

# Northern California weekend

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## East Bay day trip Solano Avenue

**Why go now:** 20 walkable blocks of stores in Albany and Berkeley let you knock out your holiday shopping in a single decisive blow. **'Tis the season:** White lights drip from the lampposts and local teens play jazz from the street corners.

**Dress code:** Fleece, Crocs—oh, and a \$500 stroller. **Overheard:** “But honey, we already have so many princess dresses.”

**The seat to score:** A barstool in closet-size Jodie's (\$; 902 Masonic Ave., Albany; 510/526-1109) for fried chicken (Sat–Sun only) and buttery pancakes.

**Chilly?** Sip steaming chocolate at the Xocolate Bar (1709 Solano Ave., Berkeley; 510/525-9626).

**Treat tired feet:** Soothe your soles at Joi Nail Spa (by appointment only; from \$15; 1597 Solano Ave., Berkeley; 510/559-3500).

**Quintessential East Bay:** At Fonda (\$\$; 1501–A Solano Ave., Albany; 510/559-9006), happy hour starts at 9 p.m. That means night owls score \$5 margaritas and \$6 fish tacos.

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### 1. Pick a winner

Folks from the neighborhood and beyond show up on foot and by car to shake, fluff, pivot, and rate the Douglas and noble firs at **Ray's Christmas Trees**, a friendly lot in the shadow of the BART tracks.

Nov 28–Dec 24; trees from \$15; 1245 Solano Ave., Albany; 510/525-6666.

BY LISA TROTTIER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNY ELIA PFEIFFER

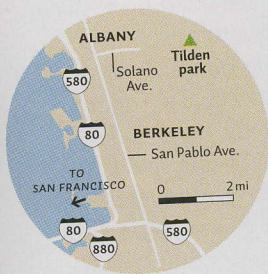


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### 2. Take a bakery break

Regulars line the benches outside sunny **La Farine**, munching on cinnamon morning buns swirled with highly addictive goodness. Inside, the baking racks groan with bouquets of baguettes, glossy eclairs, and palm-size tarts piled with seasonal berries. 1820 Solano Ave., Berkeley; 510/528-2208.



### Getting there

From I-80/I-580, take the Buchanan St./Albany exit. Turn east on Buchanan St., left on San Pablo Ave., and right onto Solano Ave. **INFO** [solanoavenueassn.org](http://solanoavenueassn.org) or 510/527-5358.



### 3. Get lost in a toy shop

The shelves at **Five Little Monkeys** are stocked with European, wood, and retro-cool finds. Parents get so absorbed with the puzzles, train sets, modernist dollhouses, and elaborate chemistry kits that eventually their kids wander out from the play area with an insistent "Mooooommm! Where aaaare youuuu?" 1224 Solano Ave., Albany; 510/528-4411.



### 4. Go 'round and 'round

Anyone with kids will love the throw-back charm of a detour to **Tilden Regional Park's** classic carousel, fresh off a renovation. Its antique hand-carved tigers, giraffes, and zebras chase one another every evening to upbeat carols, ringed by Christmas trees and a field of glowing reindeer, snowmen, and elves. 5:30-8:30 Nov 28-Dec 23, 11-5 Dec 26-31; \$2; Central Park Dr. in Tilden Regional Park, Berkeley; 510/524-6773.

## Check a few more off your gift list

**FOR THE QUIRKY COUSIN** No hohum gifts at the **Bone Room**. That is, unless you're bored with a bat skeleton, a faux amber key chain encasing a scorpion, and a real spiderweb captured behind glass. Silver pendants made of bits of butterfly wing are undeniably gorgeous. Closed Sun; 1569 Solano Ave., Berkeley; 510/526-5252.

**FOR THE BOHEMIAN NIECE** A brightly colored handmade-paper shade from **Kathmandu Imports** will pretty up a bare dorm-room lightbulb. Or go for funky knit hats or cotton shoulder bags with colorful stitching and that down-to-earth Berkeley style. 1551 Solano Ave., Berkeley; 510/528-8007.

**FOR THE NEW ARRIVAL** Clueless about kids? **O Babybaby** stocks only a handful of covetable clothes, toys, and gear: organic cotton lovies, bibs sewn from vintage cloth, fleece ponchos edged in pompoms, and outfits you'll wish came in your size. 1885 Solano Ave., Berkeley; 510/559-9909.

**FOR THE COLLECTOR** Bring in Grandma's vase, Mom's salt-and-pepper shakers—whatever—and **Sue Johnson: Custom Lamps & Shades** will transform it into a lamp paired with a handmade shade. Or come in empty-handed and check out the Arts and Crafts-influenced collection. 1745 Solano Ave., Berkeley; 510/527-2623.



**SHARE YOUR WEEKEND FINDS.** Favorite new restaurant? Local hike? Email your suggestions to the weekend guide editor at [wgeditor@sunset.com](mailto:wgeditor@sunset.com)