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Take the ride of your lights

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Christmas is nearly here, and if you have young kids, they are likely bouncing with anticipation. It's a good time for a marathon holiday lights tour, sure to channel their holiday enthusiasm while also restraining their craziness with a seat belt.

Even if you've got no official kids to contain, a tour of the most blazing lights spectacles in the Bi-City area is sure to help you rediscover the Christmas-loving child within. So fill up your cocoa mugs and be sure to bring a city map.

If you plan to attempt the full loop, give yourself at least two hours. Otherwise, select several homes near your neighborhood, and call it a night when your vision starts to blur.

Our unscientific system for rating the shock-value of each house is as follows:

40 watts: Warm, like a nice mug of cocoa

60 watts: It'll put a twinkle in your eye

75 watts: Whoa, Prancer, hand me some sunglasses

100 watts: Look out, the Griswolds live here

1. Louise Hensley and Ramon Perez, 2203 Bruce Ave.

60 watts: Creative touches at this lighted house include Santa climbing a well and a tent-shaped light tree with presents.

2. Karl and Kimberly Williams, 12 Dean Drive

Where: From Victory Drive go north on Engineer Drive, right on Artillery Drive and left on Dean Drive.

75 watts: This house is heavy on the icicle lights and features some nice geometric patterns on the roof. Tell the kids to look for the blinking sign that points them toward the North Pole.

3. George and Barbara Taylor, 3629 Dunhill Drive Where: From Macon Road, take Boxwood Boulevard to Dunhill Drive.

100 watts: There's no lawn or house visible at this stop -- just a couple hundred lighted figures, an animated train on the roof; giant inflatable snowmen and a blow-up Winnie the Pooh. Roll down the window to hear Santa singing.

4. Reynolds and SaSa Bickerstaff, 2172 Slate Drive Where: Off Hilton Avenue

75 watts: This home has a tree wrapped 25 feet high in red lights and a giant inflatable candy cane arch. Unusual figures include an animated football player, an animated leaping frog in a Santa hat and a sunbathing Santa, resting in a hammock between two inflatable palm trees.

5. Buddy and Susan Bryan, 3401 Hiawatha Drive Where: Off University Avenue

75 watts: This house puts some artistry into decorating with multi-colored lights. Drive by the side of the house to see Santa singing from a ladder.

6. Thomas and Cynthia Lewis, 4500 Forrest Road Where: At the corner of Forrest Road and Roberta Drive

60 watts: This is a blow-up bonanza, including such kid-friendly features as an inflatable Mickey and Minnie Mouse riding in a sleigh, an inflatable Santa on a motorcycle and even an inflatable nativity scene.

7. Jerry and Edith Ludy and their son Keith, 5784 Ironstone Drive Where: Take Flatrock Road to Flagstone Drive. Go left on Ironstone Drive.

100 watts: This home is the show-stopping feature on this tour. Jerry Ludy orchestrated a musical lights show, which includes a dazzling array of lights and lighted figures, all synchronized by his lap-top computer to flash and dance in time to eight different holiday tunes. Tune your radio to 90.1 FM and enjoy the performance. If you can't make the drive, go to www.ludychristmas.com and view a sample song.

8. Edward Ankebrant, 7236 Midland Chase Loop Where: Off Warm Springs Road, turn on Midland Chase Loop. Turn right to stay on Midland Chase Loop.

60 watts: This house features a nice combination of colored lights and lighted figures. Look for Santa and a reindeer in the chimney.

9. Matthew and Regina Hershman, 11 Candy Lane Where: Going north on Schomburg Road from Warm Springs Road, turn right into Sugar Mill subdivision. It's the first house on the left.

60 watts: This house features 35 lighted candy canes, an animated train, a spot-lighted yard card and an inflatable train and snowman.

10. Ginger Hatcher, 8391 Ridge Creek Court Where: Go left off Whitesville Road on Heiferhorn Way, turn left on Timber Drive, right on Timber Creek Way, left on Timber Creek Drive, right on Ridge Creek Way and left on Ridge Creek Court.

60 watts: This house has two trees framing the door that slowly change colors, a nice tent scene and a lot of rope lighting.

11. Bob and Doris Young, 925 Mobley Road 60 watts: These lights enthusiasts take advantage of a tree-filled yard to create an expansive lights show with lots of tree tents and trunks wrapped in lights.

12. Brady and Debbie Sasser, 1340 Blanchfield Drive Where: Off Whitesville Road in Sharmel subdivision

75 watts: This house has a fun checkerboard pattern on the roof and makes nice use of white lights. There's a kids corner on the right that is home to most of the color lights and animated figures.

13. Springhill Avenue

Where: From Veterans Parkway, turn onto Britt David Road. Turn left on Springhill Avenue.

100 watts: This tiny two-block street is proof that the Christmas spirit is highly contagious. Drive slowly as you gape at the multiple houses that are blazing with lights.

14. Ray Allen, 4713 Sedgefield Ave. Where: Off Manchester Expressway

60 watts: This home has a nice mix of white and color lights, with a driveway tunnel in color lights.

15. Terry and Brent Smith, 1721 43rd Street (and their neighbors, Melody Price and Joe Viggins, at 4205 17th Ave.) f-b Where: From 17th Avenue, go east on 43rd Street f+b **75 watts:** The white stripes of lights in this lawn make it look like a holiday football field. Inflatable attractions include a Charlie Brown snow globe and a train with Santa on the roof. Just around the corner, take in a yard filled with illuminated figurines at 4205 17th Ave.

16. Gladys Wilson, 1106 30th Street Where: On 30th Street, near 11th Avenue

60 watts: The garlands and bows decking a white fence that surround this lighted yard add a little country flair to this lights stop.

17. Billy and JoAnne Goss, 821 Lichfield Road 60 watts: Three pie-tin Christmas trees are a homemade highlight at this house. Large colored bulbs emerge from the center of each pie pan to create large circular ornaments. Lighted igloos and a giant blow up Santa and polar bear add to the scene.

18. Dannie and Teresa Herman, 3206 13th Ave. Where: Not too far south of the Phenix City North Bypass, where 13th Avenue runs parallel to Summerville Road

40 watts: The wooden figures at this house, including Santa Claus, Mrs. Claus and a team of wooden reindeer add some handmade charm to this comparatively subdued display.

19. Ray and Sherry Foxworth, 3206 13th Ave. Where: From South Railroad Street, turn north on 13th Avenue

100 watts: This is a blazing two-story display. In front of the house Santa waves from a sleigh pulled by big wooden reindeer. To the side is a detailed nativity scene within a miniature wooden fence. The entire backyard is filled with lights too.

LIGHTS OUT OF TOWN:

If you're up for a longer drive, or if you happen to live near these East Alabama homes, here's two sprawling lights displays to check out. Go to www.mapquest.com for directions from your home.

James and Virginia Nelson, f-b 109 Ridge Road, Seale, Ala. 36875: The Nelsons have about 4 acres of lighted figures, handmade wooden figures and a wooden nativity scene. f+b Jack and Marie Ward and family, 160 Lee Road 340, Salem, Ala. 36874. The Wards set up a few acres worth of lights and call their massive display "Country Christmas."