

Winter Festivals Without Walls

WINTER depresses temperatures, but it needn't lower the spirits. Through early spring, there are a number of opportunities to experience art, connect with culture, or engage with nature. From walking under Christo's billowing "gates" in New York to partying with whales in Hawaii, here are some notable outdoor winter events.

CHRISTO: 'THE GATES'
 Feb. 12-27
 Central Park
 New York
 212-310-6600
 (dial "311" if in New York)
 www.christojeanneclaude.net;
 www.centralparknyc.org

TWENTY-SIX YEARS in the planning—and the haggling with city officials over its logistics—the most expansive outdoor installation from husband-and-wife artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude unfurls next weekend in Manhattan, following their enclosure of the Berlin Reichstag and the Paris Pont Neuf bridge in fabric. Suspended from their 7,500 gates are saffron-hued synthetic woven panels intended to form a glimmering golden canopy over the park. This temporary "ceiling" is costing the artists \$20 million, but Central Park strollers get it for free during visiting hours, which are dawn to 1 a.m. daily. For the same price, an exhibition of 25 bronze sculptures by local artist Tom Otterness continues through March 18. His whimsical figurines are positioned on Broadway medians from 64th to 168th Sts.

A CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO TIMES SQUARE ADVERTISING
 Times Square Information Center
 Seventh Avenue between 46th and 47th Streets
 New York
 212-206-6674 ext. 206
 www.creativetime.org

WHEEL OF FORTUNE. Backed by local revivification associations, Creative Time and the Times Square Alliance, artist Christine Hill has devised a wheel-shaped tip sheet that, when spun, reveals the nitty-gritty underneath the neighborhood's tradition of hucksterism. A romp through the razzle-dazzle begins with a look at the Budweiser sign—set the decoder wheel to display eight facts about it (like how the company commits 11.67% of its total advertising dollars to its area presence), then move on to the next example. The wheel can be picked up through April 19 at places such as the Information Center, or it can be downloaded from the Creative Time web site.

CORNERSTONE FESTIVAL OF GARDENS
 23570 Highway 121
 Sonoma, Calif.
 707-933-3010
 www.cornerstonegardens.com

THE INTERNATIONAL Garden Festival at Chaumont-sur-Loire in France was the seed of inspiration for this first gallery-style garden in the United States, nestled in nine acres near wine country. Opened last July, Cornerstone set landscape architects and designers to work on 1,800-sq.-ft. parcels of land. Tom Leader's "Break Out" is a maze of screen doors that the artist says "draws on the vernacular culture of rural California," while Martha Schwartz's "The Usual Suspects" employs a miniature golf course setting. Admission is \$9 for adults, \$7.50 for seniors (age 65 and over), \$6.50 for students, and \$4 for children (ages 6-12). The gardens are currently open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily; summer hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.

SAN DIEGO BIRD FESTIVAL
 Through Feb. 13
 Marina Village Conference Center
 1936 Quivira Way
 San Diego, Calif.
 619-516-0139
 www.sandiegonaturefestivals.org/
 birdfest

FLIGHT PATTERNS. The extensive lineup of expeditions at this festival allows birdwatchers to compare notes on who saw such species as the California gnatcatcher, black-vented shearwater, and Xantus' murrelet. Members of the general public who can't quite tell a murrelet from a mockingbird but still have an interest in avian activity, can check out the free Exhibit Fair, held 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday, Feb. 12, and Sunday, Feb. 13, featuring tools of the trade like binoculars and spotting scopes, and bird-related art, books, clothing, and jewelry. A sunset walk along the San Diego River Channel, to observe ducks and herons in their native environment, is offered both days from 4 p.m. to 5:15 p.m., while fledglings can attend the "Little Salt Marsh Schoolhouse," a set of activities for young birders, on Saturday from 12 p.m. to 4 p.m.



Robert Dawson

Cowboy culture: The arts and activities of the Old West will be celebrated when Rawhide Wild West Town hosts the 15th annual **National Festival of the West** from March 17-20.

SPECTACULAR LIGHTS AND DECORATIONS SHOW
 Through Feb. 16
 Millennium Park
 Chicago
 312-742-1168
 www.millenniumpark.org

WHILE THE LIGHTS that marked the first holiday season for the Second City's premier downtown park have mostly been extinguished, enough remains to make an evening trip to enjoy its wintry mix of attractions worthwhile. A red-color wash down the Chase Promenade, and amber Italian lights in the trees twinkling along Michigan Avenue, will shine through Feb. 16. Evergreen trees, red and green eucalyptus, winterberry, and white pine and blueberry juniper also adorn the park, which is open from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily. And until the end of the month skaters can strut their stuff outdoors at the McCormick Tribune Ice Rink, from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. most evenings (admission is free; skate rentals are \$7).

MAUI'S WHALE DAY CELEBRATION
 Feb. 19
 Kalama Park
 (South Kihei Road in Kihei)
 Maui, Hawaii
 800-942-5311; 808-249-8811
 www.pacificwhale.org

MAUI'S HUMPBACK whales, weighing in at 45 tons apiece, are the stars of this day-long tribute. More than 8,000 landlubbers attend Whale Day, put on by the 25-year-old Pacific Whale Foundation, each year. The free festivities begin at 9 a.m., with the Parade of Whales, including an appearance by a

life-size whale balloon. From 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. there are activities that include a Learn-A-Thon about the species for children, hula performances, a silent auction (including bids on whale-watching excursions) and a craft fair featuring 100 artisans. Mainlanders who want to return to Maui next year can participate in the Wild and Wonderful Whale Regatta, a local variant on "rubber ducky" races with mockups of the marine mammals.

