

MOROCCAN CHRISTMAS

Linda Cloutier

The Christmas tree stood stately in the living room, lights twinkling. In our fireplace a warm fire crackled cheerily as grandma, grandpa, Mom, Dad and guest settled into assorted couches and easy chairs to listen to Christmas music and chat, having tucked the kids into bed. Tomorrow would be an exciting day; opening all those tantalizing gifts, savouring the Christmas goodies mom had been baking for days and, of course, feasting on roast turkey, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, peas, carrots, jellied salads, and plum pudding.

Could this be Christmas in Morocco? We were having the most traditional Christmas we'd had in years. Yet stepping outside, or looking out a window made us realize that it certainly wasn't a typical Canadian Christmas. In our garden roses were still in bloom, birds-of-paradise were slowly fading, and stiff palm leaves were swaying in the cool breeze.

Surprisingly, a few shops were adorned with sparkling decorations. The words, "Bonne Année" were scrawled in spray snow across their windows. These tributes to the coming New Year were not only a reminder to send cards. They also encouraged tip-giving - demanded by the garbage collectors, requested by the local firemen, and hoped for by the grocery man, the butcher and the street sweeper. Morocco enjoys the celebrations of both the Gregorian (Christian) and the Hegira (Moslem) calendars.

Our Christmas in Morocco included a family visit to the Moroccan medina, to experience the hustle-bustle of a typical Friday in Rabat, while I stuffed the turkey (accompanied by plum pudding and shortcake, brought all the way from Gibraltar by the Embassy administrator). I savoured the memory of the six different kinds of "gluwein" I'd tasted at a series of beautiful pre-Christmas diplomatic receptions. I mulled over the memories of the impressive international Christmas craft bazaar that I'd seen in preparation at our house every Thursday since September. I was warmed by the images of our efforts two days before the bazaar. We had decorated our three adjoining living rooms with handmade gifts and decorations and transformed the rooms into one big Christmas boutique. And the children. What a gay and lively party for youngsters and adults alike. Held at our Ambassador's home a week before Christmas, it included a visit from Santa Claus and carol singing around the grand piano.

Then I remembered how I was back in Canada. Having never been on a posting before, I had scoffed at the stories described by foreign service families of their efforts to get a turkey or a Christmas tree. I had thought that Canadians shouldn't feel compelled to transfer their own traditions onto foreign soil. What was wrong with going native? Nothing, I suppose, except when confronted with the reality of being overseas - and in a Moslem land - for Christmas, all of us, despite ourselves, managed to gloriously surround ourselves in our traditions. **MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL!**

