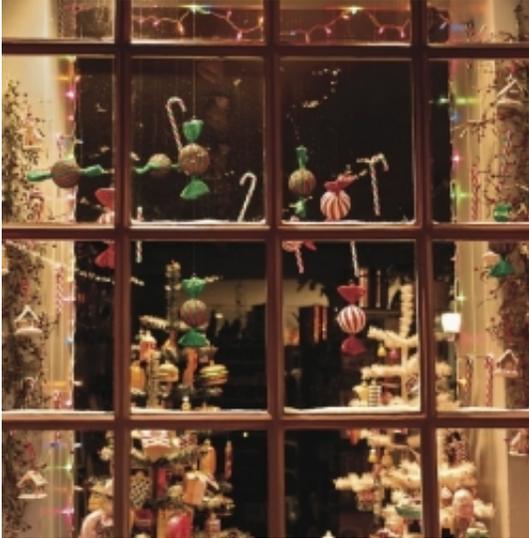


A Colonial Celebration

Each year, Alexandria, VA, transforms itself into the Christmas village of its founding fathers.

By Stephanie Citron, Special to Baltimore Magazine



Scores of bagpipers take to the street in a multi-hued plaid pageantry of Scottish clans marching in formation. With each synchronized stride, their soulful pipes bleat out a wail. Throngs of people have come from near and far to watch the procession. Is it a funeral of a dignitary? A memorial tribute? But wait: Marching behind them are snappy pipe and drum bands, followed by prancing Scottish dancers, performing skip-change sets of reels and jigs. Then come the floats—and even jaunty Scotty dogs. It’s the annual parade in Old Town Alexandria, VA, a time-honored Christmas tradition. The event (scottishchristmaswalk.com) commences a season of holiday events, while celebrating the community’s Scottish heritage and its namesake settler John Alexander in 1669. (Two other Scots established the town as Alexandria in 1748.)

“There’s even a Celtic contingent, who come to march from the St. Andrew’s Society’s Baltimore chapter,” says David McKenzie, emcee of the parade. “They’re the ones wearing white fisherman’s sweaters above their kilts.”

Old Town Alexandria, just an hour from Baltimore, has been named one of America’s “Top 10 Christmas Towns” by HGTV, and is setting the standard for a quintessential holiday getaway.

The town, quietly peering across the Potomac shoreline at chaotic downtown D.C., exudes a quirky hip and historic vibe, reminiscent of 1970s Georgetown. In an era of contrived revival towns, Alexandria is the real deal. Having played center stage in game-changing historic events that included Revolutionary and Civil War bigwigs George Washington and Robert E. Lee, it continues to celebrate centuries-old holiday traditions in a storybook setting of original cobblestone streets, lined with preserved 17th- and 18th-century architecture.

Each holiday season, the town shimmers with twinkling boulevards and storefronts, ornamented in glittering finery, while rich aromas of cinnamon, cloves, and chocolate seep out from charming cafes into the crisp air.

By day, history buffs can explore Alexandria’s famous sites, like **Gadsby’s Tavern Museum**—where Washington delivered his famous farewell address to the troops—and, afterward, browse chic galleries and shops in their quaint Colonial buildings. At night, the antiquated doors of restored taverns and inns are propped open, offering imaginative cuisines and indie artisans.

As a celebrated Christmas town, Alexandria is distinguished for hosting a variety of original, high-spirited holiday activities, including reenacted Colonial events and festivals of Christmases past. While suburban folks flock to malls on the Friday after Thanksgiving, Old Town is morphing itself back into the Christmas village of its founding fathers. Costumed interpreters stroll the streets in Colonial duds and old-style holiday garb.

“It’s kind of a fitting tradition that the bagpipers from the Scottish parade end up right here, in front of our shop,” says Cheri Hennessy, owner of Alexandria’s **Christmas Attic** (125 S. Union St., 703-548-2829, christmasattic.com). The shop is a veritable mother lode of holiday ornaments in a circa-1785 warehouse that has never been restored, still baring its original six-brick-thick walls and antique beams. “When my parents opened this business 42 years ago, we were one of the first really nice stores here, so I’ve watched the old Christmas traditions [evolve] along with the town. Old Town is still like a step back in time—and what Christmas is all about—remembrances, families, folks visiting.”

At lunchtime, nothing speaks Colonial-revival dining better than a traditional pub, like the oyster bar at the **Union Street Public House** (121 S. Union St., 703-548-1785, unionstreetpublichouse.com). The crowd is a fusion of old-timers, newbie artists, and day-trippers, who come for the restaurant’s oyster po’ boy with fried oysters, cherry peppers, and remoulade (\$14), to be washed down with Virginia Native Dark lager.

From Union Street, turning onto King Street, Old Town’s mile-long main drag is enchanting. Amid the flickering gas-lit lanterns, decorated cafes, antique shops, and boutiques are miniature trees with tiny white lights as far as the eye can see. It’s so holiday happy that even Scrooge could be swayed to smile here. Worthy stops along the street include the magical windows at **Why Not?** (200 King St., 703-548-4420), a long-standing Shangri-La-dom of toys, and **The Hour Cocktail Collection** (1015 King St., 703-224-4687, thehourshop.com) with its mid-century chic entertaining pieces, vintage barware, and outrageous retro cocktail jewelry.

