

NYBG annual Train Show celebrates 20th anniversary with panache

By Phyllis A.S. Boros, Staff Writer

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Jaunts, an occasional feature, highlights destinations of interest for day-trippers.

Describing the New York Botanical Garden's annual holiday offering as a "train show" would be a lot like characterizing Santa Claus as "a guy with a white beard."

The statements are true, of course, but fall miserably short in conveying the magic and wonder that each exudes.

At the NYBG, the 20th annual Holiday Train Show is under way through Jan. 16 in the garden's Enid A. Haupt Conservatory, a spectacular Victorian glasshouse.

Train buffs will no doubt be impressed with the more than a dozen large-scale model trains dating from the late 1880s -- American steam engines, streetcars and trolleys to modern freight and passenger trains -- as they travel on nearly a quarter-mile of ground-level tracks and across bridges, through tunnels, past dramatic waterfalls and along overhead trestles.

But it's so much more than a train exhibit, as one New Fairfield woman noted.

"If you miss this show, you've missed Christmas," said Rowena Rawlings, who was visiting with her husband, Bob, and their adult son Steven, a NYBG member who lives in Manhattan.

A source of awe, especially for Rowena, are the more than 140 miniature iconic homes and buildings past and present around which the trains travel that are created from natural materials such as bark, twigs, stems, fruits, seeds and pine cones by Paul Busse and his company, Applied Imagination, of Alexandria, Ky.

On display, for example: the magnificent Pennsylvania Station, built in 1910 and destroyed in 1964 to make way for a new Madison Square Garden; the Statue of Liberty; the Brooklyn and George Washington bridges; Ellis Island Immigration Museum; the New York Public Library; the Jewish Museum; St. Patrick's Cathedral; and Rockefeller Center.

"This has been on my 'bucket list' for a while," added Bob Rawlings, laughing, referring to his list of things he wants to see and do before he dies. "It's wonderful, outstanding."

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Rowena said that she was particularly pleased that the show celebrates all five boroughs of New York City, as well as historic sites throughout the Hudson River Valley and beyond. "And the orchids are so beautiful," she added.

Lush tropical and subtropical greenery and flowering plants and bushes surround the structures, and tiny multi-colored lights adorn hedges, bridges and trees. (Travel tip: Our favorite time of day to visit the show is shortly before dusk -- in daylight. And then, as the sun sets, the holiday lighting becomes all the more apparent, making the exhibit even more enchanting.)

When the train show began two decades ago, the focus was primarily on trains, pointed out Todd Forrest, vice president for horticulture and living collections, during a recent chat.

In its early years, the show featured about a dozen homes and buildings. "But now it's as much about the structures as it is about the trains," he said, laughing. "The structures have become more and more adventurous" and highly sophisticated over the years, including miniatures that resemble works by such great architects as Frank Lloyd Wright (the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1959) and Eero Saarinen (the TWA Flight Center, opened in 1962 at the then-Idlewild Airport). A new feature is the Artist's Studio that illuminates the model-construction process, focusing on Kykuit, the Rockefeller estate built in 1913 at Pocantico Hills.

But do not underestimate the lure of model trains: "The trains add life to the exhibit. In a clever way, they draw you through the exhibition, guiding the visitor along," Forrest said. The show, he said, is so successful because it "encapsulates New York as it lives in our imagination."

Also a new offering, especially for adults, is Bar Car Nights on Saturdays, Dec. 10 and 17, from 7 to 9 p.m.; in addition to viewing the Train Show, patrons will receive a complimentary cocktail. Advance tickets recommended: <http://www.nybg.org/exhibitions/holiday-train-show-2011/index.php>

Getting there: The New York Botanical Garden (across the street from the Bronx Zoo) is a pleasant drive south from Bridgeport via the following parkways: Merritt to the Hutchinson River, to the Cross County to the Saw Mill River to the Henry Hudson (all the while following signs for New York City/George Washington Bridge).

After merging into the Henry Hudson from the Saw Mill River, look for signs for the Mosholu Parkway, (left-hand exit 24 off the Henry Hudson). Take the Mosholu Parkway for about two miles to its terminus at the Botanical Garden; turn right and follow signs to the on-site parking lot (\$12). Visit www.nybg.org or call 718-817-8700.

Follow Phyllis Boros at <http://twitter.com/PhyllisASBoros>

WHEN YOU GO

When & where: The New York Botanical Garden, 2900 Southern Boulevard, Bronx, N.Y. It is about 55 miles from Bridgeport. On-site cafes serve throughout the day. The Holiday Train Show runs through Monday, Jan. 16.

For adults only: A new offering for adults is Bar Car Nights on Saturdays, Dec. 10 and 17 from 7 to 9 p.m.; in addition to viewing the Train Show, patrons will receive a complimentary cocktail. Advance tickets recommended: <http://www.nybg.org/exhibitions/holiday-train-show-2011/index.php>

Hours: Regularly open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, and Monday federal holidays. Closed Dec. 25.

Extended hours: 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. on the following dates: Dec. 4, 11, 18-23, Dec. 26-31 and Jan. 1, 2, 7, 8, 14, 15.

Admission: From Dec.19 to Jan. 2: \$25, \$22 seniors and students, \$15 for children ages 2--12. On other dates: \$20, \$18 for seniors/students, \$10 for children ages 2--12. Advance timed tickets are strongly recommended and are available at nybg.org.

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