EDISON FESTIVAL OF LIGHT
 Through Feb. 20
 1300 Hendry St.
 Fort Myers, Fla.
 239-334-2999
 www.edisonfestival.org

BRIGHT IDEAS. Beginning in 1885, Thomas Edison retreated from the winter light of New Jersey to the more welcoming rays of Southwest Florida. Since 1938, Fort Myers has celebrated its famous vacationer with an annual array of public events that has evolved into the Edison Festival of Light. The festival, which kicked off on Jan. 29 with a science and inventors fair, has an outdoor block party tonight (6 p.m. to midnight; general admission is \$5, children under 12, free), a free display of local artists at its historical art district (at Clifford Street and Edison Avenue) tomorrow from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and a 157th birthday event for the inventor at his estate on Wednesday, Feb. 9 (9 a.m. to 4 p.m., free with guided tour). The closing weekend offers a free Crafts on the River event (10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday, Feb. 18 and Saturday, Feb. 19; 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 20). When the sun goes down that Saturday, the outdoor activity quotient rises with a stadium and

fireworks show, the Grand Parade, and the United States' largest nighttime foot race, the Edison Festival 5K, with more than 1,200 runners.

THE 15TH ANNUAL NATIONAL FESTIVAL OF THE WEST
 March 17-20
 Rawhide Wild West Town
 23023 N. Scottsdale Rd.
 at Pinnacle Peak
 Scottsdale, Ariz.
 602-996-4387
 www.festivalofthewest.com

WANNABE COWPOKES can head to this Western-themed town for a taste of life on the trail. Its arena is home to a shooting competition, where cowboys and cowgirls attired for the frontier fire blank ammo at balloon targets from horseback and compete for Grand American Championship titles. Visitors can rough it at the Mountain Man Rendezvous and Sutler's Row, styled after the trade camps of the fur-trade era, or bring home some rugs and gear purchased at the Western Trade Show. Gates open at 10 a.m. Festival admission is \$12 for adults, \$11 for seniors (\$6 on Thursday, March 17), and \$4 for children (free for ages 12 and under on Friday, March 18); a four-day pass is \$40.

THE 19TH ANNUAL TENNESSEE WILLIAMS/NEW ORLEANS LITERARY FESTIVAL
 March 30 to April 3
 Various locations
 New Orleans
 504-581-1144
 www.tennesseewilliams.net

A "STELLA" EXPERIENCE. The enduring legacy of the playwright famed for "A Streetcar Named Desire" is explored at this event, which unfolds throughout French Quarter locations such as the Le Petit Theater and the Cabildo Museum and attracts 10,000 acolytes. Befitting a bookish celebration, many events take place indoors, with conferences for aspiring writers, theatrical performances, and literary panels. But this year, attendees can also get out and see the Big Easy as Williams might have, as the festival puts on a scavenger hunt that rummages through some of his favorite haunts (Wednesday, March 30, at 6:30 p.m.). The festivals also sponsors a series of walking tours (\$20 a person), which in addition to taking in Williams' homes and hangouts rambles around its cemeteries, bars, restaurants, and locales seen in the movies.

THE 11TH ANNUAL DEEP ELLUM ARTS FESTIVAL
 April 1-3
 Deep Ellum Entertainment District
 Main Street (between Good Latimer and Hall Street)
 Dallas
 800-538-1881; 214-855-1881
 www.deepellumartsfestival.com

THE EDGE OF TEXAS. Dallas's answer to the Greenwich Village scene is the site of a free outdoor street party that brings musicians, performers, and artists to the city for three days of entertainment. The organizers promise "no 'kid' stuff" and plan to deliver poetry slams and fashion shows for the 100,000 attendees, not to mention the lavishly decorated "Art Cars" parked throughout the district. Guests can chow down on the Mexican, Caribbean, Asian, and Mediterranean cuisine that will be served up and though children may feel slighted, pets get their own parade, which begins 11 a.m. on Sunday, Apr. 3. Hours are 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. Friday, Apr. 1, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. on Saturday, Apr. 2, and 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Sunday, Apr. 3.

Up and Coming

Tift Merritt,
 Singer-Songwriter

SINGER-SONGWRITER Tift Merritt never considered herself a musician. "I come at all of this as a writer," she says, having studied creative writing at the University of North Carolina. The songs on her two albums, "Bramble Rose" from 2002 and the recent "Tambourine," have a real storytelling bent, detailing the rise and fall of relationships with an author's eye. "Eudora Welty is a real influence," she says. "She said so much in a few sentences."

Ms. Merritt may have been a writer first, but she was drawn toward performing while still in college. Lost Highway records signed her at 26. Her first record had a soft country sound (it was on several 2002 top-10 lists, receiving praise from Time and The New Yorker), while the new one has a harder edge, more roots music, with influences of Dusty Springfield, the duo of Delaney and Bonnie and singer Maria McKee (who sings backup on a couple of tracks). "Tambourine" was produced by George Drakoulias, who has produced records by the Jayhawks and Tom Petty, among others. He elicits from Ms. Merritt a more rough-and-tumble sound than her first record has. This



Roberto D'Este

one reflects her live shows, "which are a little more rock and roll," she says. The song "Stray Paper" has gotten a lot of radio play, and the first single from the album, "Good Hearted Man," has a soulful 1960s feel.

"Her tone is really pure," says Mr. Drakoulias. For this record, he tried to give a kind of Memphis soul sound, as on old Wilson Pickett records, he says. Ms. Merritt is up for a Grammy Award for best country album. She's on a brief tour, and appears at Liquid Joe's in St. Lake City next Tuesday at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$10. 801-467-5637.

—Robert J. Hughes

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL WEEKEND JOURNAL

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