

How one man curated California's best displays

[sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/christmas-lights-map-holiday-18512810.php](https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/christmas-lights-map-holiday-18512810.php)



Alex Dourov replaces a light bulb in front of his holiday light-festooned home in Livermore on Dec. 5. Dourov is the founder and owner of [CaliforniaChristmasLights.com](https://www.californiachristmaslights.com), which maps Christmas light displays all over the state, handpicking the “creme de la creme” from user submissions. He has decided to pass the reins of the website along to a new administrator after 25 years.

Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

A lot of people love Christmas lights. But few love them as much as Alex Dourov.

Each holiday season for the past 25 years, the retired web designer and grandfather has poured weeks of his life into [californiachristmaslights.com](https://www.californiachristmaslights.com), a list of the state’s most dazzling holiday lights displays. The humble, '90s-style website has amassed a cult following in California thanks to its personal touch: Dourov vets each listing himself and includes their photos and hours of operation so visitors can confirm it’ll be worth the drive time.

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As of Nov. 30, the website highlighted more than 200 houses across California, 114 of which are in the Bay Area. There is only one listing in San Francisco proper. Dourov thinks the city may lack Christmas spirit compared with other parts of the Bay Area — a theory bolstered by [previous Chronicle reporting](#).

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This year, the highlighted homes include [4480 Clarewood Drive in Oakland](#), a sparkling menagerie featuring dozens of brightly lit animals including a sloth; [43344 Arkwood St. in Fremont](#), a walk-through display whose hosts welcome viewers with cookies and hot chocolate; and [733 Solitude Drive in Oakley](#), one of the homes on Dourov's even more selective "must-see" list, which has an interactive lights show, a snow machine and a "Christmas countdown" timer.

Getting your home on Dourov's website is more competitive than [getting your kid into UC Berkeley](#). He estimates only about one in 15 submissions ultimately get chosen, though he encourages people who just miss the mark to reapply.

"They truly have to be extraordinary, out of this world, super fantastic looking in order to make the list," Dourov said. That's for good reason: Back when he first got into the Christmas lights listings game in the late '90s, his competitors were physical newspapers that printed a generic list of reader-submitted addresses — no descriptions, photos, nothing. And all too often as he drove to each house on the list, he would end up at an underwhelmingly decorated home, perhaps with a "whopping two strings of lights" over the entryway — what he calls a "stinker."



The Christmas display of the home at 4480 Clarewood Drive in Oakland. The display is the single-handed effort of the woman who owns the home and is frequently listed on CaliforniaChristmasLights.com for its many homes displaying holiday lights. Alex Dourov is the founder and owner of CaliforniaChristmasLights.com, which maps outstanding Christmas light displays all over the state.

Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

Dourov came to believe some homeowners were submitting their addresses simply because they wanted to see themselves in the newspaper, and they were succeeding because papers weren't independently verifying each display's excellence. *I'm a web designer*, Dourov mused. What if he built a more consumer-focused list online, one with standards? What if he drove to every display submitted in the papers, photographed them himself, and picked only the best?

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In 1999, Dourov launched LightsOfTheValley.com, which collected displays throughout the Tri-Valley area, where he still lives. But as demand and interest rippled outward, he renamed the site to better encapsulate his new footprint — the 39 million-person state of California.



Residents walk along a brightly lit Thompson Avenue in Alameda. Thompson Avenue is frequently listed on CaliforniaChristmasLights.com for its many homes displaying holiday lights.
Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

Unlike most people's idiosyncratic hobbies, Dourov's has a significant community following. At its peak popularity in mid-December, CaliforniaChristmasLights.com gets upward of 20,000 daily visitors, according to stats he posts online. Many people behind his best displays resubmit their addresses year after year. He and his wife still drive out to verify a lot of them, periodically making road trips to view the displays in other counties, though he also accepts user photos these days.

But more than two decades of painstaking work later, Dourov is hanging up his "Santa hat." His duties as a father and grandfather have made the task increasingly daunting, he said, and it has gotten harder to sit in front of a computer for hours on end as he has gotten older.

But while Dourov's personal involvement with the site is ending, he's ending on a high note, with plenty of fans and a sense of what he calls "spiritual" fulfillment.



Alex and Cindy Dourov at their holiday light-festooned home in Livermore. Alex Dourov is the founder and owner of CaliforniaChristmasLights.com, which maps top-flight Christmas light displays all over the state.

Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

Soon after Dourov announced his retirement, website users flooded his inbox with heartfelt messages thanking him for his service. Among the most gratifying, he said, were messages from people who for some reason or another can't leave the house — the elderly, those with agoraphobia, or the otherwise homebound — but, thanks to Dourov's website, could still experience a little holiday magic.

These messages in particular “melted my heart,” Dourov said, adding that despite the sleep lost and time spent, he felt the project was “all worth it.”

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Fortunately for other local Christmas lights fans, Dourov told the Chronicle he has found a successor to take over the site: Joseph Leake, a fellow Bay Area resident whose sister is also a web designer. And if Leake's own [holiday lights display](#) is any indication, the new host will take the Christmas curation process as seriously as the old.

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