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Christmas Around the World

Illustrated by Karen Dugan

Australia

SYMBOL: Candlelight

GREETING: Merry Christmas

WEATHER: Sizzling heat

Early maps called Australia *terra australis incognita*, or the unknown southern land. Although Aborigines had lived there for forty thousand years, in 1770 Captain James Cook claimed the land for Great Britain and renamed it New South Wales. The continent of Australia is almost equal in size to the United States and is the sixth largest country in the world. The six colonies established by early settlers are now called states. One of its external territories, Christmas Island, was named by Captain William Mynors of the British East India Company on Christmas Day, 1643.

Many Christmas customs were brought by early settlers from England. However, the celebrations in damp, cold England were bound to change on an island continent that lies well below the equator. Australian Christmas cards sometimes picture the many unique animals found on this continent. Kangaroos, koalas, and wombats appear with unusual plants such as the eucalyptus, a native tree of Australia, and the baobab, often described as an upside-down tree.

Although Christmas falls during the summer vacation, crowds fill the churches for special services on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. After a grand breakfast of ham fried with eggs, some families follow church services with a picnic at the beach.

The traditional turkey dinner sometimes ends with a flaming Christmas plum pudding for dessert. Made with suet, or meat fat, spices, raisins, and apples (but no plums), it is steamed for six hours. In the days of the Australian gold rush, Christmas puddings frequently contained gold nuggets. Today a coin or small favor is baked inside, and whoever

finds it knows to expect good luck.

Homes may be decorated with ferns, palm leaves, the red and green flowering Christmas bush, and the yellow-edged, bell-shaped Christmas bell flower. Other flowers blooming in December include nasturtiums, wisteria, and honeysuckle. Children can search for the gold Christmas beetle. This small clumsy insect appears around Christmastime and flies into windows or clings to clothes.

Australian children are told that Father Christmas or, sometimes, Santa Claus will leave gifts for them on Christmas Eve. Costumed representatives of these two gift givers may be shown arriving by helicopter or boat in parades marking the beginning of the Christmas season. Gifts are sometimes tucked into the pillowcases on children's beds, or found at the breakfast table.

Since 1937 many Australians have made Carols by Candlelight part of their Christmas tradition. The custom began when a radio announcer, Norman Banks, noticed an old woman sitting alone at her window, listening by candlelight to Christmas carols on her radio. The following Christmas, Banks launched his idea for an annual community singing event in the city of Melbourne. The idea spread to other cities. Shops sell special candles for this event and donate all proceeds to charities. As darkness falls in the late-summer evening, candles are lit by members of the choir, dressed in white. Overhead, the sky is decorated with stars, some of which form the Southern Cross constellation. Parks are filled with audiences holding flickering candles, listening to the choir members, and blending their voices as they sing Christmas carols. The program concludes with "Auld Lang Syne," sung at midnight.



Canada

SYMBOL: Christmas tree

GREETINGS: Merry Christmas and Joyeux Noël, or Joyous Christmas

WEATHER: Waves of polar air can force temperatures below freezing

Canada, the largest country in the world, claims 7 percent of the earth's surface, or almost four million square miles. Its ten provinces and two territories sweep across the North American continent from Newfoundland on the Atlantic Ocean to British Columbia on the Pacific Ocean.

Sixteenth-century French explorers first opened Canada's rich territories for fur traders and later for colonists from Europe. They established a French stronghold that survived decades of bitter struggle with the British in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The province of Quebec retained its French language and customs, which is why the two official languages of Canada today are English and French.

Canada and the United States share a border of 5,527 miles. Both countries continue to welcome new citizens from around the world. More than 4,600,000 immigrants have entered Canada since the conclusion of World War II. Immigrants bring a rich heritage of Christmas customs and family traditions to their new homes. Christmas trees, Santa Claus, stockings hung by the chimney, and colorful outside lights are familiar sights in both Canada and the United States.

In Nova Scotia, during the twelve days of Christmas, small groups of *belsnicklers*, or masked mummers, appear in neighborhoods, ringing bells, making noise, seeking candy or other treats. Their host may provide Christmas cake or a drink made from a mixture of water and thick, sweet syrup. Costumes may include Grandma's nightgown or Dad's winter underwear. The host attempts to identify the disguised visitors. Once identified, the mummer removes his or her mask and ceases making noises and rude actions. Children in the house

may be quizzed by the *belsnicklers* about their behavior. If the children reply that they have been good, they are rewarded with candy.

