

Sleigh bells ring as big man makes way to NZ

Santa all geared up for parade and promises to watch kids' behaviour

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Tomorrow will be a long day for Santa, who is making his way "at the speed of sound" from the North Pole to Auckland for Farmers' annual parade down Queen St.

Mr Claus will be woken early and, after eating a big breakfast with all the trimmings, he'll be heading Downunder on his sleigh.

"I've got Rudolph and the whole crew bringing me down on the sleigh," said Santa, aka Neville Baker, this year's man in red.

"It's going to be a quicker trip [than at Christmas] because we won't be loaded down with all the toys and presents for all the children. We'll be coming down at the speed of sound."

The annual event, which is now in its 82nd year, starts at 1pm, leaving from the corner of Mayoral Dr and Cook St.

More than 150 groups will feature in the parade, which finishes with a party at Aotea Square around 2.30pm.

Mr Baker said Santa's after-party was the part of the day he was most looking forward to.

"Seeing all those children's expressions and they're so excited and they all wave and we try to wave back to all of them so nobody's disappointed."

Bringing happiness to others was the main reason Mr Baker loved his job, which he had been doing for five years.

"To see the look on kids' faces, they're so overawed and they hang on every word you say and they go away and they're just beaming - you just can't buy that feeling."

This will be his second time atop Santa's sleigh in the big Christmas parade.

"I'll be up high in the sky there on the sleigh in my big red suit."

This year he would also have a microphone, which added another layer of interaction for the children who came to see the parade.

"When you're going down Queen St you're 'ho, ho, ho-ing' and then they can see there is someone there, they can see you, they can hear you, they get a whole impression."

Santa and the reindeer would be keeping an eye out to see which children were being naughty and which were being nice, Mr Baker said.

"As we go down Queen St there will be children on both sides of the road so I'll be looking fairly quickly to see the good children who are waving and will be making a note."

Mr Baker, who used to work in manufacturing and now dabbles in "whatever takes [his] fancy," began performing as Santa as a favour for a friend who needed someone to fill in for a sick St Nick at the last minute back in 2010.

These days, he's a Santa expert, training a team of Clauses to entertain crowds at Christmas.

Within the world of Santa performers there were jobs with more prestige than others, although as Mr Baker pointed out, even if 100,000 people see Santa in the Christmas parade, the man behind the beard is still anonymous.

All the same, performers have ambitions to work the biggest events and be seen by the most people.

"Every Santa likes to have a fairly prominent role. Everybody likes to be, well, not top dog, but the top Santa."

The Farmers Santa Parade would be a tiring and hot day, Mr Baker said, but one he was looking forward to.

"It's thoroughly enjoyable - it's exhausting, but it's enjoyable."

Farmers Santa Parade

What you need to know



1pm: Parade starts
2.30pm: Parade finishes
2.30pm-5.00pm: Santa's Party in Aotea Square.



Car parking: Free at Downtown, Victoria Street and Civic car parks (if you leave between 1pm and 6pm).



Road closures: All inner city roads closed 11.30am-4pm.

Public transport:
Buses Some city centre bus stops relocated due to road closures. Extra services before and after the parade on
Howick and Eastern 500 and 550;
Birkenhead Transport 955, 973 and 974;
Go WEST 222 and 224;
Metrolink 249, 258, 267, 277, 305, 625 and 769;
Waka Pacific 328; Northstar 879
Northern Express.

Event trains every 20-30 minutes on most lines into the city.

Extra ferry sailings between Downtown and Bayswater, Birkenhead/Northcote Point and Half Moon Bay. Check Fullers' website for additional times.



Rain date: 6th December in event of heavy rain. Listen to Newstalk ZB after 10am.



Fundraising: Gold coin donations for Child Cancer Foundation collected at parade.



Pictures: Dean Purcell, Herald graphic