Calendar

Grazer Gifts

At the Zoo, Every Day Is Christmas

Or a watery one?
An opportunity to do some
Christmas caroling by kayak is offered by
the Aqua Adventures Kayaking School in
Mission Beach this weekend. Co-owner
Greg Knight will play his acoustic guitar
and is practicing Christmas songs for the
occasion. Eggnog, hot chocolate, and
cookies will be served. You'll paddle
around the bay and sing, and if you
don't have your own kayak, Knight will
lend you one. It's something he's heard
of other people doing — "having

LOCAL

Christmas
parties on their
boats." He
knows of
kayakers who
dressed up and

went trick-or-treating "boat-to-boat" for Halloween.

In Escondido, there's a beach theme at the annual holiday open house, sponsored by the city's recreation department and Friends of the Library. They're calling it a Sizzlin' Santa's Workshop.

You're instructed to wear "your favorite beach attire" and come prepared to enjoy "a beachcomber buffet." (Actually, it will be "a continental breakfast" - donuts, bagels, muffins, juice, and coffee, donated by local businesses.) Kids will make crafts banners, candy Santas, Christmas palmtree magnets - and have a chance to visit with Santa. St. Nick will sport a Hawaiian shirt, the better to keep cool in California, says Escondido Recreation supervisor Amy Shipley. "Usually Santa would get so warm, but this year, dressed aloha-style, he thinks he's going to be just fine.

If you're more traditional and crave a glimpse of snow, head for Balboa Park. Instead of "going to the snow," the snow comes to the polar bears this weekend and next. It's part of the zoo's "Jungle Bells" activities for the animals and for

Greg Knight and Jennifer Kleck

the humans who come to see them.

"Before the bears go on exhibit, very early in the morning, we blow 12 tons of manmade snow in there," says Stacy Ellis of the zoo's public-relations office. "We use huge, huge, huge blocks of ice. That's put into a machine, and we blow it into giant mounds. So a portion of the exhibit will be completely blanketed in snow. The keepers will hide food treats and toys in the snow, so the bears will come out and immediately

start digging. They love to crawl up to the top of the mounds and slide down.

The snow really does inspire in them a kind of behavior that you don't normally see."

At other times, says
Ellis, the bears are content
in their arctic-tundra
habitat — the Polar Bear
Plunge — that simulates a
place where the snow has
thawed, with sparse
vegetation and water
that's chilly: about 55
degrees.

"And in that environment, they're always playful, always in the water, playing with balls, playing with each other. But the snow is special. It's cold. They eat it. It's fun for them. It feels crunchy under their feet." It's called "animal enrichment."

At the zoo's Outdoor Log Theater,
'Mrs. Claus and Ruby Hippo ("a
costumed character") will help children
make gifts for themselves and family.
These include real beeswax candles and
bracelets on a reindeer theme. At the
Children's Zoo, they'll make
"enrichment" items to be given to the
animals.

One of these is a Santa to be made of paper and camel hair. The hair comes courtesy of the zoo's own camels. Keepers will put these Santas into enclosures with the black jaguar and some of the larger cats. "The cats will interact with them — sniff around," because they'll find them pleasantly odoriferous. They'll also enjoy tearing them apart.

Another enrichment item kids will make is a "browse" wreath. Rosemary, eucalyptus, acacia — "and other kinds

of nibbling leafy things" — are the materials. These will be given to the browsers among the zoo population — "leaf-eaters that pull stuff off trees and bushes." A giraffe is one, distinct from grazers, like caribou.

"We worry about maintaining animals in captivity and keeping them happy and healthy," says Ellis.
"Enrichment keeps them stimulated, gives them mental challenges, and opportunities for physical exercise."

Zoologists believe enrichment contributes to successful in-captivity breeding.

"The zoo employs a whole staff to do nothing but work with keepers to find interesting ways to help the animals exhibit natural behaviors." The Santas and the wreaths are only seasonal examples of what the enrichment team does daily at the zoo, where, apparently, every day is Christmas.

— Jeanne Schinto

"Christmas Caroling by Kayak"
Friday, December 15
6:00-9:00 p.m.
Aqua Adventures Kayak School
1540 Quivira Way
(near Hospitality Point)
Mission Bay
Free
619-523-9577

Sizzlin' Santa's Workshop
Open House
Saturday, December 16
8:30-11:30 a.m.
East Valley Community Center
2245 East Valley Parkway
Escondido
Cost: \$6 for children over 2; free
for children under 2;
\$3 for adults
Includes food, crafts,
and visit with Santa
Advance tickets recommended
760-839-4382

"Jungle Bells" Saturday December 16, **Sunday December 24** 9:00-4:00 p.m. Polar bears' snow romp: Saturday and Sunday, December 16 and 17 and December 23 and 24, 10:00 a.m. San Diego Zoo, Balboa Park \$18 for ages 12 and up; \$8 for ages 3-11 (waived with a new, unwrapped toy); free for ages 2 and under 619-234-3153

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Polar bears