

## □ CHRISTMAS ABROAD □

**F**or our family, Christmas still conjures up the idyllic images that Ottawa can provide — sparkling white snow crunching underfoot and nestling on the branches of evergreens; clear blue skies; Salvation Army Santas on street corners. All the traditional trappings of Christmas accompany this image: a church service; opening gifts; turkey with all the trimmings laid on a table set with candles, crystal, and the best china; a fire in the grate; Christmas carols; friends to visit. This despite eight Christmases in tropical heat!

10

It's surprising how many of one's traditions can be transplanted to other lands even when "snowy flakes" seem quite unlikely in the 40 degree heat, and "Jingle Bells" rings a false note. It may take a bit more effort to make sure that the turkey is on hand, and the tree may lack of real pine scent because real it isn't! But whatever the lacks, it's fun to improvise, and our Christmases have been enriched by memories of ingenious arrangements and spontaneous fun. We have also learned in each new post to maintain whichever of our old customs were possible, and to create new ones that suited our new surroundings.

One of my fondest memories of Christmas in Australia, our first post, is of a two-year-old daughter reaching the fruit at the toe of her stocking, and exclaiming "Ooooh!...Mango!" Her father and I learned to go easy on the mince pies, but each year looked forward to mangoes and champagne on our balcony overlooking Sydney harbour.

Christmas in Trinidad almost takes second place to the Carnival season, which starts unofficially on Boxing Day.



But it was here that our children declared one Christmas "the best we've ever had", despite the fact that no gifts from home made it through the customs barrier. That particular Christmas saw the beginning of a family tradition whereby one child, taking turns each year, dresses up to play Santa and distribute gifts. We've had Santa in striped pyjama pants and pillow-stuffed red sweat-shirt; an elf in ski pyjamas and a tuque; and one year we had both Santa and a reindeer (courtesy of a brown housecoat and some hair ribbons).

In Africa we experienced new customs both African and Canadian! Before Christmas we were visited by troupes of small bare-foot boys with skin-paint on their faces, carrying drums, who came to serenade us with carols — and just incidentally to collect a little Yuletide 'dash' (read Baksheesh, or whatever else fits). However, it was in Ghana that we first attended a "réveillon" (hosted by a colleague) and first tasted a French-Canadian tourtière. At dinner on Christmas Day, single colleagues who joined our family helped to make up for the grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins who remained in Canada.

Our last posting brought us some of the delights of a European Christmas, as we learned to make lovely be-ribboned advent wreaths to hang from a chandelier above the dining table, and made paper baskets to hang on the tree. We heard the traditional service of lessons and carols read in Danish and sung by a magnificent male-voice cathedral choir. Even before we understood the language, the cadences of the words and the tunes of the carols were so familiar that we felt right at home.

Looking back at Christmases spent abroad, we realize that one thing in particular made them special. We were often away from the familiar setting of Christmas and from the extended family that is so important at times of major celebrations. While we were sometimes unsuccessful in re-creating all the trappings of a Canadian Christmas, our efforts kept alive the spirit of the season. And we really appreciate a bright, clear, snowy Christmas, now that we are home again! □

Dawn Jones