by the Harvest Babka this year—a savoury version of their popular pastry. It has roasted sweet potatoes, red onion, and gruyere cheese: ideal for those lazy mornings when you want something easy, but with all the flavours of the holidays. —Stephanie Wu



Holiday Shop at Brooklyn Flea

It is still possible to shop local this season. And you should—whether you phone in an order, buy a gift card for later, or wander yonder all masked up. I got started early at Brooklyn Flea in Dumbo this year. I perused hand-made leather bags, vintage tweed jackets, gorgeous spindly air plants, and cherry red antique kitchen chairs under the Manhattan Bridge archway. Even now, the city's holiday markets are treasure troves, and every single vendor will tempt you. —Alex Erdekian



Stroll the Bronx Zoo's Winter Wonderland

Stepping into the Bronx Zoo around Christmastime is like entering a winter wonderland. Everywhere you look, there's another brightly lit Christmas tree, group of carollers harmonizing classic tunes, or man inexplicably walking by on stilts. The main attraction, of course, is the lantern safaris, where you can see illuminated animals from every corner of the world (giraffes, polar bears, sea turtles). Other highlights: the s'mores set-up, hot chocolate, and hard-at-work ice carvers. —Madison Flager



Escape It All and Go to a Spa

Not into hordes of people pushing past you for a selfie with the Rockefeller Tree? Me neither. I'm all about escaping the crowds, and treating myself to some R&R during my time off. I swear you can still find some of the best massages in Chinatown, but this year I'm dying to check out BATTHOUSE in Williamsburg. —Megan Spurrell



Get Starry Eyed at a Light Park

In its second year, the Luminocity light festival on Randall's Island is a bit smaller and organized with COVID-19 precautions in place, but is still one of the best places to take young kids to ooh and ahh during the holiday season. Visitors follow the journey of Lumi (an adorable anthropomorphic light bulb), which takes them through a rainbow of giant plants, icy dragons, and a field of glowing 5-foot tall mushrooms that are a real wonderland for kids. This year timed reservations are required (as are masks), but they actually make the whole experience feel orderly and manageable. We were there for an hour with a two-year-old and he didn't stop wowing at his surroundings the entire time. —Noah Kaufman



Find Something Special at a Holiday Pop-up Shop

A monthlong holiday pop-up shop, LTD by Lizzie Tisch, has opened on the Upper East Side, and I can't wait to circle through, hoping that a perfect last-minute gift will catch my eye. The shop touches on all things fashion, art, travel, beauty, and design, all whimsically presented in the space. I'm especially looking forward to checking out Paul Arnhold Glass, which is blown in Red Hook, and Le Lion's astrology embroidered merch. I can feel safe knowing the store is enforcing social distancing and partnering with CLEAR to use HEALTH PASS—a touch-free entry system that scans customers' temperatures and gathers contact tracing info. —A.E.



Ice Skate in Bryant Park

My favourite holiday activity is waking up at the crack of dawn on a weekday and hoofing it from my Brooklyn apartment to Bryant Park to be there when the winter ice rink opens at 8 a.m. In a normal year where Midtown is filled with in-office workers, you'll find fully dressed corporate folks in their hockey and ice skates, headphones in, getting in a few morning turns before heading to work. In the shadow of the New York Public Library, it's an urban winter wonderland. On weekday mornings, the rink—which is free if you have your own skates, or \$21-\$36 for rentals—is quiet, without the crowds (or kids) that usually show up on the weekends. This year, timed rink reservations are required, whether or not you need to rent skates, which means even more space to skate to your heart's content. —Meredith Carey



Shop for Christmas Ornaments in Little Italy

Not all of New York's tourist bait is equal. In Little Italy, walk right past The Godfather kitsch and mafia license plates and into the year-round Christmas store. I may be weird, but I love walking into a wonderland of glass ornaments, fluffy trees, and porcelain carollers in March as much as in December. While you're there, wander over to the stunning St. Patrick's Basilica, grab a cannoli at Caffé Palermo, or dig into a family-size portion of the Sunday Sauce at Aunt Jake's.



