



FUN AS THE DICKENS!

Victorian-themed events are in style this Christmas season.

STORY: MARY ANN DESANTIS

Maybe it was the popularity of “Downton Abbey” and the sorrow over its final episode that spurred a wave of Victorian-themed Christmas events this year. Or it could have been the resurgence of information about Queen Victoria, who had the first indoor Christmas tree in Great Britain. Whatever the reason, Florida has embraced Charles Dickens-style celebrations. Here are a few we’ve found close to home to entertain and inspire the entire family.

“CHRISTMAS SPECTACULAR!” HOLIDAY HOME TOUR

Through Jan. 15
Stetson Mansion, Deland
stetsonmansion.com

If friends and family are visiting this holiday season, you don’t have to drive far to find an authentic Victorian home filled with enough elaborate decorations to bestow the Christmas spirit on any Scrooge in your party.

The Stetson Mansion, built in 1886 for famed hatmaker

John B. Stetson, had one of the first Christmas trees ever illuminated by electric lights, courtesy of Stetson’s good friend Thomas A. Edison. The



Singers photo: Deremer Studios, LLC; Stetson Mansion photo: Mary Ann Desantis



mansion is Florida's oldest historic home still being used as a private residence.

Current owners JT Thompson and Michael Solari are now into the seventh year of opening their home for holiday tours. The themes are always different and more breathtaking each year as decorations from around the world adorn every room—even a secret closet.

"The Victorians began our modern traditions of Christmas trees and gift giving, so what better place to go to than an authentic Victorian mansion," says mansion tour guide Jo Anne Heinle. "Our tours bring you through all the rooms on the first and second floors. We expect about 12,000

visitors this year, so it really is a festive time here at the mansion."

This year, the Christmas Spectacular! tour comprises seven different themes, and each scene is composed of hundreds of hand-placed decorative items.

"We close the mansion for two months so JT can devote every day to install every painstaking detail," Michael says. "It is amazing to watch his love for the season provide such original inspiration. I have seen more than one guest tear up when looking at his dramatic interpretations."

With so many visitors and limited space, reservations are required. Guided tours are

offered three times daily and often sell out quickly.

Just in case you can't get to the Stetson Mansion in December, the guided tours continue through Jan. 15. Holiday visitors get two extra bonuses this year: the Christmas ticket entitles them to free admission as many times as they wish to return from February to September for the history tours when they bring a paying guest, and they also will receive a free chocolate-covered strawberry at Pat and Toni's Sweet Things in downtown DeLand.



Stetson Mansion piano: Joey Maxwell; Stetson Mansion horse: Mary Ann DeSanitis; Dickens on Centre photos: Deremer Studios LLC; Dressing Downtown photos provided by FloridaHistoricCoast.com; Victorian Christmas Stroll photo by Tony DeSanitis

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—JO ANNE HEINLE



Downtown Fernandina Beach, FL

DICKENS ON CENTRE

Dec. 8-10
Downtown Fernandina Beach on Amelia Island
ameliaisland.com

Fernandina Beach on Amelia Island in northwest Florida transforms itself into a classic Victorian village for three days as the town's main street hosts the third annual Dickens on Centre.

Set for Dec. 8-10, this free event is sure to convince any Grinch to get jolly. Inspired by Dickens' novella, "A Christmas Carol," the festivities include chestnuts roasting, carolers strolling, and themed entertainment. Each evening, Santa arrives, followed by a retelling of "Twas the Night Before Christmas." Visitors are also encouraged to dress up in Victorian-style garb.



How it all began

At the beginning of the 19th century, Christmas hardly was celebrated. Even businesses did not consider it to be an important holiday. The change occurred when Britain's Queen Victoria married German-born Prince Albert, and he brought many

of his German traditions to England. Soon after a drawing appeared in the newspaper of the royals around a Christmas tree, almost every home in Britain had a tree bedecked with candles, sweets, fruit, handmade decorations, and small gifts.

Charles Dickens' novella, "A Christmas Carol," is credited with helping to popularize Christmas with its themes of family, charity, goodwill, peace and happiness, which encapsulated the spirit of a Victorian Christmas.

Source: bbc.co.uk/victorianchristmas

VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS STROLL

Dec. 1-23
Henry Plant Museum, Tampa
plantmuseum.com

It's easy to picture what a real Victorian Christmas looked like in 1890 when Henry B. Plant brought the first railroad to Tampa. Just walk into this ornate museum, which was the former Tampa Bay Hotel, and you'll find 14 rooms filled with trimmed trees, joyous carolers, and stockings hung with care on all the fireplaces.

The Victorian Christmas Stroll event transforms the museum with Christmas trees ranging in height from a few inches to more than 14 feet,

40,000 lights, and hundreds of feet of garland. Decorations include vintage fashions, antique toys, locally sourced cigar boxes, and fanciful ornaments.

Celebrate the warmth and spirit of an old-fashioned holiday with complimentary cider and cookies on the veranda. Guests also can enjoy live music from 6-8pm each day.



"DRESSING DOWNTON: CHANGING FASHION FOR CHANGING TIMES"

Through Jan. 7
Lightner Museum, St. Augustine
lightnermuseum.org

Christmas in St. Augustine always is a festive treat with its internationally known Nights of Lights celebration. This year, the historic Lightner Museum has an added bonus for holiday visitors looking for turn-of-the-century nostalgia.

"Dressing Downtown: Changing Fashion for Changing Times" is an exquisite exhibition featuring 36 costumes and accessories from



the popular PBS series. The items are displayed among Otto Lightner's collection of 19th-century fine art and furniture. Many of the museum pieces have been in storage and are on view for the first time as part of this exhibition.

The exhibition presents a costume history of the period surrounding World War I, a period that changed the social fabric of Great Britain. The "Dressing Downtown" exhibition has been a

phenomenon at every museum it has been displayed. The Lightner Museum—known for its Victorian-era artifacts—is the exhibition's final stop.



St. Augustine, FL



Tampa, FL