JUSTIN HORVATH
REAL ESTATE

FREE GUIDE

Leavenworth in Festival Season

Autumn Leaf, Oktoberfest, Christmastown and Winter Karneval: what to know, when to come, and what locals do differently.

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The short version

Leavenworth has four big stretches between late September and January, and they are different trips. The dates here are for the 2026-27 season.

- **Autumn Leaf Festival, September 25 to 27, 2026.** The local one. Fall color, a Saturday parade, and the least crowded of the four.
- **Oktoberfest, October 2 to 3, 9 to 10 and 16 to 17, 2026.** Ticketed, loud, fun, and crowded on the weekends, with more going on than beer: a parade, keg tapping, stein hoisting, a mustache contest, and a whole Kinderplatz for the kids. If you do not like crowds, come on a weekday in between, knowing the festival itself runs Fridays and Saturdays only; a weekday gets you the town in October, not the tents.
- **Christmastown, November 27 through December 24, 2026.** The town also calls it the Village of Lights. By far the busiest time of the year. The lights come on the day after Thanksgiving, run daily from 6 AM to 11 PM, and stay up until nearly St. Patrick's Day most years, which is the part visitors miss.
- **Winter Karneval, the weekends of January 2027.** The only fireworks show Leavenworth puts on all year, ice carving on Front Street, fire dancers, and a fraction of December's crowd.

I live here with my family, so this is the version I give friends who ask when to come.

Autumn Leaf Festival (September 25 to 27)

This is the oldest festival in town and the one that feels most like it belongs to the residents who live here. The color in the valley is usually starting to turn by the last weekend of September, with the peak up toward Lake Wenatchee coming a week or two later.

The Grand Parade is Saturday, September 26 at 10 AM down Front Street. The festival posts the route map and the full schedule at leavenworthautumnleaf.org, and nine shops downtown sell the collector's pins if that is your thing. Bring a chair and get there early for curb space near the gazebo end. Front Street is closed to cars year-round now, and on parade morning expect detours on US 2 right before and after. Kids do well at this one; it is a small-town parade with candy, marching bands and floats, not a stadium event. There are some big-headed Bavarian puppets that spook a few of the youngest kids. Mine love them.

What locals do: park once and walk. Anywhere within a ten-minute walk of Front Street is fine, and you will spend far less time circling. The old elementary school off Osborne has parking in and around it, and the high school works too. If you are driving in from the Seattle side, US 2 through Tumwater Canyon will be busy Saturday morning; leaving before 8 makes a difference.

Oktoberfest (October 2 to 3, 9 to 10, 16 to 17)

Leavenworth's Oktoberfest runs the first three weekends of October. In 2026 the venues are the Festhalle, Front Street Park, the Bierzelt Stage and the Gazebo Stage, all downtown.

Tickets, hours and the full schedule are in my Oktoberfest post, which has the prices, the gate and box office times and the bag rules. Buy online ahead of time and skip the line. Kids 12 and under get in free.

Getting there without losing your mind. Parking downtown on an Oktoberfest Saturday is the hardest part of the weekend; plan on paying and plan on walking. The festival runs free shuttles on three routes from the edges of town, Link Transit runs a free Route 22 from Wenatchee, and there is a paid shuttle from the Wenatchee Valley on Saturdays. If you are staying in Wenatchee or Cashmere, the shuttle is the move.

With kids. The Kinderplatz is free with your festival ticket, open Friday 6 to 9 PM and Saturday noon to 9 PM, with a 62-foot Ferris wheel, carnival games, face painting and a root beer garden. Some activities have small fees. My kids are big fans of the inflatable obstacle course. You cannot bring alcohol into the Kinderplatz, so finish your beer first.

Saturday midday is the part most visitors skip. On a typical Saturday the Festzug parade comes through town at 11:45 AM, gates open at noon, and the keg tapping is at 2 PM on Front Street, with the stein hoist, costume and mustache contests running through the day. The parade and the tapping are free and happen before the crowd peaks. If you only have one Saturday, be downtown by 11:30. The weekend schedule is at leavenworth.org/oktoberfest.

Eat and drink like you meant to. The local breweries, Icicle, Blewett and Doghaus, have collaborated on a Festbier in past years; ask what is on this year. For a sit-down German meal, Mozart's, Andreas Keller and Rhein Haus are the three I send people to, and you will want a reservation on a festival weekend. There is plenty of wine, cider and non-alcoholic options inside if beer is not your thing.

Where to stay. Book early. Really. Leavenworth rooms go first, then Cashmere, then Wenatchee. If everything is gone, Wenatchee plus the free shuttle is a perfectly good plan and cheaper.

The morning after. The city publishes an Oktoberfest recovery guide with breakfast spots and low-key things to do, and in past years it has gone further than breakfast: hot springs, hydrotherapy, cold plunge and sauna, and IV drip deals for the truly wrecked. Look it up before you need it. Blackbird Island and the Waterfront Park loop, five minutes from Front Street, is what I recommend to anyone who needs to walk something off. Fall color, the river, and almost nobody there before 9 AM.