Slurp Frrozen Hot Chocolate at Serendipity

Some people stop by Serendipity with friends as a joke, in large part because of that 2001 movie by the same name. But the crowds keep going back, because even though the interiors can feel a little OTT Mad Hatter, the Frrozen Hot Chocolate (actual name) is so good that Oprah has called it “one of her favourite things” and Jackie Kennedy once asked for the recipe so she could serve it at the White House (she was denied). Come Christmastime, order the mint chocolate version to really get into the season. You can’t dine in this year, but taking that hot cocoa to go is a wintry delight anyhow.



Do a Holiday Pop-Up Bar Crawl

Starting almost immediately after Thanksgiving, several beloved bars in NYC string up holiday decorations—then go a step further, converting into full-blown seasonal pop-ups. Start at Miracle on 9th at Cabinet (on Resy), in Alphabet City, where the bathrooms sport subversive old-timey Santa scenes on the walls and the drinks menu is always different. This year, the SanTaRex—a play on mulled cider—is served in a T Rex mug. A 10-minute walk south, in the Lower East Side, is Beachbum Berry’s Sippin Santa at Boilermaker, which brings a tiki touch to all the holiday accoutrements. Yet further south in Brooklyn is Boerum Hill’s beloved Leyenda (on Resy), which becomes Sleyenda this season. It carries on the Latin theme with disco balls, Day of the Dead nutcrackers, and seasonal cocktails that make use of mezcal and tequila as creatively as they do rum and bourbon. If committing to a full mug is too much, tiny spiced shots are on offer, too. —Corina Quinn



Walk Through the West Village When It’s Totally Empty

There’s a mad rush of visitors leading up to the holidays, but if you’re actually in town on Christmas or New Year’s Day, there’s a dreamlike quiet that falls on the city. That’s when I love walking around one of the usually buzzy neighbourhoods, like the West Village, and taking my time looking into windows of stores (even if they’re closed), admiring brownstones, and walking in the middle of streets that are never going to be that empty again. Plus, because it’s New York City, undoubtedly some little bar will be open, so when your hands and feet start to numb you can duck in and defrost. Days like that remind me of why I love this city so much. —M.S.



Amble Around Central Park

For an ice queen such as myself, winter in New York is something to be adored, not feared. One of my favourite NYC activities is visiting Central Park on chilly December evenings, where I can (mostly) avoid the Fifth Avenue crowds while still feeling a part of the merriment. Ice skating at the Wollman rink and carriage riding are spectator sports for me, since I’d rather laugh at children falling down than actually don the skates myself. I can seriously stroll around the park for a couple hours and be fully content, hands in my pockets and Christmas music on my headphones. —Caitlin Morton



See the Botanical Garden's Holiday Train Show

If you're seeking a warm way to show out-of-town guests New York City, look no further than the New York Botanical Garden's Holiday Train Show. It's more natural wonderland than train show, but well worth the trek up to the Bronx: New York's concrete jungle becomes a dreamy forest landscape, each landmark made from found natural materials by artisans at Applied Imagination designs. It's the quickest way to tour the city's many neighbourhoods, and features stunning recreations of Yankee Stadium, the Chrysler Building, and more. Don't be shocked if you leave with an annual membership. —CNT Editors



Bask in the Met Christmas Tree's Glow

Duck out of the cold and into the Met's Great Hall, then head straight past the stairs to Gallery 305, where each year, the museum displays a 20-foot blue spruce in its Medieval Sculpture Hall. This ain't just any ol' tree display: there's also an eighteenth-century Neapolitan Nativity scene at its base, all backed by an eighteenth-century Spanish choir screen from the Cathedral of Valladolid. Plan your 2020 visit with a timed ticket or reservation.



Stroll by the Lights at Dyker Heights

For the past four years, I've taken the long subway ride out to Dyker Heights in Brooklyn to be awestruck by the dedicated neighbourhood of houses that go all out with holiday cheer. It's like Christmas exploded in everyone's yard, but in the best way. Giant inflatable lawn animals, motorized Santas, a mob of nutcrackers, and so many lights that you can barely tell what time of day it is. Inside tip: The specific blocks you'll find the most light displays are 11th to 13th Avenues from 83rd to 86th Streets. For a pick-me-up in the neighbourhood, grab a hot chocolate and a pastry at Panino Rustico. —Lara Kramer

