

December Nights holiday festival finds new format to be bright idea

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A new December Nights format got rather jolly reviews last night, with many festival-goers enjoying the dozens of food and craft vendors added to the Balboa Park holiday event this year.

"It's a nice thing to have the food spread out and the crafts," said Leslie Johnson Leech of San Diego, who was strolling past a circle of vendor booths near the Reuben H. Fleet Science Center. "We are just enjoying the space."

Patty Amador of La Mesa echoed the feeling. "Everyone's not on top of each other. That's nice," she said.

Against significant odds, the 27-year-old holiday event kicked off smoothly last night. Sizable crowds packed into Spreckels Organ Pavilion to hear choirs sing yuletide classics, and at least one museum had a line out front before opening its doors for free admission during the festival. Organizers estimated that 45,000 to 50,000 people attended.

A visitor might not have guessed that December Nights was canceled in July because of a lack of money. The city stepped in the next month and, with the help of last-minute corporate donations, resurrected the San Diego tradition that park volunteers had previously run.

To shore up budgets for future festivals, city organizers added more professional food vendors than before. Craft booths were introduced. A carnival-style midway was added. And the new attractions were

spread across the park, instead of being clustered around the organ pavilion.

Some feared the result would be too commercial, sullyng the homeyness of the longtime event.

"Part of me was saying it takes away from the traditional Christmas things," said Christina Naumanuf of San Diego, who was standing with her children in front of a carnival ride.

"But the kids like it, and God knows we want to keep them happy," she said.

Cindy Duley of Chula Vista happily watched her family whipping around on a ride.

"This is a nice thing for the kids. It gives a little break from just-adult things," such as museums, Duley said.

The Lyons family warmed right up to the new restaurant tasting concept on the Cabrillo Bridge. About 20 local eateries dished out appetizer-sized items from their menus. Customers paid with tickets bought from city-run booths.

"It's fun. They need to do this every year," said Beth Lyons of San Diego, as her family stood at a high-top table set up on the bridge, munching from their little dishes.

"It's good because you don't get full and you can try everything," said her daughter, Katie.

The Hard Rock Cafe San Diego stand was doing enough business to satisfy its manager.

"It's great to be able to reach this many people," said sales manager Joanna Train, whose booth featured the Hard Rock's cobbler dessert.

Festival-goers also took the city up on its offer of more shuttles from distant parking lots. Buses coming from the County Administration Building to the park's west side were mostly full in the first few hours.

The festival continues today from noon to 10 p.m.

Organizers decided to try daylight hours this year in another effort to spread out the crowds. In the past, the park has been jammed with 100,000 visitors.

Known for years as Christmas on the Prado, the park's holiday festival started in 1978. Back then, it was a holiday thank you to San Diegans from park institutions. It was also a way to get people shopping in museum gift shops.

Now, with several stages of live entertainment, it has become one of the city's largest free outdoor festivals.

For more information on December Nights, visit the park's Web site, www.balboapark.org.

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