The quiet weeks in between

Late October, after the third Oktoberfest weekend and before Thanksgiving, is my favorite time to have visitors. The color is at its best up toward Plain and Lake Wenatchee, the town is back to normal, restaurants have tables, and the light in the afternoon is the light people come here for. If your schedule is flexible, this is when to come.

Christmastown (November 27 to December 24)

Christmastown, which the town also calls the Village of Lights, is the holiday season here: lights on every building downtown, music at the gazebo, and a steady run of weekend events. In 2026 it runs November 27 through December 24. The city starts hanging lights the day Oktoberfest ends, they come on the day after Thanksgiving, they run daily from 6 AM to 11 PM, and most years they stay up until nearly St. Patrick's Day.

What is on (2026, from the city's schedule):

- Movie night, ELF, Saturday November 28, 7 PM at the Festhalle, $8.
- Merry Christmas from Leavenworth concert, Saturday December 5, 7 PM, $5.
- The Jewel Tones Motown Christmas Show, Saturday December 12, 8 PM, $15.
- Manuela Horn and Her Slay Belles, Sunday December 20 and Tuesday December 22, 5 to 6:30 PM, $15 adults, $5 kids.
- Daily: free live music at the Gazebo, strolling carolers, Santa and characters on weekends and select weekdays. The Festhalle is the warming station, with kids' crafts, gingerbread houses, photos with Santa and hot cocoa.

What locals know. The lights are the same on a Tuesday in December as on a Saturday, and the sidewalks are not. If you can come midweek, do. If you can only come on a weekend, arrive in the afternoon, eat dinner early, and walk the lights after dark when the day-trippers are heading back over the pass. Dress for actual winter: it is regularly in the 20s after sunset in December, the sidewalks ice up, and the wind comes down the canyon. Bring real boots and a hat you will actually wear.

Snow. Not guaranteed at Thanksgiving, likely by mid-December, and a real possibility for your drive home. Check WSDOT pass conditions for Stevens Pass before you leave, carry chains, and know that the Blewett Pass route via US 97 to I-90 exists if Stevens closes. December 2025 flooding closed US 2 through Tumwater Canyon for two months; that is rare, but it happened.

Winter Karneval (the weekends of January)

This one is my personal favorite. Winter Karneval runs across the January weekends, the lights are still up, and the crowd is a fraction of December's. It is also the only fireworks show Leavenworth puts on all year. No admission.

2027, from the city's schedule:

- January 2: Dia de los Reyes celebration, 1 to 7 PM.
- January 9 to 10: the Leavenworth Alphorns at 4:30 PM and fire dancers at 5, 6, 7 and 8 PM Saturday, both at the Front Street Park gazebo.
- January 16 to 17: live ice carving, noon to 3 PM in Front Street Park, and the fireworks over town at 6 PM Sunday, January 17.
- January 22 to 24: the Fasching pub crawl, Friday through Sunday, times vary by bar.

If you can only pick one weekend, pick the ice carving and fireworks weekend. Get dinner early, walk the lights, and be on Front Street before 6. Dress warmer than you think; you will be standing still outside in January.

The rest of January and February. The lights are still on, the hotels are half the price, Ski Hill is open for sledding and skiing when there is snow, and downtown is the version of itself that people who live here love. If a quiet, cold, lit-up mountain town sounds better than a crowd, come after New Year's.

A few things that are true all season

- **Parking.** Downtown is paid parking, city lots and meters. On festival weekends the businesses and school groups along US 2 sell spots for about $20 a day, usually as a fundraiser. Park once, walk everywhere. The town is a few blocks long.
- **Weekday over weekend, every time,** if your schedule allows. One catch: in the slow seasons some restaurants close on the slowest days of the week, usually Tuesday and Wednesday, so check that the places you want are open the days you will be here.
- **Reservations** for dinner on any festival weekend, and lodging as far ahead as you can manage. People book their Christmastown trip a year out, and I mean that literally; some of the places I manage are already full for next December.
- **The passes.** Stevens Pass on US 2 and Blewett Pass on US 97 both close on short notice in weather. WSDOT's pass page is worth having on your phone for the drive home.
- **Cell service** is fine downtown and drops out in the side canyons. One caveat: on the heaviest tourist days the towers get swamped and service downtown gets bad, and the Christmastown lighting weekends are the worst of it. Agree on a meeting spot with your group before you split up.

If you start wondering what it would be like to live here

Most of the people I work with came to a festival first. If the thought crosses your mind while you are here, I have a buyer's guide, for moving here or buying a second place here, that covers what a year in this valley actually looks like, schools, healthcare, the drive, the snow, and the six different places a "Leavenworth" address can mean. Message me BUY and I will send it. Or come find me; I am usually around.

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General information, not legal or tax advice. Rules and counts change; confirm the details for a specific property before you rely on them.