

*CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS IN WILMINGTON  
AND OUR SISTER CITIES IN BELIZE,  
BARBADOS,  
CHINA AND ENGLAND*



*Belize (San Pedro)*

Christmas in Belize represents diverse traditions and rituals of the more than 10 different ethnic groups that make up its people. Masses to processions and dances to dinners, holiday celebrations last for two weeks and are always festive. San Pedro town is heavily influenced by traditions found in Mexico and El Salvador since many families migrated to Belize from these nearby countries. The traditional Christmas greetings include *“Merry Christmas”* and *“Felize Navidad,”* reflecting both British and Spanish influences. As a former British colony, Belize has adopted many English traditions such as Boxing Day which is celebrated the day after Christmas with dancing, singing and drum playing in the streets.

Music, singing and dance are at the center of all the holiday celebrations. A tradition of the Free Music School in San Pedro is to host a Christmas Eve celebration in Central Park in San Pedro Town serenading residents and visitors and giving out gifts to the children. Trees are part of the household decorations at Christmas. The trees often have boat ornaments to represent the Belizean fishing industry. Birds symbolizing peace are also part of the decorations. The trees generally come from the mountain pine region in Belize.



Houses are cleaned in mid-December in anticipation of family and friends visiting at Christmas. Traditional holiday foods

in addition to turkey and stuffing, or a ham for the main course might include: rice and beans and potato salad (Creole), black fruitcake, white relleno (Mestizo soup with pork stuffed chicken and raisins), pebre (roasted pork and gravy), and tamales (Mayans). And, of course, Rumpopo, a Belizean version of eggnog, is part of the Christmas tradition.



Señor Santa shares the stage at San Pedro Dance Company's Annual Christmas recital in photograph above.

### *Barbados (Bridgetown)*



#### *Recipe for Sorrel*

1 cup hibiscus calyces (dried or fresh)  
1 tbs. chopped fresh ginger  
1 cinnamon stick (optional)  
1 tbs. cane sugar (can use honey or agave syrup instead of sugar)  
4 cups hot water

Preparation: Steep hibiscus calyces, ginger, cinnamon (if using), and sugar in hot water for several hours. Once cooled, place in refrigerator and continue to steep for a little or as long as you

prefer (up to 2 days). Strain out plant parts and serve plain over ice or a splash of ginger beer. Some people spike it with rum or a splash of red wine.

Christmas in Barbados is focused on family similar to other cultures and involves a day of feasting. As a former British colony, Christmas in Barbados resembles an English Christmas with a few additions that reflect its own national identity. You will find Christmas decorations in stores around mid-November although people try to delay festivities until after Independence Day which is observed on November 30. Soon after major town centers are lit up and people drive around to admire each other's decorations. An annual event is the Christmas parade in Bridgetown arranged by the Barbados Cancer Society. Adults and children line the parade route waiting for a glimpse of Santa Claus and popular cartoon characters. The decorated trucks participating in the parade are sponsored by local companies and Virgin Atlantic Airways plays a major role.



Like Belize, there is an annual Christmas cleaning which in Barbados includes the changing of curtains and purchasing a new rug, appliance or piece of household furniture. The holiday meal is usually held at the eldest family member's home (grandparent or eldest sibling). Gift giving, feasting, Christmas cards, music and masquerade in various forms are part of the celebration. Christmas Day begins with church service and masses start as early as 5:00 AM. After church many families may go to Queens Park to enjoy listening to carols and seasonal music. A traditional meal in addition to turkey or ham will include: jug-jug (ham, guinea corn flour and peas), roast pork with crackling and gravy, fish, pepper pot, yam pie, candied sweet potatoes, plantain, conkies, Christmas cake, cassava pone, plum or "Christmas" pudding that contains no plums. The pudding is made of



currants, raisins, sultanas and other dried fruits. It is steamed for 3 plus hours in a large saucepan with boiling water. Then turned onto a heated serving dish and warm brandy or rum is poured over it and ignited. It is often accompanied by a butter rum sauce. The section on Doncaster gives a more detailed history of this classic dessert. Traditional drinks include home made sorrel (recipe at top of section), which is a staple Christmas drink throughout the Caribbean, ginger beer, and rum punch. The next day, Boxing Day, is observed by a picnic on the beach – something you can't do in the United Kingdom perhaps a good reason to spend Christmas in Barbados.

