

LIGHT UP THE *Night*

CELEBRATE NEW YEAR'S EVE WITH FESTIVITIES TO FIT EVERY TASTE.

by ANDREW MYERS

The Times Square ball drop of 1,070 pounds, 504 Waterford crystals, 600 light bulbs and a billion viewers? Edible fireworks by top toques such as Thomas Keller, José Andrés or David Chang? A celestial view from a five-star suite? Or not.

Regardless of price point or pocketbook, there's a constellation of choices across the country, each so memorable it won't be soon forgotten to "Auld Lang Syne."



LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

The perennial party place, Las Vegas doesn't disappoint with its full house of special New Year's Eve "one-night-only" events and extravaganzas. But the biggest cavalcade isn't in the casinos or theaters. Rather, it's on Las Vegas Boulevard, a.k.a., The Strip, the bulk of which becomes a vehicle-free promenade where revelers can mingle, tipple and tilt their heads skyward to catch the full gamut of fireworks shot from the surrounding tower tops—a gratis jackpot. vegas.com/newyears ▶



Photo: Courtesy American Queen

American Queen

RIVER ROYALTY

If Mark Twain were alive, the author and erstwhile river pilot would likely signal the *American Queen* and come aboard for its nine-day, Memphis-to-New Orleans Lower Mississippi Cruise.

The largest steamboat ever built, the 418-foot, six-deck recreation of a 19th-century "paddle-wheel palace" was launched in 1995, and inaugurated a new program of luxurious river jaunts last spring. Décor is high American Victorian with all the opulent tasseled and swagged fixin's a Southern belle or beau might expect. Passengers are fueled in three restaurants, all with menus overseen by Natchez-native and celebrity chef Regina Charboneau; fêted by the likes of the Glenn Miller Orchestra; intellectually fed with onboard lectures by the likes of "riverlorians"; and entertained by on-shore excursions to destinations such as Louisiana's Oak Alley plantation.

December 27-January 4. Suites and deluxe staterooms with private verandas from \$3,195-5,795. americanqueensteamboatcompany.com

SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

This antebellum beauty might be most famous for its historic squares and as the eccentric setting for the bestselling *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (referred to locally as "the book"), but it also likes a straightforward party. City Market's annual outdoor street party, a free fete open to the public, sets the tune with live music from 9 p.m. until 1 a.m.—long after the last of the spectacular fireworks launched from neighboring Tybee Island. For a mix of historicism paired with sit-down sustenance (think: lobster tails and beef tenderloin) followed by dancing, there's also a four-hour cruise aboard a traditional stern-wheel riverboat. savannahcitymarket.com; savannahriverboat.com

WASHINGTON, D.C.

It might not be "Midnight in Paris," but a New Year's Eve dinner-drinks cruise on the *Bateau Mouche*-like *Odyssey* (in this case, a modern, multi-tiered yacht) shows the monuments of Washington, D.C., with similar grandeur. The three-and-a-half-hour New Year's Eve merrymaking begins at 8 p.m., with a launch onto the Potomac an hour later. Then it's dinner (an omnivore's delight with meat, seafood and vegetarian choices ranging from caramelized duck en croustade, a seafood mélange and roasted vegetable Napoleon), deck strolling, a Viennese dessert table and chocolate fountain, and a midnight champagne toast under the gaze of Abe and Thomas (as in Lincoln and Jefferson). Over 21; \$252.57 per person. odysseycruises.com

Odyssey Cruises also launches from Chicago's Navy Pier onto Lake Michigan for a New Year's Eve fireworks, dinner, drinks and dancing cruise. ▶



BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Called "First Night" and not "Last Night" because of its progressive orientation, First Night Boston is the oldest and largest New Year's Eve celebration in North America. More than 1,000 artists in 200 performances at 40 indoor and outdoor venues comprise the day-long mosaic that includes: large-scale outdoor performances; monumental ice sculptures (each at least 30 tons); a family-friendly festival featuring interactive installations, dance performances and face painting; dozens of evening concerts and dance parties; a live, televised countdown from Copley Square; and midnight fireworks over Boston Harbor.

