



ICE! — a 15,000-square-foot installation carved from 2 million pounds of ice — can make for warm memories.

NATIONAL DISPLAYS

All visitors making their way through Washington, D.C., should begin at President's Park, where the National Christmas Tree and the Pathway to Peace — 56 trees (representing every U.S. state, territory and district) decorated with one-of-a-kind ornaments made by Americans will be illuminated from 5 to 11 p.m. daily through Jan. 1. Nearby, at the Ellipse, Santa's Workshop offers the kiddies an opportunity to glimpse St. Nick and his elves busy in their workshop before they head off to deliver presents on Christmas Eve. Check the schedule for nightly musical performances. Admission is free (thenationaltree.org).

Also near the Ellipse is the National Hanukkah Menorah, which will be lit in a public ceremony at 4 p.m. Dec. 20 (nationalmenorah.org).

After lingering in President's Park, head over to the National Zoo. Designed by Frederick Olmsted, the zoo is headlining the season with ZooLights, a free program that delivers an alternative encounter with



The National Christmas Tree, after this year's lighting, is a D.C. holiday bright spot.

animals. The twinkling grounds light up against the night sky, while massive animated sculptures and the zoo's unscripted residents entertain visitors of all ages (through Jan. 1, nationalzoo.si.edu).

ICE

If you're looking to get your skate on, the National Gallery of Art's Sculpture Garden Ice Rink welcomes skaters through mid-March.

Glide along to music while ogling the magnificent sculptures on the grounds of one of the premier galleries in the country (\$7-\$8, plus \$3 skate rental, nga.gov).

Don't skate, but love the cold? You're in luck. One of the most

eagerly anticipated holiday events — ICE! — takes place at the National Harbor's Gaylord Hotel. This year, the 15,000-square-foot installation carved from 2 million pounds of ice draws inspiration from DreamWorks' "Merry Madagascar" holiday TV special.

Stroll through the exhibit and relive the story of Santa's crash into the island of Madagascar. The show is open daily through Jan. 8 (\$25-\$35 adults, \$20-\$30 ages 4-12; nationalharbor.com).

TRAINS

Like handcrafted gingerbread houses, model train displays are an integral part of any holiday experience. For some of the best, make your way over to Union Station. This year's display is three times the size of last year's — model trains from other railroad time periods

also can be seen (free, through Jan. 1, unionstationdc.com).

More trains? The U.S. Botanic Garden offers another train display, one that chugs through a Washington reinvented in plant-based miniatures. The exhibit, called "Season's Greenings," is free and also runs through Jan. 1 (usb.gov).



These boys are on the right track at "Season's Greenings," a plant-festooned train exhibit at the U.S. Botanic Garden.

SHOPPING

Whether you're buying for loved ones or office grab bags, the markets of D.C. are ready for gift-giving. Locals swear by the Downtown Holiday Market, which runs through Dec. 23. Centered at Eighth and F streets across from the Smithsonian's American Art Museum, this market sells everything from jewelry to ceramics to clothing and antiques (downtownholidaymarket.com).

For hard-core shoppers, Merriment in Georgetown is 12 days of sales, tastings and events (through Dec. 20, merrimentingeorgetown.com).

EAT AND DRINK

It's hard not to indulge over the holidays, and with hot new restaurants springing up all over the city, the question of where to dine in D.C. has become difficult.

AmericaEats Tavern is 2011 James Beard Award winner Jose Andres' pop-up restaurant, which explores uniquely American foods like flavored ketchups — oyster or gooseberry, anyone? — (\$3), Cobb salad (\$16) and eggs Benedict (\$16) (americaeats.tavern.com).

"Top Chef" runner-up Mike Isabella is giving Andres a run for his money with the highly praised Graffiato. An Italian-inspired menu of small plates, killer pizzas (\$14-\$18) and refined pastas (\$9-\$19) is served in a funky rock-and-roll dining room (graffiatodc.com).

For drinks, cozy up to the fireplace in Georgetown's swank Ritz-Carlton, a magnet for D.C.'s hippest resident (ritzcarlton.com).

Washington wonderland

Start with 2 million pounds of ice, elves and wishes for peace on Earth

BY MARIE ELENA MARTINEZ Special to Newsday

Though it's a city more closely associated with party politics than rollicking parties, our nation's capital knows how to celebrate — especially during the holidays.

Officially, the season kicked off at the beginning of the month with the lighting of the National Christmas Tree (in a tradition started by Jackie Kennedy in 1961), and this year's White House holiday theme is "Shine, Give, Share." Unofficially, though, a slew of festive performances, holiday menus and off-the-beaten-path experiences — many of which are free — await the D.C.-bound. So, if you've grown tired of miracles on 34th Street, jump a Delta shuttle or get comfy on Amtrak, and find your way south for a patriotic holiday escape.



Go see it, everyone: "A Christmas Carol" is a Christmas staple at Ford's Theatre.

PERFORMANCES

A holiday season just isn't a holiday season without a staging of "The Nutcracker," and this year, D.C. offers two localized versions of the tale. The Washington Ballet's "Nutcracker" is quintessentially Washington, recasting the Nutcracker Prince as George Washington and the dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy as the dance of the Cherry Blossoms. The setting? A Georgetown mansion, of course (\$40-\$110 through Dec. 24, washingtonballet.org).

The other D.C. "Nutcracker" is Duke Ellington's jazzed-up version of Tchaikovsky's classic score. In this incarnation, which is being showcased by Eric Felton's Jazz Orchestra at Blues Alley, a posh supper club, native

Ellington reimaged such roles as the Sugar Plum Fairy as sassy "Sugar Rum Cherry" (\$25, 8 and 10 p.m. Dec. 15, bluesalley.com).

Another perennial fan favorite around Christmastime is Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." Playing on the grounds of the 1865 assassination of President Lincoln, the historic Ford's Theatre will witness the arrival of ghosts of Christmases Past, Present and Future as they lead the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge on a journey of transformation and redemption. (\$57-\$65 through Dec. 31, fords.org).

ON THE COVER The U.S. Capitol Christmas tree shines on the west front lawn of the building.

MEET SANTA

Christmas wouldn't feel complete without logging some one-on-one time with the man himself, so make time for Brunch With Santa at the Kennedy Center's Roof Terrace Restaurant. A lavish affair with hand-shucked oysters and made-to-order omelets — the skyline views, live jazz and a keepsake from Santa himself are added treats (\$39.99 adults, \$20 ages 4-11; 10 a.m. Dec. 17-18, kennedy-center.org).

If you can't make it to brunch, be sure to find your way to the Potomac River on Christmas Eve. There, watch the annual appearance of



Santa Claus is waterskiing to town as he glides down the Potomac.

Waterskiing Santa, his kneeboarding reindeer whipping down the Potomac as people cheer from the banks. Tip: The best views are from the National Harbor in Maryland (1 p.m. sharp Dec. 24, waterskiingsanta.com).