

Fairytale of New York

From traditional lights to cool-yule kitsch, the Big Apple puts on a glittering Christmas show.

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SORRY LONDON. BETTER luck next time Vienna and Prague. With the exception of wherever in the world your nearest and dearest happen to be, the best city in which to celebrate Christmas has to be New York.

Of course, if your idea of a perfect Christmas involves peace, quiet and goodwill to all men, you're free to disagree – this is still loud, unruly and rude New York, after all. But if you're looking for somewhere that makes you feel like a kid again – a place that mixes twinkling city lights, magical festive tradition and unabashed consumerism into a glorious festive stew – it's gotta be NYC.

If you're planning a Christmas trip to New York, it can be tempting to schedule it for the couple of weeks leading up to the big day, when festivities are at their height. But there's a lot to be said for arriving earlier to experience the holiday spirit without the worst of the holiday crowds.

The days following Thanksgiving (the fourth Thursday in November) are a great time to visit – the Christmas decorations are up, the department-store window displays have been unveiled and the deep-discount Thanksgiving sales are still going strong.

On the Wednesday after Thanksgiving the lights on the city's most famous Christmas tree, the gigantic Norway spruce at the Rockefeller Center (rockefellercenter.com), are illuminated, marking the unofficial start of the city's festive season. The event, dating back to 1933, continues to attract tens of thousands of rugged-up locals to see the lights



This page clockwise from left: Saks Fifth Avenue; the rink at the Rockefeller Centre; Radio City Music Hall decked out in lights. Opposite: The illuminated Empire State Building.



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switched on – following curtain-raiser performances from artists such as Dolly Parton and Neil Diamond – and millions more watch the TV simulcast from home.

From the moment the tree bursts into light, the Rockefeller Center becomes the glittering heart of Christmas in New York. In the shadow of the skyscraper affectionately known by its abbreviated street address, 30 Rock, skaters glide around the ice rink.

Around the corner at the art deco Radio City Music Hall, locals and tourists flock to the razzle-dazzle Christmas Spectacular, a bona fide New York holiday institution. It debuted the same year as the Rockefeller tree first lit up, and today the Spectacular

remains a 90-minute sprint through every festive tradition you can think of, from *The Nutcracker* to Santa's workshop to *The Night Before Christmas*, all shimmied along by the high-kicking precision dance troupe the Rockettes (rockettes.com/christmas).

It might not be the hottest Broadway ticket in town, but where else offers a nativity scene, complete with real camels and snowflake-shaped drones circling above the audience's heads?

After the show, wander back to Fifth Avenue to check out some of Manhattan's best department-store window displays. Even better, enjoy a cocktail or two at Bar SixtyFive, on the Rockefeller Center's 65th floor, and then venture out. This section of Fifth Avenue always has throngs of tourists, and triply so during holiday season. Waiting until most of them have gone to bed gives you the best chance at an unobstructed view of the enchanting Christmas displays at Saks Fifth Avenue, Tiffany & Co and Bergdorf Goodman.

Less crowded, but just as magical, is the Winter Village at Bryant Park (bryantpark.org), midtown Manhattan's favourite outdoor precinct. Here you'll find a

gorgeously decorated tree, an ice-skating rink that's far more atmospheric than the Rockefeller Center's (not to mention free to use – you only pay to rent skates), a carousel for the kids and a whole heap of retailers and independent food and drink vendors.

For a real taste of the American holiday spirit, order a hot apple cider from Big Apple Hard Cider (bigapplehardcider.com) and a truffle cheddar soft pretzel from Sigmund's Pretzels (sigmundnyc.com) before finding a park bench from which to enjoy the show. As "White Christmas" plays over the loudspeakers and the snow begins to fall, look up: you're surrounded by soaring skyscrapers, all lit up like 50-storey Christmas trees.

There are plenty of New York-set movies with memorable Christmas scenes, such as *When Harry Met Sally* and *Home Alone 2*, but none are more closely tied to the city than *Miracle on 34th Street*, the story of a

department-store Santa who might just be the real thing. The department store in question? Macy's (macys.com). The chain's national flagship, with 10 levels of shopping spread over an entire block, is one of the biggest department stores in the nation.

When it comes to Christmas windows, this is the granddaddy of them all – it was at this Macy's that the whole "Christmas windows as a shopper drawcard" concept was invented back in 1883. You can still view the old window displays commemorating the 1947 movie at Santaland (macys.com/santaland), the enormous enchanted forest/Santa's grotto/holiday wonderland on the store's eighth floor. Before you visit, go to the website and book in (you won't get in without a reservation), and then read David Sedaris' funny essay "Santaland Diaries", about his two seasons working as an elf at this Macy's store during the 1980s.

While much of New York holiday activity

centres on its premier retail thoroughfare, you'll find plenty of places away from the shopping hordes where you can still get into the spirit of the season. At the Merchant's House Museum in the East Village (merchantshouse.org), the annual performance of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* makes good use of the venue, a beautifully preserved 1832 house considered one of the finest examples of domestic architecture of the period.

