

RALEIGH, N.C. — In a season that has lost a measure of joy to COVID-19, attractions across [North Carolina](#) buoy spirits with new celebrations and adjusted traditions that embrace the wonder of the holidays while being mindful of safety. For travelers wary of gathering close to extended family and friends, these events can be scaled to the size of a household with social distancing and other precautions in place.

“With the Greensboro Science Center’s new [Winter Wonderlights](#), WRAL’s [Nights of Lights](#) and Greensboro Ballet’s drive-in ‘[Nutcracker](#),’ it’s clear that North Carolina will keep its heart in the holidays,” said Wit Tuttell, director of Visit North Carolina. “We can also find comfort and cheer in longstanding favorites that have creatively adjusted in the interest of safety. Though we will miss events that have been canceled, the experiences of 2020 will make their return even sweeter as we reflect on everything that lends meaning to the season.”

Tuttell encourages trip planners to use the [Count On Me NC](#) website as a reference when looking for hotels, restaurants and activities. This statewide initiative centers on free, evidence-based training to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and calls on consumers to wear masks, wash their hands frequently and wait at a safe social distance to help keep everyone safe. Travelers can also find details online about specific protocols for any given place or activity.

Here’s a look at what’s new and retooled for the 2020 holidays.

Winter Wonderlights

Greensboro Science Center, Greensboro

What better place for a fresh take on the holidays than a destination with a brand new celebration. [Winter Wonderlights](#) transforms the zoo at Greensboro Science Center into a holidayscape of 12 Magical Realms of light, color and excitement. Outdoor experiences include a walk through the Ice Age, a forest of light and a fountain featuring dancing penguins. Visitors can also head indoors to visit Santa, hear carolers and see a giant living snow globe. *Through Jan. 3*

Tanglewood Park Festival of Lights

Tanglewood Park, Clemmons

Though the Holiday Village is closed, fresh displays dazzle visitors along the 5-mile wooded route that makes the [Tanglewood Park Festival of Lights](#) a perennial favorite. The sights are enhanced by original music from UNC School of the Arts Music Technology students. Families and small groups can reserve a horse-drawn carriage ride or tractor-pulled hayride. Book an [RV campsite](#), the [Manor House Inn](#) or other Tanglewood lodging for free admission. *Nov. 13-Jan. 1*

N.C. Transportation Museum in Lights, Candy Cane Train

Salisbury

Having canceled its Polar Express run, the N.C. Transportation Museum creates a new [drive-through lights display](#) plus a limited-capacity Candy Cane Train ride. Lights will be displayed along a 1.25-mile route with an option to visit a satellite gift shop to see Santa for a socially distanced photo. *Nov. 20-Dec. 30* The [Candy Cane Train](#), running weekends, offers a from-the-rails view of the museum grounds and includes music, hot chocolate and cookies in the 1905 Back Shop. *Nov. 21-Dec. 20*

Other train rides

Tweetsie Railroad in Blowing Rock, the Wild West theme park benched by COVID-19, reopens at reduced capacity for [Tweetsie Christmas](#) with its historic steam engine pulling the train through

an adorned mountain landscape. Rides and other activities are also available. *Nov. 13-Dec. 31*
Great Smoky Mountain Railroad in Bryson City adds social distancing and other measures for its popular [Polar Express](#) excursion. Stop by the town's iconic red caboose for a family selfie. *Through Dec. 31*

Winter Lights

North Carolina Arboretum, Asheville

This Frederick Law Olmsted-inspired attraction converts [Winter Lights](#) from a pedestrian experience to a milelong drive. Designed to showcase the natural landscape, the displays feature colorful native butterflies and winter wildlife with a special insect-themed lantern exhibit on view. *Nov. 20-Jan. 10*

Speedway Christmas

Charlotte Motor Speedway, Concord

The Christmas Village is closed, but the bright lights and movie nights are ample reason to hit [Speedway Christmas](#). Hear seasonal tunes as you drive the 3.75-mile course used by NASCAR champions and see displays created with 4 million LED lights. Thursday through Sunday, guests can park in front the Speedway's giant screen to watch a holiday movie. Speedway Christmas is presented by Count On Me NC. *Nov. 21-Jan. 17*

Taste of the Season

Carowinds, Charlotte

After spending summer on the sidelines, Carowinds reopens for [Taste of the Season](#), a stand-in for the amusement park's full-scale Winterfest. The outdoor event centers on holiday sweets and savories while also offering shows, shopping and family rides. *Nov. 21-Dec. 20*

Enchanted Airlie

Airlie Gardens, Wilmington

Santa and concessions are MIA, but the brilliance still shines at [Enchanted Airlie](#) on a self-guided stroll set to music. Outside food and beverage are allowed. *Nov. 27-Dec. 22*

Lighting of the Lake

White Lake

The resort town of White Lake brightens the holidays with a new [Lighting of the Lake Holiday Dock Decorating Contest](#). Travelers can follow the signs to four vantage points to see the displays, then cast a vote for their favorite. *Nov. 28-Dec. 24*

Chetola Resort Festival of Lights

Blowing Rock

Visitors can expect wellness checks and mask reminders as they enter [Chetola Resort](#) for the free light show at the 87-acre property. Cruisers are allowed to park at the lake and walk around to see the new Nativity scene, glittering skaters and other displays. *Nov. 29-Jan. 31*

Deck the Trees

Monte Vista Hotel, Black Mountain

For its 10th installment, the historic Monte Vista extends its [Deck the Trees](#) display into the artsy downtown to help with social distancing. The move also allows the addition of 18 trees to the dozen on view in the hotel lobby. The event is a fund-raiser for the Swannanoa Valley Christian Ministry Fuel Fund. *Dec. 3-Jan. 4*

Holiday Cheer at the Palace

Tryon Palace, New Bern

Outdoor activities become the centerpiece for 250th birthday of North Carolina's original Capitol. [Holiday Cheer at the Palace](#) features circus acts and militia demonstrations in the afternoon plus evening performances by the Tryon Palace Fife and Drum Corps and its Jonkonnu company, which re-enacts a celebration tracing back to Jamaica and the slave ships from West Africa. Walkthroughs of the reconstructed palace's first floor require separate tickets. *Dec. 12 and 19*

Nights of Lights

Dorothea Dix Park, Raleigh

Dix Park, a 308-acre expanse on the edge of downtown, becomes the scene of the new [Nights of Lights](#) experience. From safe inside their cars, visitors can drive the 1.3-mile route to see oak trees

draped in lights, themed displays and new art installations. WRAL-TV partnered with the City of Raleigh and Artsposure/First Night to create the event at Dix Park, which was acquired by the city in 2015 with aspirations to make it a model for civic space. *Dec. 16-31 with Raleigh's traditional New Year's Eve acorn drop Dec. 30-31*

"The Nutcracker"

Greensboro Ballet, Greensboro

To address this year's "Nutcracker" shortage, [Greensboro Ballet](#) adds masks to the costumes, puts the dancers' onstage and films the performance for drive-in showings in the Greensboro Coliseum parking lot. In addition to the masks, the production includes other touches that acknowledge the challenges imposed by COVID-19. *Dec. 18-20*

Find more events and information at [VisitNC.com/holiday](https://www.visitnc.com/holiday).

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