



'TIS THE SEASON

# Getting Swept Up in the Christmas Tornado

Fond and occasionally frantic memories of the Nutcracker Market

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As the temperatures drop and the holidays get closer, we must aggressively shop. As if a primordial ritual, we line up outside stores and flood malls, pushing through crowds to stack goodies high in our carts—goodies that *aren't even for ourselves*—all to the tune of the same five Christmas songs on repeat.

No Black Friday or Christmas Eve crowd is like that of the **Nutcracker Market**, four days of decidedly frantic shopping fun. The ticketed event at NRG Center raises money for Houston Ballet Foundation scholarships and brings hundreds of vendors from all over the country. It's best described as a Christmas Tornado.

The bustling crowd is predictable: fashionistas looking for a good deal, stay-at-home moms shuffling their children down the aisles, and gaggles of women who make a day of the market a

## **Nutcracker Market**

Nov. 13–16

\$15-16

NRG Center

tradition with “Santa’s list” clutched in one hand and—if they are doing it right—a plastic cup of wine or an aluminum bottle of beer in the other for a little bit of Christmas cheer.

On our first time attending, my mother and I had no real game plan. We just browsed, finding the occasional gift and sampling dips and sips from vendors until we broke down and stopped for lunch, enjoying whatever children’s choir was performing. It was harmonious and people were friendly, with the occasional sweet southern lady who would point at, say, a silver watch I was considering to chime in with “That would look great on you!”

Years later, I now encounter more sharp elbows than compliments—not that the friendliness has completely gone, but when people need two chevron scarves for \$10, things can get ugly if you don’t get out of the way.

Despite the increase in popularity, our tradition hasn’t changed too much over the years, except we share it with hundreds more people. The line will snake from the front doors past the Starbucks (which will have another endless line) and around the exterior of NRG Center. At precisely 10 a.m., all of these shoppers rush inside the building in a formation that is both terrifying and impressive.

I’ve also been impressed with the people who, like my mother and I, are just going for the fun of it. They tailgate before, with their hatchbacks open and filled with ice chests full of mimosa ingredients, donuts, and kolaches. I’ve often felt envious of these Nutcracker ladies as I drudge toward the lengthening line while nursing my lukewarm coffee.

While we wait, we contemplate a strategy. Forget researching the vendors—even if we did, we’d never find them in the madness that is the crowd inside. Rather we look at the map and pick a starting point, generally one as far away from the entrance as possible, and work backwards.

All the vendors are scattered and in no particular order, which is frustrating. While walking down an aisle, we’ll pass a jewelry store from San Antonio and a specialty taffy shop from Louisiana, only to almost overlook the North Texas boutique with jewelry made from bottle caps—something my niece would adore in her stocking. It’s a headache that requires complete concentration, so away goes the iPhone for three entire hours.



Image: Natalie Harms  
My mom and I have Yuletide

If you’re claustrophobic or hate crowds, then you should stay at home and order online. If you’re organized and prepared, it’s a great place to get unique gifts for family members, artisan foods for holiday parties, decorations and gift wrap that will make your home covetable, and maybe a little black dress for yourself. If none of the above strike your fancy, trust me, the people-watching alone is worth the price of admission.

It’s definitely an experience that will get you in the holiday spirit, and along with any gift for grandma



Image: Natalie Harms  
My mom and I have Yuletide spirit, but it's sometimes crushed by the crowds and craziness.

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It's definitely an experience that will get you in the holiday spirit, and along with any gift for grandma is the story of how you found it: "I searched a dozen bins to find that wine Koozie with the embroidered '#1 Grandma.'" I've gotten my roommates

personalized keychains—that they still use today. I've gotten my family delicious candies and myself too many scarves too count—actually, I did count and I have 14. But, most importantly, I always am guaranteed to have a great day with my mom and most of the other moms in Houston.

So put on your best walking shoes, dig out your collapsible shopping bag and my mom and I will see you there.

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