Rudolph's Holly Jolly™ Christmas Light Parade at Silver Dollar City.

An Ozark Mountain Christmas

"America's Christmas Tree City," Branson, Missouri, rolls out the red-and-green carpet to visitors looking to immerse themselves in cheer and goodwill.

STORY BY PATTI VERBANAS

If Santa, the missus, and their band of merry elves weren't so busy getting the sled ready, likely they'd be in Branson, Missouri. Starting on November 1, the town transforms into a winter wonderland with events, festivals, and a blanket of holiday décor so festive that the bright memories will carry you warmly through the impending winter's chill.

When it comes to this jolly holiday, Branson holds the crown. Cited as one of the best Christmas destinations in America by national media like *The Today Show*, the Travel Channel, and *The Wall Street Journal*, Branson also has been named "America's Christmas Tree City" for four years straight, and for good reason: Last year, the community-wide event boasted more than 1,700 Christmas trees, some more than 25 feet tall.

Miles of lights radiate out from the town center, beckoning travelers—*come on, this way!*—bringing the magic of the season to life with homespun charm. Following is our Christmas List of favorite events and places to visit:

OH COME LET US ADORE HIM!

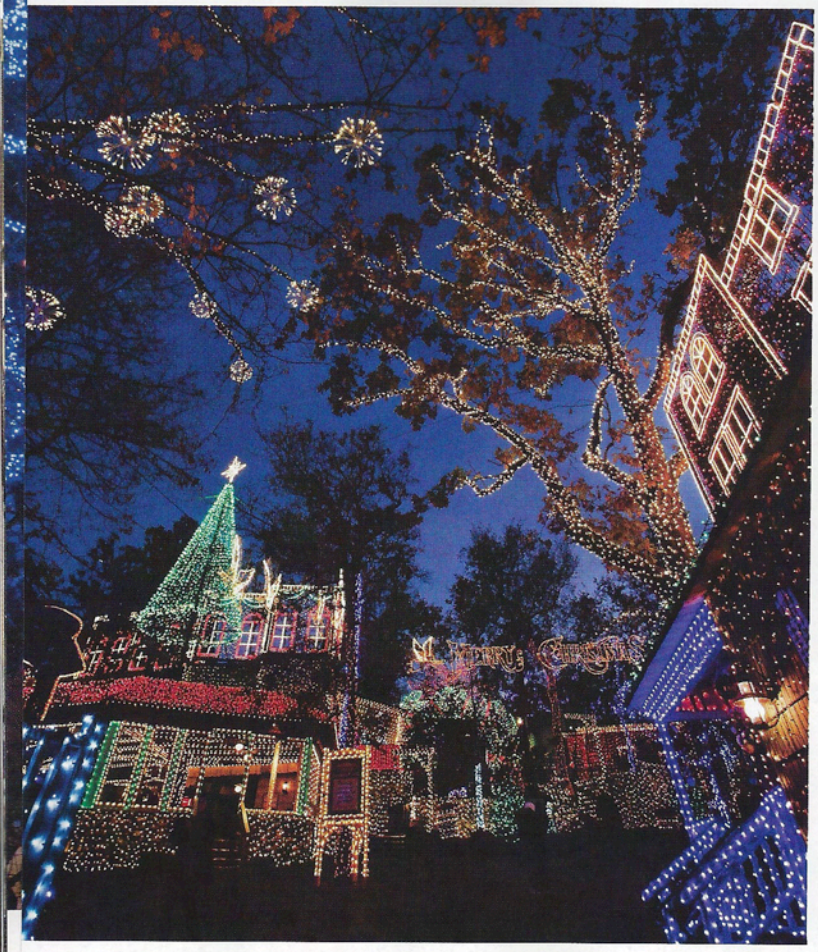
The holiday season in Branson includes the Adoration Celebration, now in its 71st year. The 2019 event occurs at dusk on December 8, when the Nativity scene, populated by 28-foot-tall figures on top of Mt. Branson, is lit. This non-commercial event recalls the true meaning of Christmas and gives participants a chance to reflect on the pure wonder and joy of the season.

