Holiday Festival of Lights (HFOL) Trivia and Fact Sheet

Festival History

- In 1989, Hurricane Hugo destroyed 90% of James Island County Park's trees that were planned to be the framework of the Holiday Festival of Lights, turning the festival's focus from lighted trees to light displays for its 1990 debut.
- In 1990, the Holiday Festival of Lights premiered and attracted 85,000 visitors with only 18 light displays over a two-mile route.
- The festival's first 18 light displays were made by Bernie Pettit in Wheeling, WV. Retired Light Show Supervisor Rich Raab built each display afterward. His first light display was "Santa on the Roof" at the Park Center. All of the other light displays were (and are today) constructed on-site by park staff at James Island County Park.
- In 1994, the Fun Run and Walk was added as a preview to the festival.
- In 1996, Santa added the Holiday Festival of Lights to his schedule and continues to visit with thousands of boys and girls each year.
- In 2010, event staff introduced the children's Light Display Design Contest, where kids submit their ideas for a new display at next year's festival. Winning displays have featured a Ferris wheel (installed in 2011), and the South Carolina state flag (installed in 2012), a penguin sliding down an ice berg (2013), a seal pup (2014), the pineapple fountain (2015), and a dog stuffing a stocking (2016). 2015 marked the final year the contest was offered, but the winning displays are a permanent part of the event.



The Light Displays

- All but 18 of the light displays were constructed on-site by park staff.
- The first animated light display, depicting the Jack-in-the-Box, was programmed and operated by a computer donated to James Island County Park in 1990. The display is now on its third computer.
- The festival features various themed sections, including Sea Land, Dinosaur Land, Candy Land, and Toy Land.
- Lowcountry and Charleston landmarks are also depicted in lights, including Fort Sumter, Rainbow Row, the Cooper and Ravenel Bridges, the USS Yorktown, St. Michael's Church, and others.
- The Light Show Crew works year-round to design, build, construct and breakdown the festival.
- It takes between six to ten weeks to create one light display.
- The life span of a light display is about five years prior to reconditioning.
- An estimated 23 miles of rebar has been used to create the festival's displays.
- The **Ravenel Bridge** light display is 30 feet tall and roughly the length of a football field.
- The giant lighted Oak Tree takes 80 hours to complete, and is composed of 10,000 lights.
- The golfing Santa display hits a hole in one every time, at a distance of 220 feet.
- The festival's 750 displays are comprised of over 1,000 pieces that are stored within 28 trailers in the off-season.
- There are 2,500 breakers and 40 transformers used to power all of the festival's displays, and it takes a full hour to turn on and off the show each night.

The Festival By The Numbers....

- Though organizers have lost count, it is estimated that there **are over two million lights shining bright** at the festival.
- Throughout its 37-year span, more than 5 million people have toured the Holiday Festival of Lights.
- An estimated 25,000 hot cocoas and 19,000 marshmallow sticks are sold on the festival grounds each year.
- The festival trains take approximately 40,000 guests through the park woods and around the lake each year.
- The carousel whirls about 30,000 riders around each year.



- In 2015, the festival's attendance was 244,795 people in over 65,000 vehicles, which was the highest number of visitors ever reported. In 2016, the festival saw over 13,000 visitors in one evening.
- It takes about one week and 50 tons of sand to construct the **giant holiday sand sculpture**, which is held together with a mixture of glue and water. At the end of the show, the sand is placed in the dog park to renourish the lake's beach.
- Over 100 local businesses and organizations contribute to the success and growth of the event through sponsorship.
- Each year, the festival staff generally see license plates from all 50 states.
- Many staff members from various divisions of the Charleston County Park & Recreation Commission commit volunteer evening hours throughout October to hand-string thousands of mini-lights on trees, shrubbery and other areas along the road – the goal being not to have "one dark spot." The involvement by so many different people contributes to the uniqueness of the Festival. There are about 10,000 strands of these lights strung each year, or 500,000 individual "mini" lights, covering 75 different locations throughout the festival.
- The Festival relies heavily on volunteers for checking and replacing an estimated 180,000 light bulbs and working at the Festival once it opens. A primary source of volunteers is the Campground Host Club, which donates over 4,100 hours each year. This club consists of 18 couples who travel around the country in their RVs, and reunite each year in Charleston to volunteer at the Holiday Festival of Lights.
- During the Festival, around 8 tons of waste is recycled from the park and its campground.
- The Giant Greeting Cards are 4x8 feet in size, and are created by local schools each year as part of an art competition.

Accolades

- 2022 & 2023: HFOL named Best Lowcountry Event by ***The Post & Courier's*** **Charleston's Choice**
- 2018 and 2013: HFOL voted one of the **top 20 events in the Southeast** by the Southeast Tourism Society
- 2015: HFOL named 3rd **Best Public Holiday Festival** in the US by *USA Today's* 10Best Readers' Choice Award
- 2014: HFOL named the 3rd **Best Public Lights Display** in the US by *USA Today's* 10Best Readers' Choice Award
- 2012: Moscow's Festival of Festivals featured the Holiday Festival of Lights as its event representative from the US. Pictures of the Holiday Festival of Lights were projected onto the Moscow Central House of Artists as part of the Circle of Light Festival.



- 2011: The American Bus Association named HFOL one of the **Top 100 Events in North America** for 2012.
- HFOL has also received national attention from the *Travel Channel*, *the Wall Street Journal*, AOL, The Discovery Channel, *Coastal Living* and *Southern Living,* among others.