### *China (Dandong)*

A Christian household in the eastern part of Asia, which includes China, celebrates Christmas in the same way as Christians around the world with an emphasis on the sanctity of family as well as the sanctity of Jesus of Nazareth. Their homes are lighted and hung with paper lanterns. Christmas trees are often called "*Trees of Light*" and are adorned with paper chains and flowers. Chinese children may hang muslin stockings hoping for a visit from Santa Claus. Santa is called "*Sheng Dan Lao Ren,*" which means "*Christmas Old Man,*" and Merry Christmas is, "*Sheng Dan Kuai Le!*" Pictured to the left is SCAW board member Jonathan Garriss in Shenyang posing with a Chinese Santa, both giving a sign of peace.



Gift giving and decorations involve increased economic activity among both Christians and non-Christians making the holiday a major event for many retailers in Dalian and Shenyang, metropolitan areas located near Dandong as evidenced by these photographs from the Liaoning Gateway. Today China manufactures and exports a significant percentage of holiday

decorations purchased around the globe. You will find many factories in Dandong making glass ornaments, wreaths and candles for export. It should be noted that the vast majority of Chinese people are not Christian. The main winter festival in China remains the Chinese New Year celebration also called the Spring Festival which begins the end of January. Preparations begin in the middle of January with cleaning the house in



preparation for family visits. Similar to Christmas the celebration involves a strong focus on family, new clothes for the children and gift giving, parades and firework displays. The Spring Festival predates the celebration of Christmas by more than 2,000 years.

## *England (Doncaster)*



Christmas in England dates back to AD 596 when St. Augustine arrived with monks who wanted to bring Christianity to the Anglo Saxons. Today it is the most celebrated holiday in Great Britain. The photograph to the left is St. Sepulchre Gate in Doncaster bedecked with wassail balls and strung in lights for Christmas. Many of Doncaster streets are called '*gates*' - originating from the Danish word '*gata*' meaning '*street.*' During medieval times Doncaster was protected by four gates into the town. There are 'Roman' marble gates to commemorate St. Sepulchre today. The day after Christmas is called Boxing Day. The origin of the name given to the day comes from boys going around town collecting money in clay boxes. When the boxes were full, they broke them open. Another famous British tradition since the mid 1800's would be the Christmas crackers. The crackers are used to decorate the table at Christmas dinner which is served midday. They are small cardboard tubes covered in brightly colored paper. The cracker is pulled by two people and the friction creates a "pop." The person that gets the big end when popped keeps the prize. The cracker contains a tissue paper hat, a slip of paper with a silly joke or riddle and a small trinket or prize.

The Christmas tree tradition can be traced to Germany and is credited to Martin Luther. He decorated a tree with lights and brought it indoors to show his children what stars looked like at night in the forest. It became popularized in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain when Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, introduced the custom from Germany.

Other Christmas decorations brought over to America by the English include mistletoe, which was considered sacred by the people of ancient Britain. Druid priests used it in their sacrifices to the gods. The Celts believed it had miraculous healing powers. The name "*mistletoe*" in the Celtic language means "*to heal.*" In 18<sup>th</sup> century England mistletoe was believed to have a different kind of magic. A kiss under the mistletoe was thought to mean deep romance or lasting friendship.

A traditional Christmas meal in Doncaster would include roast turkey and Christmas pudding (aka plum pudding) with brandy sauce. Plum pudding is a classic British dessert and has been served on Christmas day for centuries. The traditional plum pudding is served in a blaze with a sprig of holly stuck on top. Holly greens with red berries are believed to have special powers. In Germany holly was considered a good luck charm against the hostile forces of nature. Early versions of plum pudding contained meat similar to early mince pies. Plum actually refers to a prune but later meant any dried fruit and today most recipes don't call for plums/prunes. In modern times the variations fluctuate since recipes have been handed down for generations. It is suggested that it be made four to five weeks prior to Christmas and can be stored for months. The Roman Catholic Church decreed that the pudding should be made on the 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity and be prepared with 13 ingredients to represent Christ and the 12 apostles, and every family member had to turn it from east to west to honor their journey.

*A GOOD CHRISTMAS PUDDING* [recipe from Godey's Lady's Book, Dec. 1860]



One pound of flour, two pounds of suet, one pound of currants, one pound of plums, eight eggs, two ounces of candied peel, almonds and mixed spice according to taste. Boil gently for seven hours.