Outdoor events are free, though supported by sales of the First Night button (\$18, children under four, free), which grants you admission to all indoor events. firstnight.org

EVERGREEN, COLORADO

Gliding into the New Year is entirely possible at Evergreen's Skate the Lake Winter Festival. An annual no-alcohol event since 1996, the steel-bladed, family-oriented event offers music, food vendors, ice golf, two firework displays (at 8 p.m. and midnight respectively) and open-lake skating across frozen Evergreen Lake.

And for those who need a cold dunk the following day (for any number of reasons), there's the Evergreen Lake Plunge. Priced at \$20 and \$25, both benefit Drive Smart, a local organization dedicated to preventing traffic-related fatalities and injuries.

5280host.com/drive-smart/skate-the-lake

SANTA ROSA, CALIFORNIA

Going wild on New Year's Eve is simply a given at Safari West, a private 400-acre wildlife preserve in Sonoma County. It's home to more than 700 exotic, endangered and extinct-in-the-wild African mammals and birds—omnivores, herbivores and carnivores (oh my!), including cheetah, scimitar-horned oryx, Cape buffalo, Nile lechwe, zebras, springbok and gazelle. The private preserve, established in 1989 and a member of the prestigious (and protective) Zoo and Aquarium Association, focuses on the propagation of endangered species, which includes raising public awareness and understanding of these exotic friends. Hence, visitors can safari on the Sonoma Serengeti, stay in a luxury tent (high on stilts with all the expected amenities), dine al fresco while watching giraffes gambol, enjoy a massage and local wines, and participate in any number of private game drives, among them "Twilight Safari and Dinner." New Year's Eve packages start at \$500 for two. safariwest.com

LIVINGSTON MANOR, NEW YORK

Fireworks need not only be external. At Dai Bosatsu Zendo Kongo-ji, a Zen monastery set on 1,400 acres in New York's Catskill Mountains, they might well be internal. The New Year's Eve ceremony begins with a seated meditation session and spiritual discussion, and before midnight, progresses to a nearby hill where a temple gong is struck 108 times to cast off 108 delusions, including baseness and greed, all according to an ancient Buddhist practice governing repentance. New Year's Eve Celebration, December 31 to January 1, \$250. daibosatsu.org ▶



Photo: Mark Sullivan/Barral

Midnight Run



Photo: Thomas McGraw/Elle

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

A bit of “Brideshead Revisited,” an echo of “Downton Abbey” and an evocation of trans-ocean travel when glamour came in tidal waves, the *RMS Queen Mary* hosted many a legendary party from its launch in the 1930s through its decommission in the late 1960s. Moored in Long Beach since 1967, the ship is now a floating hotel, museum and event center. Nevertheless, the frolics and fetes continue, particularly on New Year’s Eve. The night’s itinerary includes seven unique venues, live entertainment (such as ’70s, ’80s and ’90s cover bands), a playlist of DJs, strolling entertainers and dinner packages in the ship’s three restaurants, as well as a buffet in the Grand Salon. Never mind the light show at midnight, and don’t even think Titanic. They’re fireworks, not flares. The only danger is drowning in champagne. From \$109. queenmary.com

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Running from the New Year’s Eve crowd becomes literal with Manhattan’s Emerald Nuts Midnight Run. The four-mile race through Central Park, a 33-year tradition, starts at midnight. The first burst of fireworks marks the start, whereupon thousands of reveling racers, many in costume, kick off the New Year in a sprint, jog, walk or roll along the park’s “inner loop.” First-place male and female finishers receive \$500, and there are other cash incentives. But regardless of speed or finishing place, all participants can partake in a costume parade and dancing at the Central Park Bandshell. From \$25–65. nyrr.org

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

Midnight fireworks on the San Francisco waterfront mean postcard skyline and bay and bridge views made even more eye-popping by pyrotechnics. But you can improve the spectacle still further if you view the panorama from a kayak on the bay’s pitch-dark water. For nearly a decade, Ted Choi, owner of City Kayak, has led New Year’s Eve excursions that paddle past landmarks—the illuminated Coit Tower atop Telegraph Hill, the Ferry Building and entire Embarcadero—before pausing near the Bay Bridge to watch the celestial explosions of diadems, dahlias and chrysanthemums. Choi limits the group to approximately 30 paddlers and calls the hour-and-a-half adventure “not too long and not too short. And not too hard.” Approximately \$104; rudimentary kayaking experience recommended. citykayak.com ♦