

Lyon's Festival of Lights

Story and photos by Genevieve Northup



Museum of Fine Arts, Place des Terreaux

Revelers endure damp December nights to witness art and technology intersect at Lyon's Fête des Lumières, an illumination festival that mesmerizes first-time spectators and discerning locals who've attended for years.

Celebrating With Light

According to the event's official website, Lyon's celebration of light began in 1852. In September, a ceremony to commemorate a new Virgin Mary statue was cancelled because of river flooding. On Dec. 8, heavy showers delayed the rescheduled soiree. Residents placed candles in their windows and congregated outside when the rain ceased in the evening.

Each Dec. 8 after, citizens lit their home exteriors with colorful candle votives. This tradition, and a 1996 municipal project to install permanent lighting on monuments, sparked today's festival.

Fête des Lumières

The next Fête des Lumières is Saturday to Tuesday, Dec. 5-8, 2015. Most installations are open nightly from 6 p.m. to midnight, but some are scheduled at select times. In 2014, 75 exhibits included abstract lanterns, pulsing LEDs, theatrical performances, processions, fireworks, animated graphics synced to music, and three-dimensional light art shaped like flowers, marionettes and more.

The Fête Experience

The old town becomes an impromptu Christmas market, where cheery families set up picnic tables and hand-written signs to promote homemade mulled wine, soup and baked treats. They chant "Vin chaud!" (hot wine), hoping to win the attention of passersby.

Last year, I returned over and over to a stand for the best mulled wine I've ever had (determined after my first sip, not my third glass).

When macarons caught my eye, the teen who wrapped the confections looked proudly at me and said his mother made them. Those macarons had richer flavors and cheaper price tags than some I'd purchased at exclusive *confiseries* earlier in the day.

Amid this market chaos is a shared sense of anticipation as visitors shimmy and shuffle for clear views of each exhibition. Even the inebriated are silent as the music crescendos and brilliant projections transport everyone from France to the Russian ballet, outer space and Asia. Displays at the Cathédrale Saint-Jean, Musée des Beaux-Arts and L'Opéra at Place Des Terreaux and Place Bellecour command attention.

Want to join the party in 2015? Turn the page for trip planning tips.

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Navigating the Streets

Pick up the free program featuring photos, descriptions and maps at the Place Bellecour tourism office. Or download an app of the program at www.fetedeslumieres.lyon.fr/en. Then plan your route based on what you want to see the most. Be aware that foot traffic must enter and exit some squares or streets one way.

You can sign up for a guided bus or boat tour with OnlyLyon, www.en.lyon-france.com. However, it's cheaper to explore independently by foot, metro and tram. Lyon's public transit network provides discounted tickets from early evening. Some stops are not serviced on these busy nights, so read signs carefully.

The festivities are entertaining for little ones, but pushing strollers around can be challenging. Start at 6 p.m., before the streets get really congested and kiddos get cranky.

Finding Time for Dinner

Dining out leaves fewer hours at the show, but a sit-down dinner is a peaceful escape to thaw cold noses, rest tired feet and map out your next stops. We had pleasant meals both nights: fresh maki at Miko's Sushi and French set menus at Victoria Hall.

Sadly, we missed a traditional Lyonnaise meal at a *bouchon*. These casual eateries serve hearty, locally sourced meat dishes, cheese and sausage. For a list of certified *bouchons*, see www.lesbouchonslyonnais.org/en. Plan ahead because they are frequently *complet* (fully booked) on Saturdays and closed Sundays.

Before contacting restaurants, check www.thefork.com. We saved 30 percent on our sushi meal by reserving a table online.

Seeing Lyon in Daylight

The old town is quaint and crowded during the day, but Rue Victor Hugo and Rue de la République promise worthy budget-friendly shopping and restaurants. For a bit of breathing room, browse the shops on the Rhône River's east bank. Arrive early to hunt for DIY furniture crafts, vintage jewelry and original artwork at the Sunday Canal Market.

Ride the funicular up Fourvière Hill for a walk around the amphitheater ruins and Gallo-Roman Museum. The museum has a well-organized collection of Roman artifacts and no lines — I highly recommend it.

Go to a bakery and try the vibrant pink sweets seen around the city. The Lyonnaise praline tarte is a mixture of melted red candied almonds and cream in a shortbread shell.

Arranging Lodging

Most hotels in the city are sold out by now or have sky-high prices — don't panic! Browse hotels outside the city that are along a metro, train or bus line that reaches Lyon. Check U.S. and French versions of booking sites. For something closer, search room/apartment rentals in Lyon using www.airbnb.com, www.windu.com, www.vrbo.com, www.9flats.com and www.homeaway.com. If you're driving, look for a place with on-site parking or a nearby garage because street parking is scarce.

Reaching Lyon

The trip to Lyon takes between 5.5 and 7 hours by train or car from Frankfurt, Wiesbaden, Stuttgart or Kaiserslautern. Add at least an hour if departing from Bavaria. Direct flights are available from Cologne, Frankfurt and Düsseldorf. ■



Discover where the illuminations of Europe's grandest lighting event will take you this year.



Tunnel, Voûtes sous Perrache