

# City of Lights

EL PASO dazzles  
with holiday lights and luminarias.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY AL BRADEN



VIEW FROM RIM ROAD

**WHEN I WAS GROWING UP IN EL PASO,** three things characterized the city: **Mount Franklin, football mania, and the skyline at night.**

The city's topography and relative lack of vegetation make the night lights extraordinary. And at Christmas, El Pasoans go all out: Every neighborhood decorates; everyone celebrates the season. There's the exuberance of the Eastwood neighborhood, the brilliant luminarias surrounding Pennsylvania Circle, the city's own Christmas tree at San Jacinto Plaza, the decorated homes of Rim Road, and—of course—the huge star on Mount Franklin.



VIEW OF EL PASO AND JUÁREZ



PENNSYLVANIA CIRCLE NEIGHBORHOOD

El Paso Electric Company employees erected the city's famous "Star on the Mountain" on the face of Mount Franklin in 1940. The original star, which stood 50 feet wide, was destroyed by storms in its first season, but rebuilt in 1946 to its present 459-by-278-foot size.

My sister, Elaine, and I remember riding to Cotton Street in the 1950s in the back of Dad's pickup, bundled up and excited about watching the annual star-lighting. This event always kicked off our family's celebration of the season. Although the star was originally lit only for the Christmas holidays, in 1993, it became a year-round symbol of the city. For many residents, it will always be the "Christmas Star."

**EL PASO'S HEART, San Jacinto Plaza is the center** of the local holiday spectacle. The plaza shines in a spellbinding display of some 5,000 lights capping a 55-foot tree. Following the tree-lighting, traditionally held on the first Saturday of December, El Paso's Holiday Light Parade winds its way around the plaza and downtown streets to the delight of more than 60,000 residents and visitors.

If you're fortunate enough to be in El Paso on Christmas Eve, make your way to the historic Austin Terrace area and find Pennsylvania Circle and the surrounding Cumberland Circle. The round park, lined with fine older homes, is easy to miss, but what a gem! Residents here have been making Christmas Eve special for generations. On this night, glowing luminarias line all of the sidewalks, driveways, and curbs—completing the circle and making this a place to linger.



SANTA DRIVES A 1960 CADILLAC

Also take a drive up to Rim Road, just north of downtown, a neighborhood of elegantly decorated homes with a great view of the city. The home of Dr. Mike Velazquez and his wife, Blanca, features their classic 1960 Cadillac outlined with white lights flanked by an inflatable Santa. Rim Road takes you to directly to Scenic Drive, which affords an overview of the entire El Paso del Norte Valley, including both El Paso and Juárez, Mexico. Another eye-popping sight is the techno-industrial display at Western Refining on Trowbridge Drive, where the oil refinery twinkles for the holidays in red, green, and blue lights.

**\*webextra**  
See [www.texashighways.com](http://www.texashighways.com) for illuminating Q&As with Eastridge and Rim Road residents.

**ON THE EAST SIDE OF TOWN, Eastridge-area residents**

go crazy with Christmas lights. What began as a decorating contest between two neighbors in the early 1960s has turned into a neighborhood-wide passion. Most of the neighbors have been building and adding to their decorations for years, and they produce a wild display of colors and themes.

Ed and Pat Hazleton are among the many who take part in the annual Eastridge festivities. “There are 104 homes in the area, and all but a few have lights,” Ed says. He borrows a hydraulic lift to put lights on the top of his towering yucca plants and then helps neighbors with their high decorations. The scene is amazing: those dazzling yuccas, rows and rows of houses fully outlined in lights, yard decorations of every description—some sacred, some patriotic, some Texana-themed, some celebrating the owners’ brand of school spirit—and Santas everywhere!



SAN JACINTO PLAZA



LUMINARIAS AT SOCORRO MISSION

Luminarias become part of the scene on Christmas Eve. Thousands of glowing candles—lining yards, drives, and sidewalks—grace the area, adding a spiritual calm. Traffic moves slower, and many neighbors and visitors walk quietly, enjoying the decorations up close.

### **SOME 15 MILES** southeast of downtown, **El Paso's**

active, historic missions are always a must for me when I'm home for the holidays. Luminarias trace the outline of San Elizario Mission, where Mass (in English and Spanish) is celebrated on Christmas Eve. The Las Posadas event is held two weeks earlier; luminarias fill the streets and the adjoining plaza for the evening as celebrants re-create Joseph and Mary's search for an inn.

At Socorro Mission, which recently underwent a major restoration using adobe bricks handmade by members of the community, the Christmas Eve Children's Mass and the Midnight Mass are held at the church hall to accommodate the large number of people. But the historic chapel is decorated and open for visitors..

And at Ysleta del Sur Mission, founded in 1682 to serve the people of Tigua Pueblo, decorations in the sanctuary include a manger filled with the symbols of faith of both the Tigua Pueblo and the Catholic Church. Christmas Eve Masses are held next door at our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, but the historic mission remains open. At midnight, members of the Tigua Pueblo hold a traditional dance in the mission courtyard, blending their Native American and Catholic traditions as they have for more than 300 years.

Long may these traditions continue—and long may El Paso glow. ★

---

Austin-based photographer AL BRADEN enjoyed spending Christmas in El Paso last year. "I felt at peace, as I hope *Texas Highways'* readers will, when they visit this special, exquisite city of lights."

### essentials SHINE ON

**EL PASO** Parks and Recreation Dept. decorates **San Jacinto Plaza**. The 2008 Tree Lighting ceremony will be Sat., Dec. 6, from 4:30-6 p.m., followed by the Holiday Light Parade from 6-7. The "Sounds of the Holidays" will feature different musical groups at the Plaza from 5-6 p.m., Mon-Fri, during the weeks of Dec. 8 and 15. For details, call 915/554-5436; [www.ci.el-paso.tx.us/parks](http://www.ci.el-paso.tx.us/parks). For more on El Paso, contact the **El Paso Convention and Visitors Bureau**, One Civic Center Plaza, at 915/534-0601 or 800/351-6024; [www.elpasocvb.com](http://www.elpasocvb.com).

The **Eastridge** neighborhood is east of McRae Blvd. and just south of Eastwood High School. Light displays are up from early Dec. through the end of the year. Luminarias are featured only on Christmas Eve.

**Pennsylvania Circle's** entrance can be reached from the 4600 block of Hastings Dr., just across from St. Anthony's Seminary, or from Trowbridge Dr., one block east of Radford St. Don't miss the luminarias on Christmas Eve.

For schedules of Mass and Christmas celebrations at the missions, contact the following churches: **Ysleta Mission**, Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, 131 South Zaragoza Rd., 915/859-9848; [www.ysletamission.org](http://www.ysletamission.org). **Socorro Mission**, 10041 Socorro Rd., 915/859-7718. **San Elizario Mission**, 1556 San Elizario Rd. (in San Elizario), 915/851-2333. For more on the **El Paso Mission Trail**, call the **El Paso Mission Trail Assn.** at 915/851-9991 or 915/534-0600; [www.themissiontrail.net](http://www.themissiontrail.net).