The Mission Inn’s Fantastical Festival of Lights

By: J.Tracy Hermann

One of the oft-overlooked – at least to newcomers to the area – crown jewels of the Inland Empire is the historic Mission Inn of Riverside.
Although the Inn encompasses a full downtown city block, this luxurious and palatial hideaway that has played host to both Hollywood socialite and foreign dignitary, is tucked neatly out of sight and sound of the nearby freeways: California Highways 91 and 60 and Interstate Highway 215, which pass just a few hundred yards from the hotel’s front door.

From Thanksgiving to mid-January, this National Historic Landmark Hotel is awash with color and brilliance as part of its Festival of Lights, a spectacle that includes over 2,000,000 lights and an array of greenery and decor, transforming this already-magnificent structure into a fantastical vision of holiday glory.

The event has become an annual tradition for many locals and is well worth the hour-long drive from our desert floor. “Must sees” include the Spanish Patio, Court of Birds and prominent Queen Palms located in front of the hotel — presenting a stunning arrangement of colored lights in various shapes and sizes. Both Main Street and Orange Street, which run adjacent to the hotel, feature spectacular displays in their own right, including an orchestra of animated musicians dressed in 17th century costumes and conducted by an eight-foot Santa Claus.

From Thursday through Sunday during the holiday season, Dickens Carolers stroll the halls of the hotel singing yuletide favorites, further adding to the magical ambiance of the hotel.

In 1876, the Mission Inn had a humble beginning as the Glenwood, a two-story, 12-room, adobe boarding house in the center of Riverside, which had begun its boom as the capital of the thriving navel orange industry.The city had deeded the plot of land to a surveyor, Captain Christopher Columbus Miller, as payment for services rendered. Miller later sold the land, and the boarding house, to his eldest son Frank, for the bargain price of $5,000. Over time, the younger Miller transformed the small establishment into a first-class hotel, adding wings in the Mission Revivalstyle architecture: first, the Cloister Wing in 1910; then, the Spanish Wing circa 1913 to 1914, and finally, an International Rotunda Wing in 1931. Historical tours are offered daily at a cost of $12 per person. Reservations are highly recommended and can be made via the Mission Inn Museum, 951-788-9556.

Today, the Inn also boasts the Inland Empire’s only AAA Four Diamond rated restaurant, Duane’s, and a variety of other restaurants. Call the restaurant reservation line toll free at 888-326-4448.

Whatever the time of year, the Mission Inn is truly a showcase of beauty, antiquity and charm, and a “must see” for visitors to the Inland Empire and beyond.

The Mission Inn 3649 Mission Inn Avenue Riverside, California, 92501 951-784-0300 www.missioninn.com Directions Take Interstate Highway 10 west to California Highway 60 west merging to California Highway 91 (Riverside/Beach Cities). Exit Mission Inn Avenue, and turn right. Travel three blocks, and you’ll find the inn on the right.

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