

Everything you need to know about Wild Lights 2023

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You'd have to be mad as a hatter to miss out on Wild Lights this year!

For the third year in a row, Sedgwick County Zoo's Asian lantern festival has returned. But this year, it has a literary twist. Follow the White Rabbit into Wonderland at this year's Wild Lights.

This lantern display takes you through all your favorite scenes from Lewis Carol's beloved classic, as well as through traditional Asian lantern displays and vignettes.

Thousands of lanterns light up the night in an unforgettable display of beauty and artistry.

We want to make sure you don't miss out on any of the fun, so here's everything you need to know before attending Wild Lights.

What is an Asian Lantern Festival?

The Wild Lights lanterns are provided by [Tianyu Arts and Culture](#), the largest producer of Chinese lanterns in North America. They partner with zoos, botanical gardens, and natural science institutions to incorporate conservation and sustainable messages into the festival lanterns.

The origins of lantern festivals are hard to exactly pinpoint, and there are many legends that claim to tell the origin.

Lantern festivals can be traced back over 2,000 years to the reign of Chinese Emperor Han Ming. An advocate of Buddhism, he noticed monks lighting lanterns in temples on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. Emperor Ming then ordered all households, temples, and the imperial palace to begin lighting lanterns as well.



Deer lantern // photo courtesy of Tianyu

One legend tells the story of a beautiful crane that flew down to earth from heaven. Villagers killed the crane, which angered the heavenly Jade Emperor because he loved cranes. He planned to take revenge on the villagers by burning their village on the fifteenth day of the Lunar New Year. The Jade Emperor's daughter warned the villagers, who then devised a plan to trick the Jade Emperor.

Every family hung red lanterns around their houses, exploded firecrackers, and lit bonfires in the streets. When the Jade Emperor's troops arrived at the village, they were fooled and believed the village to already be burned down. From that day on, on the fifteenth day of the Lunar New Year, the village would celebrate their victory by exploding fireworks and firecrackers and carrying lanterns in the street.

Today, festival lanterns come in more elaborate shapes and colors than red. And the evolution of lantern design and intricacy is perfectly showcased at Wild Lights.

Welcome to Wonderland

If you've visited the Zoo in the last month, then the Alice in Wonderland theme of Wild Lights will come as no surprise.

Tianyu teams have been assembling lanterns since early September. In just under a month, they will assemble thousands of lanterns into more than 60 displays.

Bridget Beckler, the Zoo's Director of Events, said that this year two teams were sent to assemble the lanterns. In the past, only one team has been required, but this year's display is so ambitious and grand that more manpower was needed.

This is Wild Lights' third year of operation, and every year the lanterns are different. Of course, some fan favorites return annually. But the majority of the lanterns are having their Wichita debut.

"It is not a lantern that you would think of that is lit and released to float in the water or released to float in the air," Beckler said. "It is actual sculptures of light that are made with different fabrics and metals."

Creating these sculptures of light is an elaborate task. First, the design is drawn out and the dimensions are configured, then it's time to craft the lantern. Through sculpture molding and welding, the frame of the lantern is given shape.



Members of Tianyu work to assemble the Main Entrance Lantern

Once the frame is assembled, electrical cables and LEDs are installed to light the structures. The first paperhangings and decorations are also applied. Finally, the larger paperhangings are hung and details are applied by the artisans crafting the lantern sculptures.

Guests visiting the Zoo prior to Wild Lights' opening are likely to see the sculptures being assembled.

Beckler says that while the sculptures are impressive during the day, it's at night when they're truly stunning.

"It's amazing," Beckler said. "I was floored when I first saw them lit up. It just absolutely blew me away."

Unique Food Offerings

Did you know Wild Lights has a unique menu available? You won't be able to try these delectable delights anywhere else except during the lantern festival.

Executive Sous Chef Kris Anderson has crafted a menu that's truly unforgettable.

"I love 'Alice in Wonderland,'" Anderson said. "I wanted to create a menu that people would come in with their kids and have that fun feel."

You might want to try "The Mad Hatter's Platter," a sampling of three tea sandwiches. For something sweet, pick up the "Churro Nachos," bite size churros over soft serve with a chocolate caramel drizzle.

Looking for something more substantial, try the "Dragon Fire Burger." It comes with a sriracha honey aioli, smoked gouda, fried jalapenos, and onions.

Craving Italian? Order "The Red Queen." This pizza has peperoni slices, mozzarella balls, and fried basil. Anderson says it's inspired by Alice painting the white roses red in the Queen's garden.



The Rose Tree // photo courtesy of Tianyu

The "Dodo Chicken Sliders" are an homage to Anderson's favorite character.

"A lot of people don't realize that the Dodo Bird in 'Alice in Wonderland' actually had several parts," Anderson said. "He was the judge; he was the juror. He also played one of the soldiers. He kind of just ran around."

In addition to the Beastro, Nganda Village will be serving up soups, paninis, and chili. Kookaburra Canteen will be offering gourmet popcorn.

"We'll have a s'mores and cider tent across from the stage area in the grass by the stingrays," Anderson said.

Food and drinks will be available for the entire event.

With so many unique and delicious offerings available, you won't go hungry at Wild Lights.

V.I.P Cart Tours

For those wanting a V.I.P. experience at Wild Lights, consider booking a [private golf cart tour](#).

This is the second year golf cart tours have been offered for Wild Lights.

"The guests get a festive drink, and snack, which is usually a hot chocolate and puppy chow or a cookie," Events Sales Manager Mariah Sullivan said. "We also provide blankets, so they can kind of snuggle up on the cart."

Sullivan said that while most people choose to stay in their cart the whole time, there is an opportunity for your tour guide to stop and take your photo at certain displays.

Cart tours are also perfect for those who don't do well in crowds or are prone to sensory overload. It's also great for those with mobility difficulties.

"It's great for people who can't make the long trek," Sullivan said.

Each cart's tour guide provides unique insight into the lanterns on display. From discussing the story being told by the lanterns, to explaining how they're built, transported, and assembled, you'll leave the cart tour with a new appreciation of the festival.

These 45-minute Cart Tours can accommodate up to 10 people and can be booked online or by calling the Zoo.



A Mad Tea Party // photo courtesy of Tianyu

Quick Facts About Wild Lights

WHEN: Wednesday through Sunday from 6 p.m. – 9 p.m. October 11 – December 17 (That's 50 days, or 150 hours, you can see the lanterns)

HOW MANY LANTERNS: Thousands of individual lanterns, but there are more than 60 lantern scenes and displays.

BIGGEST DISPLAY: The tallest display is The Temple of Heaven (modeled after the real palace in Beijing, China), which measures 56 feet tall and 59 feet wide. But the longest display is The Chinese Dragon, which is 23 feet tall and 164 feet long.

ACCESSIBILITY: Guests who have problems with mobility or have anxiety with crowds should consider booking a cart tour to see the lights. Guests with photosensitivity can view the lanterns during the day with regular Zoo admission.

HOW LONG: The lanterns cover the main Zoo loop, which is just under one mile in length

WILL I SEE MY FAVORITE ALICE IN WONDERLAND CHARACTER: Of course! This lantern display has everyone! See Alice and the Queen of Hearts play croquet, watch the March Hare and Mad Hatter host a tea party. You'll spot the Caterpillar and the Door Mouse as well, and keep an eye out for Bill the Lizard and the Cheshire Cat.

When journeying through the looking glass at Wild Lights 2023, you're in for a night of wonder and whimsy.

[Tickets are on sale now and can be purchased online or by visiting the Zoo's ticket office.](#)