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French Sun in the South Fuels a Festive Glow in Paris

By ELVIRE CAMUS NOV. 23, 2011

PARIS — For the 31st year in a row, the Avenue des Champs-Élysées was lit up on Wednesday evening for the holidays, 200 trees sparkling against the Paris night sky.

But in this season of European austerity, organizers are trying to play down the glittering display's conspicuous consumption — of energy. They have teamed up with a solar farm in southern France that they say will “offset” 100 percent of the electricity consumed.

The Comité des Champs-Élysées, the association that oversees the annual lighting, began to make the display more energy-conscious in 2007, swapping traditional light bulbs for blue-ish LED's, or light-emitting diodes, which consume one-tenth the energy of conventional lights.

This year, however, the group has opted for newer LED's that are yet more energy-efficient. Organizers expect the display, during 49 days, to consume 40 percent less energy than last year, despite choosing to keep the lights on during part of the day, for the first time ever.

“The Champs-Élysées is a window on our city and on our country, and so ought always to affirm French excellence and inventiveness,” Jean-Noël Reinhardt, president of the Comité des Champs Élysées, said in a statement.

To offset the electricity used by the decorations, a solar plant in the mountains of the Pyrénées-Orientales Department will donate 31,000 kilowatt hours, or 40 days of production, to the national electrical grid.

Beyond their green credentials, the Christmas decorations this year are meant to be esthetically daring, as well, Mr. Reinhardt said in an interview.

“The decorations on the avenue used to be inspired by Christmas trees,” he said. “This year it is more dynamic and less traditional.”

Instead of the usual, static Christmas lights, three rings of LED’s are suspended around each tree along the avenue, as if floating. The lights are programmed to cycle through 67 distinct colors — there are 10 shades of white, along with gray, blue, yellow, red and green — and varying levels of intensity, creating an evolving scene throughout the day and night. The result is an arrangement that is striking, if not quite Christmas-like.

To bolster the glamour of the inaugural lighting Wednesday, organizers called on Audrey Tautou, the French actress and face of Chanel, to symbolically “light” the display.

The display cost €1 million, or about \$1.3 million, of which 20 percent is provided by the City of Paris. The remaining €800,000 was paid by corporate sponsors and the Comité des Champs-Élysées, a grouping of 170 store owners.

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