The French-speaking Canadians of Quebec display *crèches*, or Nativity scenes, in their homes as part of their Christmas decoration. After attending midnight mass, families may be served *tourtière*, or pork pie. Another favorite food is *boulettes*, or small meatballs. A Christmas banquet is called a *réveillon*. Banquets for reunions of extended families require months of planning. Many family groups include thirty or forty relatives.

In British Columbia, Christmas turkey may be accompanied by either fresh or smoked salmon. People of British heritage may serve brussels sprouts, mincemeat pie, or trifle and will place a decorative favor, called a Christmas cracker, at each plate. Whimsical paper hats found in the cracker are worn during dinner.

A flotilla, or parade of ships, is organized in Vancouver Harbor in the two weeks prior to Christmas. Carols ring out across the water as children's choirs on the ships echo the sound of ringing bells. Onshore spectators view a harbor filled with ships silhouetted in lights, their mastheads decorated with Christmas trees.

The *aurora borealis*, or northern lights, casts an eerie green curtain of lights over the forests of fir trees. Trees are grown as an export crop in different parts of Canada. From October through the first day of December, Christmas trees are baled and loaded, sixteen hundred per truck, for a journey of thousands of miles to the United States. Some are also sent by ship to South America. They bring the joy of Christmas and a part of Canada into many homes.



Ethiopia

SYMBOL: Fringed, beautifully embroidered umbrella

GREETING: Melkm Ganna, or Good Christmas

WEATHER: Rainfall and temperature range from cool moist mountain air to scorching heat along the border

Ethiopia, which forms part of the horn of Africa, has always been a symbol of independence for the African continent. Unlike many of its neighbors, it was never a European colony. Its capital, Addis Ababa, is close to the exact geographical center of the country and has a wonderfully musical name that means new flower. In the ancient Egyptian world, the word *ethiopia* meant all lands south of Egypt, and the country that is now Ethiopia was called *Punt*, or the land of God. Egyptian ships sailed to Ethiopia to purchase spices, incense, and myrrh.

In the Ethiopian Coptic church, *Ganna*, or Christmas, is celebrated on January 7. This celebration takes place in Ethiopia's ancient rectangular churches carved, over 800 years ago, from solid volcanic rock and in modern round churches that are designed in three concentric circles. Men and boys sit separately from girls and women. The choir sings from the outside circle. The second circle, or holy place, is for the congregation. Holy Communion is served in the innermost circle, the sanctuary. Following a day of fasting, everyone attending the early-morning mass wears white. People receive candles as they enter the church. After lighting the candles everyone walks around the church three times, then stands throughout the mass, which may last up to three hours.

Ganna is also the name of a game played only on this day by Ethiopian boys. Similar to hockey, ganna is played with a stick and wooden puck. Players frequently endure cuts and broken bones in the rough-and-tumble action. At nightfall the game ends as the teams shout naughty limericks at each other.

Timkat, a three-day holiday unique to Ethiopia,

starts on January 19 and celebrates the baptism of Christ. A newly washed *shamma*, or rectangular shawl, is worn by adults to the church services. Children walk in a festive procession, wearing crowns and robes identified with particular church youth groups. Priests, dressed in red-and-white robes, wear turbans and carry beautifully embroidered umbrellas. Music for the ceremony may be that of the *sistrum*, a rattlelike percussion instrument shaped like a spade or pear. The *sistrum* has small metal disks that make a tinkling sound when shaken. The beat is tapped out by the *makamiya*, or prayer stick. This long pole is T-shaped and is also used as a support for the clergy during lengthy services. The *meleket*, or Ethiopian musical chant, is learned by *dabtaras*, or church officials, after rigorous study. *Dabtaras* are trained in theology and have an important part in church affairs.

During *Timkat* Ethiopians play a sport called *yeferas guks*. In a large field, teams pursue one another on horseback, throwing ceremonial lances. Young men on the teams, dressed in white, wear lion-maned capes and headdresses. Hippopotamus hides are used as shields.

Christmas food in Ethiopia usually includes *injerá*, a sourdough pancakelike bread that can be easily cooked over an open fire. *Injerá* serves as both plate and fork. *Doro wat*, a spicy chicken stew, might be the main dish for dinner. A piece of the *injerá* is used to scoop up a portion of *wat*. Beautifully designed basketlike stands are used to serve the *wat*.

An Ethiopian child would be amazed to see the many Christmas gifts received by children in other parts of the world. Gift giving is a very small part of their Christmas celebration. Children usually receive very simple presents like a small gift of clothing.



CHRISTMAS AROUND THE WORLD

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