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The Golden Gate Express™

The Conservatory of Flowers' popular garden railway exhibit steams back into town for the holidays

SAN FRANCISCO -- All aboard The Golden Gate Express for a San Francisco holiday experience like no other! Golden Gate Park's Conservatory of Flowers brings back its enormously popular garden railway exhibition this winter with many new features and surprises created by local garden railroad aficionados and artists from SF Recycling & Disposal, Inc.'s Artist in Residence program. It's a celebration of the city of San Francisco as a model train, cable car, streetcar and more wend their way through a lush landscape of dwarf plants and zip past mini versions of the city's landmark buildings created entirely from recycled materials. New this year also are some only-in-San Francisco special effects including the sounds of the city and the twice-daily arrival of the fog. **The Golden Gate Express will be on view November 19, 2009 through April 18, 2010 and opens with a preview gala November 18, 2009.**

A brand new layout awaits return visitors – one that features a G-gauge train modeled after a historic San Francisco locomotive looping through the cityscape, a cable car ascending a San Francisco hill, a streetcar and miniature cars zooming across the Golden Gate Bridge. This year's all-new, dynamic design is being created by the members of the Bay Area Garden Railway Society (BAGRS). With over 300 members that have created more than 1000 layouts in backyards around the Bay Area since 1988, BAGRS is the largest club of its kind in the world with more outdoor railroads than anywhere else.

Many of the club's members came to last year's exhibit, designed by model train enthusiast and Professor of Landscape Architecture at UC Berkeley Chip Sullivan, and were highly enthusiastic about continuing the exhibit as an annual event. Chief among those was BAGRS past President and the author of the definitive book *How to Design and Build Your Garden Railroad*, Jack

Verducci of San Mateo. “This is a chance for us to share our passion and create something lots of people can see,” he says. “Most of our railroads are at our homes and not so accessible. At the Conservatory, we’ll be able to bring this great family hobby to everyone and hopefully get them excited about trying it themselves.”

Verducci promises a lay out with lots of fun features including bridges, tunnels, California-specific landscaping and even a change in the weather. At 11:15 AM and 4:15 PM each day, San Francisco’s famous fog will roll in under the Golden Gate and envelop the mini city in mystery.

In addition to the new layout, several new miniature San Francisco landmarks join the eleven buildings that were fabricated last year. Debuting this year will be San Francisco’s City Hall, the Palace of Fine Arts, the Castro Theater, the Painted Ladies, Lotta’s Fountain, the California Academy of Science’s Living Roof, AT&T Park and historic Firehouse #37 built in Potrero Hill in 1917. The new landmarks, like last year’s Conservatory of Flowers, Japanese Tea Garden pagoda, Golden Gate Bridge, Mission Dolores, Chinatown Gate, Transamerica Pyramid, Ferry Building, Coit Tower, Ghirardelli Square, Bently Reserve and Merchant Exchange Building, will be made entirely of recycled and repurposed materials, reflecting present day San Francisco’s cutting edge commitment to sustainability and the Conservatory’s own environmental mission.

To create several of the new buildings, the Conservatory has teamed up with Bessie Kunath, an artist who has had a long love affair with San Francisco’s dump. Kunath was a Student Artist in Residence with SF Recycling & Disposal, Inc. that maintains an art studio at its Solid Waste Transfer and Recycling Center and provides select artists with 24-hour access to San Francisco’s refuse. She worked with the program for six years, lured by its mission and the creative treasures to be found in the city’s garbage. “It’s like shopping,” says Kunath. “Artists that work there call it The Big Store because anything you can imagine needing will eventually turn up.”

For the exhibition, Kunath is crafting the Palace of Fine Arts and San Francisco’s City Hall exclusively with materials from the dump. The dome of the 1915 Palace is a ceiling light fixture standing on recycled wood columns and adorned with bits and pieces from a discarded children’s science activity kit in homage to the Palace’s longtime resident, the Exploratorium. City Hall

sports a roof decoupage with bits of city newspapers, pages from a book outlining statistical analysis of population growth and bits of civic documents. A computer keyboard stands in for the stairs leading up to the building and a handful of gold pens create its gilt finial.