At the other end of the cultural spectrum, but with a similar theme (and just as much charm), is *How the Grinch Stole Christmas! The Musical* (grinchmusical.com), a Broadway version of Dr Seuss' holiday classic performed at Hulu Theater at Madison Square Garden.

Up at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (metmuseum.org), the 6m spruce in the Medieval Sculpture Hall has become something of an institution, along with

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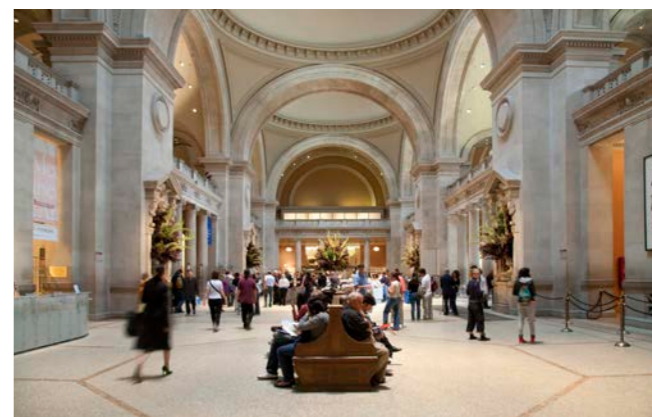
Clockwise from right: Sweet, sweet Gingerbread Lane; stalls and the Christmas tree at Bryant Park; Saks Fifth Avenue.



the beautiful 18th-century Neapolitan nativity scene displayed at its foot. If you're not all treed out, head east to Park Avenue, where the centre-strip trees stretching from 54th to 97th Streets are festooned with sparkling lights, a tradition that began 70 years ago to honour those who'd lost their lives in World War II. Further afield, the Gingerbread Lane exhibit at the New York Hall of Science in Queens (nysci.org/gingerbread-lane) wows kids with its Guinness World Record assortment of gingerbread houses.

Heading south to Brooklyn, the Dyker Heights Christmas Lights are a fair hike away, but worth the effort. Considered among the best displays in the US, these kitschy and flat-out bonkers illuminations cover about six blocks of a largely Italian neighbourhood in the borough's southern reaches. You can get there on the subway, but you won't regret joining A Slice of Brooklyn's (asliceofbrooklyn.com) bus tour.

After all that excitement, you deserve a drink. Find a seat at the bar, order a beer and fish around for some quarters for the jukebox. Your song? The Pogues' "Fairytale of New York" of course. "The boys of the NYPD choir were singing 'Galway Bay' and the bells were ringing out for Christmas Day". nycgo.com



From above: Macy's; in the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Christmas lights display at a house in Dyker Heights, Brooklyn.





From left: Reynards at Wythe Hotel; New York's famous Katz's Delicatessen.

Eat

KATZ'S DELICATESSEN

Because "the holidays" are as much about Hanukkah as Christmas, a classic Jewish pastrami sandwich is a must. Go to Katz's Deli, but read up on how to order first – it can be daunting for first-timers. katzsdelicatessen.com

BUBBY'S

Even in the city that never sleeps it can be tricky finding somewhere open on December 25. If a trip to Chinatown doesn't appeal, try Bubby's, where the Christmas Day brunch menu has, in the past, included Scandi-inspired dishes. bubbys.com

THE USUAL

The chef behind Los Angeles' famed diner Eggslut has just opened his first New York restaurant proper, a casually cool place where the dishes are American comfort staples with an immigrant spin. theusualnyc.com

Play

SLEEP NO MORE

The immersive theatre experience *Sleep No More* has been described as "like living inside a David Lynch dream" and "a lovely evening in hell!" – in a good way. This is a night at the theatre you'll never forget. mckittrickhotel.com

THE MORGAN

This complex of three buildings once owned by Pierpont Morgan and his son JP (of JP Morgan banking fame),

has a collection of art, rare books and manuscripts – including Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* – and an incredible private library. themorgan.org

BROOKLYN FLEA

Prefer your Christmas shopping with more of an indie vibe? Check out this weekend market at Industry City, a rejuvenated warehouse district in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. Browse the antiques, crafts, vintage clothes and used vinyl. brooklynflea.com

Sleep

REFINERY HOTEL

After lots of festive kitsch, coming back to the sleek Refinery Hotel is a blessed relief. The hotel, in a former millinery factory near Bryant Park, has a rooftop lounge with million-dollar views. refineryhotelnewyork.com

WYTHE HOTEL

For spectacular Manhattan views from another angle, book into the Wythe Hotel across the East River on the Williamsburg waterfront. Spend your days exploring Brooklyn's most lively neighbourhood, then enjoy dinner at the hotel's acclaimed plough-to-plate restaurant, Reynards. wythehotel.com

POD

Proving budget accommodation doesn't mean musty hostels, Pod, which has several hotels in the city, cuts prices by offering rooms with Zen-like minimalism. thepodhotel.com



Getting there

NEW YORK +

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