While wandering around town, it’s worthwhile to pop into **Christ Church** (118 N. Washington St., 703-549-1450). This is the Episcopal church where George Washington worshipped; his family’s pew is still intact. Strolling these streets amid the restored Colonial townhomes is a treat; admittedly, one that routinely rouses our peeping-Thomas curiosity about what’s inside. But the inquisitive aren’t left out in the cold. Alexandria’s annual **Holiday Designer Tour of Homes** (srscampaigncenter.org/online/) offers ticketed tours of some of the town’s most exquisite homes, which have been grandly decorated by local designers with holiday adornments.

One of Old Town’s long-standing treasures is the **Torpedo Factory Arts Center** (105 N. Union St., 703-838-4565, torpedofactory.org). Housed in a real torpedo factory—from 1918-45—it now features three floors of working artist studios, galleries, and the Alexandria Archaeology Museum.

Just outside the arts center, at the City Marina, is where the annual **Holiday Boat Parade of Lights** takes place. This is a juried holiday boat-decoration competition, with prizes for the most creative and other themes. At dusk on the day of the event (Dec. 1 this year), about 50 decked-out sailboats and motorboats parade across the Potomac River from Alexandria to D.C.’s waterfront, where the judging begins. Some of last year’s winning themes included “Christmas Gone Wild” (wildlife of the North Pole), “SEAS-ons Greetings” (a snow globe), and “Surfing Santa.”

Enjoy the present by sampling New American comfort food at **Virtue Feed & Grain** (106 S. Union St., 571-970-3669, virtuefeedandgrain.com), located in a spectacularly restored warehouse just a few steps from the Marina. The menu boasts that the food is freezer-less, farm fresh, and seasonal. Entree standouts include Polish sausage with molasses, squash, and shallots, and whole red snapper with

orange gremolata.

After dark, Colonial Christmas celebrations are reenacted by candlelight in four historic milieus. Costumed docents lead tours through decorated rooms while regaling visitors with anecdotal tales of the famous residents' holiday activities. The **Historic Candlelight Tour** (tickets: \$20, \$15 seniors, \$5 kids, 703-746-4242) includes the circa-1785 Gadsby's Tavern Museum, which hosted several founding fathers and Civil War dignitaries. In its famous dancing room, where George and Martha Washington once twirled, there are demonstrations by 18th-century dancers in period attire.

Musicians and carolers greet visitors with Old-World holiday hymns at the circa-1753 **Carlyle House** (121 N. Fairfax St.), once the residence of prominent Scottish merchant John Carlyle.

Lovers, seeking a spontaneous smooch, stand under the 19th-century kissing ball at the circa-1785 **Lee-Fendall House** (614 Oronoco St.). The home was occupied by Robert E. Lee and 36 members of his family over a period of 118 years. Another candlelight venue is the **Bank of Alexandria** (133 N. Fairfax St.).

A don't-miss nighttime adventure is searching for the clandestine hotspot **PX**, a reincarnated, 1920s-era speakeasy. Hint: Look for the pirate flag by a blue light outside 728 King Street and ring the concealed bell. The door will slip open and quickly shut behind you. Hint two: If you're wearing jeans and sneakers, you'll be back out on the street before you can say, "Revolt!" This is a classy-clothes joint. Also, on weekends, they expect a reservation, even though they don't have a telephone. Hint three: Call 703-299-8384 and leave a message. (You're welcome.)

Once inside the bar, a candlelit hallway leads to a vintage drawing room, furnished with glitzy chandeliers and sumptuous mahogany chairs. Here, dark-clad wait staff serve creative, modern-day libations with names like "Thymes Like These." The cocktail, inspired by a popular Foo Fighters's tune, is gin-based with thyme and citrus.

If you're staying overnight, consider the **Hotel Monaco** (480 King St., 703-549-6080). It's like attending a fabulous family holiday celebration. The hotel exudes nonstop merriment, with its gorgeous, glittering lobby, featuring daily and evening musical entertainment, around-the-clock cider and hot cocoa, complimentary happy-hour hors d'oeuvres, and even in-room doggy beds and treats.

Those seeking an Old-World setting might select the **Morrison House** (116 S. Alfred St.). With more stars, medals, and accolades than General Lee, this Federal-style inn is elegantly garnished with greenery, ribbons, and decorated trees. On Saturday afternoons in December, the hotel's traditional high tea (from \$32) features homemade holiday delicacies and beverages.

If you go: Old Town Alexandria, VA, is about 50 miles from Baltimore. A calendar and description of holiday events and activities can be found at visitalexandriava.com. Where to stay: Hotel Monaco, holiday package rates begin at \$149/night and include parking. 480 King St., 703-549-6080, monoco-alexandria.com. Morrison House, holiday package rates begin at \$139/night and include parking. 116 S. Alfred St., morrisonhouse.com.