Kunath was thrilled to be invited to participate in the exhibition. “It’s really exciting for me as an advocate of recycling,” she says. “The Conservatory didn’t have to go this route. The buildings could have all been perfect little brand new models, but they specifically chose to use recyclables and to educate the public in this fun way. It’s so appropriate for San Francisco.”

Kunath’s colleague from the dump, James Sellier, is producing the historic firehouse, and the Conservatory’s own staff and volunteers have had a hand in some of the other new features including horticulturist Mario Vega who fashioned Lotta’s Fountain from a cast off chandelier and volunteer Nicole Passerotti who is crafting AT&T Park.

As with last year’s exhibit, the landmarks are surrounded by a magical landscape of miniature gardens and parks with living plants including dwarf conifers, mosses and tiny flowers. The landscape will be replanted several times throughout the run of the exhibition to showcase a colorful variety of seasonal blooms and the transition from winter to spring.

New this year is the addition of audio effects that will bring the sounds of the city to life. As the train zips around the track, visitors can listen to the joyous noise of Chinese New Year, the barking of resident sea lions, the cheering crowd at the ball park, the ringing bells of cable cars, the Castro Theater’s organ, fog horns, the rumbling of an earthquake and much more. The special soundscape is the work of Andrew Roth of Natural Sounds in San Francisco.

Also new this year will be a children’s interactive train set designed to allow young visitors a chance to operate a mini locomotive, a San Francisco history treasure hunt also for children and several short videos that allow visitors to see the process of creating the landmarks, the other Bay Area gardens created by BAGRS and more.

“We are delighted to be teaming up with local garden railroaders and artists to create an even more magical experience for our visitors this holiday season,” says Brent Dennis, the Conservatory’s Director. “The whole ‘Honey, I shrunk the city!’ impact of the exhibit thrilled just about everyone last year no matter what age and we’re excited to be bringing it back with all of the new features. It’s a real celebration of the things that make San Francisco unique -- our architecture, our history, our parks and also our creativity and leadership in the environmental movement. What better place to showcase this than the city’s 130-year-old glass monument to the natural world?”

The exhibition kicks off with a **preview gala entitled *Tropics, Treasures and Trains* on November 18, 2009 at 6:30 p.m. that celebrates the romance of the rails and raises funds for the Conservatory’s youth environmental education programs.** Gala guests will be the first to see The Golden Gate Express and have the rare chance to experience the Conservatory at night. Guests also enjoy premium wines and “Station Stops” of tantalizing treats. Tickets are \$130 per person and can be purchased at www.conservatoryofflowers.org.

Media sponsors for the Golden Gate Express include ABC7/KGO-TV, Alice @ 97.3 KLLC-FM, The Examiner and KQED Public Broadcasting.

The Golden Gate Express is open Tuesdays – Sundays from 9 am to 4:30 pm and is included with admission to the Conservatory. Admission for San Francisco residents is \$5 general; \$3 youth 12-17, seniors and students with ID; \$1.50 children 5-11; children 4 and under FREE. Admission for non-residents is \$7 general, \$5 youth 12-17, seniors and students with ID; \$2 children 5-11; children 4 and under FREE. The public should call (415) 831-2090 or visit www.conservatoryofflowers.org for more information.

Background

The Conservatory of Flowers is a spectacular living museum of rare and beautiful tropical plants under glass. From Borneo to Bolivia, the 1,750 species of plants at the Conservatory represent unusual flora from more than 50 countries around the world. Immersive displays in five galleries include the lowland tropics, highland tropics, aquatic plants, potted plants and special exhibits. Opened in 1879, the wood and glass greenhouse is the oldest existing conservatory in North

America and has attracted millions of visitors to Golden Gate Park since it first opened its doors. It is designated as a city, state and national historic landmark and was one of the 100 most endangered sites of the World Monuments Fund.

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