

## From small town squares to drive-through lights, where to take in the holidays this year

By Mary Beth Gahan  
Grapevine is known as the Christmas capital of Texas and features hundreds of activities throughout the holiday season.

Among the many public holiday celebrations across the state, it’s harder to find anything more Texan than a living nativity at a cowboy church. At Living for the Brand Cowboy Church in Athens, about halfway between Corsicana and Tyler, services are attended in Stetson hats and Ariat boots. There’s an arena on site where children are taught roping and barrel racing. And this December, for the second year in a row, the church will host a drive-through nativity with live animals.

The idea sprang up in the early days of the pandemic, mission leader Debbie Burleson said. Members of the church, which is nondenominational, wanted a way to safely spread the word about Living for the Brand, which relocated from Giddings in 2018, and to celebrate Christmas.

They had no budget for the nativity, so Burleson relied on members of the church to sew costumes. Area residents loaned animals - the church even found a handler who brought a camel. To draw a crowd to the free event, which took place for four nights, someone donated two sides of beef that had been processed. Each car received a ticket to be dropped into a bucket for one drawing after the nativity ended: two people would win a freezer full of beef. Word spread, all right.

The church expected to have fifty cars come by. The first night, they got “quite a few,” Burleson said. More came on day two. “By the third night, it was unbelievable,” she added. “We couldn’t even take a break.”

In all, 796 cars viewed the nativity, which included a donkey, cows, goats, sheep, chickens, and the camel. From 6 pm to 9 pm, December 16 - 19 of this year, the church, at 902 Texas Highway 7 Loop, will host both the nativity as well as the drawing for the beef - this time there will be four sides raffled off, each valued at around \$1,000.

Here are a few other select, mostly outdoor places around the state to get you into the holiday spirit.

### Abilene

The United Way Winter Lightfest is a one-stop shop for holiday fun. Walk through a tunnel of lights to arrive at the Christmas Village, where you can make s’mores in view of the sixty-foot tree of lights. There’s also a lighted maze, singing snowmen, and elf fuel at Mrs. Claus’s Snack Shack. The event, which is in its third year, starts November 26 and will feature nearly three million lights. Tickets for adults are \$15 at the gate and \$12 in advance online; children’s tickets are \$10 at the gate and \$7 in advance.

The Winter Lightfest is open on weekends and the week of Christmas from 6 pm to 10 pm.

### Austin

Now with more than two million lights, Trail of Lights at Zilker Park has been an annual tradition since 1965. It will once again be a drive-through event this year, with tunnels, almost a hundred lighted trees, and dozens of displays. Timed tickets start at \$30 for the 7 pm to 10 pm slot, or you can opt for the \$65 beat-the-crowds Dash Pass for early admission (5:45 pm - 7 pm) and a box of cookies. The Trail of Lights runs from November 27 to New Year’s Eve. Some nights are closed for private events.

### Cleveland

The Christmas Ranch light display started 36 years ago in Huntsville in an effort to win a neighborhood display contest. Each year, Bob and Diane Hanley added more lights. And in 1995, the family moved south to Cleveland and bought fifteen acres outside of town to accommodate a drive-through light display. This year, more than 300,000 lights will be strung between towering pine trees around twinkling reindeer, signs, and nutcrackers. Free and open to the public, the display runs from 6 pm - 10 pm nightly from Thanksgiving to New Year’s Day.

### El Paso

From now through January 2, El Paso’s popular WinterFest brings an ice-skating rink to downtown, hundreds of lights to San Jacinto Plaza, and all kinds of celebratory events, such as free holiday movies at the Plaza Theatre and readings at local libraries. Although the skating rink requires tickets for fifty-minute sessions, the majority of the events are free.

### Fredericksburg

The city’s German roots are on full display during Weihnachtszeit, or the Christmas

season, with the German Christmas Pyramid, handcrafted in the mother country in 2009, that stands 26 feet tall with a windmill on top and is decorated with figurines depicting holiday scenes. During the free Christmas Nights of Lights, which started this week, the Marktplatz and pyramid will be lit up each evening after an audio presentation. With the exceptions of December 3 and December 31, the nightly event runs through January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany, which is a public holiday in several German states.