EVERYONE DANCIN' MERRILY IN THE NEW OLD FASHIONED WAY

Branson is known for its blockbuster shows, and Christmas is an occasion for the stars to put out their best sparkle and shine. Book tickets to a holiday show from any one of Branson's top-tier acts and entertaining families: Clay Cooper, Doug Gabriel, the Baldknobbers, Presleys, Osmonds, Lennons, Duttons, Haygoods, Bretts, The Petersens, SIX, and the Hughes Brothers. Want to go *really* big? The Hughes Family Christmas show stars not only the five guys, but their entire family of close to 50 people. Now, that's a family reunion to remember!

GOODNESS & LIGHT

Branson's Gift of Lights drive-through Christmas light display features over 300 super-bright LED lights from November 1 to January 1. Hear the story of Christ's birth set to synchronized



LEFT: Christmas in Midtown® at Silver Dollar City, featuring 1.5 million lights.
BELOW: The Garden Chapel at Big Cedar Lodge.

lights, embark on the Santa Safari, weave through a forest of Christmas trees, time-travel to prehistoric times, and see Noah's Ark in a new light—literally.

Promised Land Zoo transforms into a sparkling wonderland every night in the holiday season. Santa's Safari Village is two miles of jaw-dropping light displays, and VIP admission allows you to travel on a climate-controlled tour bus and meet and feed the safari animals.

The Trail of Lights, Branson's original drive-through display, has been delighting families who have wound their way through the 160-acre Shepherd of the Hills Homestead for 29 years. New this year is "The North Pole Adventure," a walk-through experience that takes you through thousands of twinkling lights and past hot chocolate stands and artisan crafts.

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Make Big Cedar Lodge your home for the holidays, and you'll have a Christmas to remember. Starting on the night of November 29 through the holiday season, parents can arrange for elves or Santa to visit their children in their rooms at night to read them a story, take photos, and leave them goodies. Or bring the kids to the Elves' Workshop, which features a Christmas movie, hot chocolate, and a ceramic ornament that guests can paint and keep.

Feel nostalgic as you lace up your ice skates and circle around a large interactive Christmas tree on the synthetic ice rink, which is rimmed with glittery lights, or embark on a scavenger hunt seeking holiday ornaments, which you can then use to decorate a wreath to take home, or go on the hunt for the ubiquitous Elves on the Shelf—snap a picture of the mischievous creatures when you find them and receive a prize.

Other events include a Gingerbread Build-Off; tree lighting ceremonies; stocking decorating; storytime and baking with Mrs. Claus; a Kids' Club Tree Decorating Pajama Party; and a celebration of the 12 Days of Christmas from December 13 to 24, with each day featuring a special activity. You can also soak in the season by joining fellow guests on a holiday light tour. Offered every day but Sunday from November 19 to December 30, the tour takes guests on a festive tram ride through twinkling lights, complete with Christmas carols, blankets and hot chocolate.

Then, with Rudolph's nose a twinkle on the horizon, you can usher Baby New Year in style with celebrations designed specifically for children, teens and adults.

BRING HIM SILVER & GOLD

Silver Dollar City rings in the season with its acclaimed holiday festival, an Old Time Christmas, which features the Christmas in Midtown Light Spectacular, Rudolph's Holly Jolly Christmas Light Parade with musical, lighted floats accompanied by 33 costumed characters, an all-new towering 8-story video-motion Christmas tree, two Broadway-style Christmas productions, and 6.5 million lights, plus rides, handcrafted shopping, and holiday dining specialties.

The 1880s-style theme park hosts two Broadway-style productions that complement dozens of star-filled Christmas music shows in Branson. During *An Old Time Christmas*, Silver Dollar City is open Thursdays—Sundays beginning November 2, plus Wednesdays Nov. 20 through December 18, and open after Christmas Dec. 26-30. Hours, schedules, and more at silverdollarcity.com

O CHRISTMAS TREE!

You'll find Christmas trees everywhere: traditionally decorated trees, natural trees strung with holiday lights, and even "creative" trees formed from unusual objects, in unique shapes, or set in one-of-a-kind displays are sure to delight. Can you imagine the 25-foot-tall tree created by Track Family Fun Parks with its 500 upcycled go-kart tires?

One of the best selfie spots is in front of the tree in front of the Sight & Sound Theatre: It's a breathtaking 46 feet tall, with a six-foot star on top, more than 4,300 LED lights, and 1,260 ornaments. &