



Each year, the first thing that really gets our family into the holiday spirit is putting up our Christmas lights. After fumbling with the tangled strands—who put these things away, anyway?—we stand together, flip the switch and *ta da!* the season is here.

Now multiply that feeling by a hundred thousand or so and you have the glowing splendor of the Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel at Christmas.

From the day before Thanksgiving to New Year's, they take decking the halls as seriously as their fine wine list: Witness the 50-foot Christmas tree, life-size Nutcrackers, gingerbread house spacious enough to sleep two (humans, that is), costumed carolers and miles of lush garlands. And, oh yes, 350,000 twinkling lights. Now *that's* what I call flipping the switch.

Located on a 150-foot bluff overlooking the Pacific, the Mediterranean-style Ritz is worth at least a day visit—and we couldn't resist an overnight stay. The impeccable service and our room's refined decor did not really impress my sons, ages 6 and 9; the in-room Nintendo did. That evening's dinner at The Terrace Restaurant, which they would call casual but I would call elegant, was perfectly prepared California cuisine.

There's an extensive children's menu, but more importantly, the kids were treated with as much respect as the adults. Classy.

Holiday programs for kids include storytelling by the fireplace, Teddy Bear Teas with marionette shows and appearances by Santa (call for hours).

The hotel is offering the "Once Upon a Wonderland" package from Nov. 26 through Dec. 30, starting at \$149 per night for a garden-view room and continental breakfast for two (\$219 per night, two night minimum on weekends). Call (800) 241-3333 or (714) 240-2000 for reservations and information.

— Vivien Santana Hughes

Editor's note: Scrooge fans won't want to miss the return of Charles Dickens' great-great-grandson, actor Gerald Charles Dickens, to the Biltmore Hotel in downtown L.A. Mr. Dickens will read selections from *A Christmas Carol* at two events: Tea with Scrooge, Dec. 20, 2 p.m. \$30 adults, \$15 children. Reservations: (213) 612-1561; and the Dickens Feast, a black tie optional gourmet dinner, Dec. 20, 6 p.m. \$85 per person. Reservations: (213) 612-1580.