### Georgetown

Georgetown’s square will be transformed on November 26 into a lighted wonderland worthy of being featured in a Hallmark movie, but another story will be on full display the first weekend of December. On December 3 - 4, the city’s fortieth annual Christmas Stroll will feature many family-friendly attractions and events, including desserts with the Grinch and a booth where kids can get their hair fixed in the style of residents of Whoville.

### Grapevine

We’re usually cautious with superlatives, but Grapevine really is the Christmas capital of Texas. The state legislature deemed it so in 2009. Tickets for the North Pole Express train with Santa went on sale in September and sold out by mid-November. But there are 1,399 other activities to enjoy in the city. From November 26-December 23, the Grapevine Christmas Village, on historic Main Street, will feature a 44-foot live Christmas tree, carolers clad in Victorian clothing, and an oversized Santa’s workshop where children can play the parts of elves. From now through January 2, the Gaylord Texan will be decked out in usual fashion with a life-size gingerbread house, 12,000 ornaments, and miniature train sets.

### Hidalgo

The Hidalgo Festival of Lights celebrates its thirtieth year with a modified, drive-through

format, but that doesn’t mean it’s any less fun. Once you drive into the parking lot of Payne Arena, turn the dial on your radio to a predesignated FM station and listen to holiday tunes as you take in more than five million lights. Drive-up concessions will be selling hot chocolate and other goodies to enjoy for the two-mile excursion. General-admission tickets are \$20 and must be purchased in advance for the celebration, which opens nightly at 6 pm from December 1 - January 2.

### Houston

While the animals sleep, take a walk around the Houston Zoo and enjoy light displays that take the creatures’ shapes. Now in its tenth year, Zoo Lights includes a 125-foot tunnel as well as an “underwater” adventure with jellyfish and other sea creatures. On December 6, there will be a sensory-friendly night with reduced noise, smaller crowds, and fewer flashing lights to accommodate guests who are sensitive to loud sounds and bright lights. Zoo Lights is running now through January 9 from 5:30 pm - 10:30 pm ticket prices range from around \$15 to \$25, depending on the day, and must be purchased in advance.

### Jefferson

This small city in East Texas puts a Bayou flair on the holidays. Stroll through the Enchanted Forest with 115 decorated trees and then take a candlelit tour of historic homes that are elaborately decorated for the season. Finish the weekend with a one-hour riverboat cruise on a lighted boat and learn the rich history of the area. Tickets for the tour of homes, which runs December 2 - 4 and December 9 - 11, are \$22.50 in advance. The Turning Basin Riverboat Tours run nightly from November 26 through December 20.

### Johnson City

Transport yourself back to the early twentieth century, when Lyndon B. Johnson was a boy in this part of the Hill Country.

There are lamplit tours of LBJ’s childhood home on Saturdays and horse-drawn carriage rides available for hire each weekend. From November 26 - January 2, as part of the thirty-first annual Lights Spectacular, the Pedernales Electric Cooperative headquarters will be lit up with more than 1.3 million tiny bulbs. The courthouse will also be draped with lights, and fireworks will kick off the season. Santa will be on-site each weekend for some social-distanced wish-granting: kids will sit on a bench near him.

### Palestine

If you’re a fan of hot chocolate, Santa, and riding old trains in pajamas, head to the Piney Woods for the Polar Express on the Texas State Railroad, leaving the station now through December 26. Once passengers are on board the steam locomotive, the crew members read the famous book out loud and pass out sweet treats. The trip includes a quick stop at the “North Pole” and singing of Christmas carols on the way back. Seating options range from Presidential Class to coach. Tickets range from \$30 to \$100 for the journey, which leaves from the train depot in Palestine and is about an hour round trip.

### San Antonio

Bluebonnets usually pop up in March, but the San Antonio Botanical Garden has them now - at least in light form. At Lightscape, a display with 100,000 lights, visitors can walk through a tunnel that mimics the vault of a cathedral to see a field of lights strung together to look like 2,500 of the state’s favorite springtime flower. To make a weekend of it, head toward the city center and stroll along the River Walk, where more than 2,000 strings of lights will be draped on the bald cypress trees that line the river. Lightscape runs now through January 2; tickets are \$25 for adults and \$18 for children over the age of two.

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