### *United States of America (Wilmington, NC)*

America is the youngest country and most of its Christmas traditions came over with the early settlers reflecting British, German and Dutch traditions. Eventually as the immigrant population spread to include more countries the ways in which we celebrate Christmas reflects the diversity that is truly what America is about. There are some local and regional events and recipes that have been passed from one generation to another, which have their roots in the southeast. One example is the poinsettia plant that was believed to have arrived in Mexico City by Montezuma the last Aztec king. The Aztecs called the plant "*cuetlaxochitl*" and used it to control fevers and make a reddish dye during the 14<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> century. Later, a German botanist [Wilénow] gave it the botanical name "*Euphorbia Pulcherrima*," which means "*very beautiful*."

During the Mexican Civil War, the US Ambassador to Mexico was Joel Roberts Poinsett. Ambassador Poinsett discovered a shrub growing along the road in Mexico City with beautiful red blooms. He took cuttings back to his



greenhouse in South Carolina and is credited for the now common name "*poinsettia*" and introducing the plant to the United States. The poinsettia is a popular potted plant used both for gift giving and decorations in the southern region and its popularity has spread across the US.

Plaid patterns are popular in the south due to the large number of Scotch and Irish descendants. Gift packages are often wrapped in high gloss red paper with silk plaid bows on top. Bows are also frequently used to decorate families Christmas trees instead of garland in the south. The spruce tree is widely grown in North Carolina though other varieties of pine are popular as well. A traditional Christmas dinner will include turkey with cornbread stuffing, candied yams, a variety of casseroles as side dishes, pecan pies, eggnog, sweet tea, and some form of seafood as a first course.

### *Southern Style Pecan Pie*



1 ½ cup pecan halves  
3 eggs  
1 cup light corn syrup  
2 tbs. all-purpose flour  
3 tbs. milk  
3 tbs. butter (melted)  
1 tsp. vanilla

One hour to one day in advance make your favorite pie crust, wrap dough in plastic and refrigerate until ready to fill and bake. Preheat oven to 450° F (230° C). Place pecans in bottom of pie crust. In large bowl, stir together the sugar and flour. Mix in eggs, corn syrup, milk, melted butter and vanilla. Blend well and pour over pecans. Bake in preheated oven for 10 minutes. Reduce oven temperature to 350° F (175° C) and bake additional 40 – 50 minutes or until golden brown and filling is set.

The decorations, exchange of cards and gifts and the celebration of family and faith are traditions that are credited to the customs and traditions of early settlers in the new world and are still evident today. The Covenant Moravian Church in Wilmington hosts a tradition known as "*The Moravian Putz*" that includes old world crafts, special holiday cookies and other treats, and the telling of the Nativity story in narration, sight and sound.

As the region shaped its own identity over time new traditions emerged and are blended with the old. The rapid economic growth in America and abundant consumerism of modern times has often been associated with the commercialization of Christmas. However, Christmas in Wilmington is celebrated both as a secular and non-secular holiday that offers a large measure of peace and goodwill. The Chancel Choir & Orchestra gives three performances during December at the First Baptist Church in the downtown

for the enjoyment of everyone. There is an annual tree lighting of the world's oldest oak tree, a tradition that began in 1928 with over 500 multi-colored lights. The tree was estimated to be 200 years old at the time. Now it is decorated with thousands of lights and remains lit through December 31. The lighting which marks the beginning of the yuletide season in Wilmington includes a visit from Santa Claus and Christmas music. The Nutcracker Ballet is performed annually by the Wilmington Ballet Company in Thalian Hall, one of the oldest working theaters in America. The story of Clara, Neir, Drosselmeir, the Mouse King and the Sugar Plum Fairy come to life each year to the delight of audiences, both young and old. The Theater was completed in 1858 when Wilmington was the largest city in North Carolina.

Other annual holiday events include the Old Wilmington by Candlelight Tour of historic homes, churches and sites in Wilmington's historic district, the North Carolina Holiday Flotilla, a lighted boat parade that concludes with fireworks on the Intercoastal Waterway in Wrightsville Beach, and the recently developed Mayfaire Town Center organizes a musical celebration with Santa's helpers, a lively parade and even simulated snowfall to everyone's delight.



World's oldest live oak Wilmington NC adorned with lights Christmas 2009

*We wish people of all faiths and cultures peace and goodwill during the 2010 holiday season. To our friends in Dandong – good health and prosperity in the New Year. And to our friends in Gliwice, Poland, sister city to Doncaster – “Wesolych Swiat Bozego Narodzenia.”*