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A Free Trip to Paradise, without Leaving Chicago

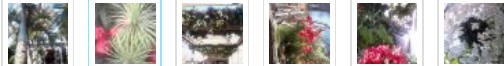
Baby, it's cold outside! Luckily, tropical temperatures, vibrant blooms and intoxicating scents are just a short drive away.

Posted by [Laura Ehrke](#), December 12, 2012 at 12:18 PM

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Baby, it's cold outside! We Chicagoans have to face the reality of December temperatures now that Jack Frost has taken up (belated) residence here. The leaves have fallen and the landscape is a study in muted blah colors. Still, tropical temperatures, vibrant blooms and intoxicating scents are just a short drive away.

On a whim, my husband and I decided to try something different, and visited the [Chicago Botanic Garden](#) in December. Check with your library to see if they offer a free [Museum Adventure Pass](#), as ours does. As soon as we walked up to the entrance, we were greeted with a small forest of evergreen trees and boughs, all decorated with bright, twinkly lights and bursting with accents of

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walls, ceilings and pots aplenty. Even Mark, a friendly guide stationed next to the information desk, answered questions in his festive best.

We braved the cold (fortified with hot beverages from the cafe), but not for long. Our next destination was the Regenstein Center, which was chock-a-block full of festivity. The Wonderland Express exhibit is housed there (this requires an extra fee - half-priced on Tuesdays, I noticed). It was a bit too crowded for our liking, and the tropical-style Winter Wonderland that exploded throughout the open areas provided more than enough to see. If only I had any plant sense, I could tell you what type of sprouts and blooms we saw. I can tell you that there were many, many beautiful and unusual red, green, white and pink varieties. Palm trees, orchids, and cacti, oh my! Close your eyes in one of the hothouses, breathe in the sweet aromas that permeate the air, and you might just feel like you're on an island in the South Pacific. Unfortunately, just about the time we felt thawed and renewed, the bah humbug of a never-ending holiday to-do list shocked us back to the real world.

As we ran across the bridge back to the warmth of the main building, we took a moment to look at the greens that bedecks the pergola sprawling above the half-frozen pond. Inside, we had one last respite. We enjoyed a delicious meal (since we had saved on the admission after all) of velvety carrot soup, customized pasta and a freshly made panini (ok, and a brownie for dessert - shared). The tables were decorated with candy-cane striped roses, and the center of the room featured confetti-sprinkled pointsettia surrounding a soaring evergreen. An electric train chugged along a large track suspended from the ceiling, encircling the room with cherished childhood memories.

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