

# The West.Indian American

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## Memories Of Christmas In The Caribbean



By Stan Walker

It is that time of the year again. Christmas is in the air. With Thanksgiving now behind us, stores throughout the city have become alive with eager shoppers looking for that special present for their loved ones. And as usual fantastic light decorations on buildings and residences have popped up almost everywhere.

Despite the enjoyment of having the opportunity to witness these colorful displays, for someone from the Caribbean it does not take long to realize that something is missing. Coming from the Caribbean, you can't help thinking about Christmas without the snow, the cold, the coats. You can't help thinking about Christmas in the islands.

To many Caribbean folks Christmas is like Thanksgiving to the Americans. So although many have adopted the trends of their adopted homeland, when it comes to Christmas their minds are taken back to the traditional celebrations that they are used to in their homeland.

Whether it is grandma's delicious fruit cake or plum pudding that she makes each year, every family has traditions that make Christmas special. People in different countries have their own way of celebrating and observing Christmas, many based on the family's culture and the way their ancestors celebrated the holiday.

All around the Caribbean beginning from late November to early December activities generally heighten in preparation for the season. And while it is a favorite time of the year for many, it also involves enormous work and decision-making. Decisions about décor, involvement in various activities, purchase of gifts, cards, clothes and of course

food preparation, which in most cases are at the top of the list, have to be made.

Similarity in the types of food served at Christmas time is one of the many manifestations of cultural connections between Caribbean islands. So although today many of these countries show a growing North American influence in food preferences, for Jamaicans, the traditional dishes of curried goat, jerk pork, chicken, rice and peas, remain among the favorites that are prepared for the celebrations. Along with these popular dishes, desserts will include fruit cakes in a variety of forms with sorrel being the favorite beverage.

With the holiday upon us, I decided to ask a few friends from Jamaica about their special memories of Christmas back home. The recollections seem to be similar. Foremost was the feeling of togetherness. Families and friends getting together to enjoy a sumptuous meal, exchange presents and generally party and have fun.

It started with the gentle "Christmas breeze" that began to cool the air from about late November or early December, one of them said. That got the holiday mood rolling. Then there were special recollections of being able to just go from house to house, visiting family, friends and colleagues eating, drinking and just having plain fun.

Once the season hits, there is the Christmas music everywhere you turn, radio stations, clubs and other business establishments that help to keep our spirits up. Then there was the Christmas parties which lasted non-stop for almost two weeks.

And since it is a time for youngsters, who can forget the popular Christmas Market? No matter how much money you had or did not have, you could not help but have a wonderful time seeing the vendors' stalls chock full of toys of every description and the children's faces lit up brighter than Christmas trees. As a child you look forward to this all year.

There were also the special church services and the Christmas

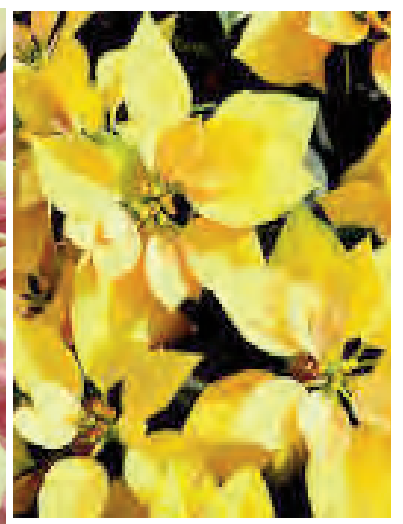
morning concerts. From the ones where everyone in attendance was dressed up in new outfits, to the ones where you could just enter as casual as you please and share the Christmas spirit.

Christmas in Jamaica may be somewhat different now from what many of us older folks have as our special memories, and although many of us seem to have forgotten the true meaning of the occasion, the celebration of the birth of our savior Jesus Christ, whether we are at home or abroad, let us put our hearts into making more good memories and keep alive the ones that make our celebration unique.

Have yourselves a peaceful and merry Christmas!



## Magnificent Poinsettias: The Christmas Connection



By Joette Johnson

Poinsettias are highly sought-after plants during the festive Christmas season. Their striking beauty and diverse hues are appealing. This holiday plant is often called different names—Christmas Star, Christmas Flower, Lobster Flower, Flame-Leaf Flower, Flower of the Holy Night, Premium Picasso, Monet Twilight, Shimmer; and Surprise are a few names for the Poinsettia plant.

The plant blooms for a short period of time and at different times during the year, principally during the Christmas season.

The Poinsettia plant is a shrub, which grows between two and 16 feet tall. The colored parts of the Poinsettia that people enjoy are actually colored bracts—modified leaves. And the flowers themselves are very small with yellow buds in the center of the plant.

There are more than 100 varieties of Poinsettias that bloom in hues, such as cream, white, orange,

yellow, pink, peach, green, burgundy, marbled and speckled, multi-colors, and the traditional red, which dominates over other color choices.

Poinsettias are native to Mexico and the ancient Aztecs used them to produce a reddish purple dye for fabrics, cosmetics, and the milky white sap was used medicinally to reduce fevers. Also, the Aztecs used Poinsettias in their religious ceremonies as they considered the color red to be a symbol of purity.

Two individuals made a significant influence to the popularity of Poinsettias. Joel Roberts Poinsett introduced the plant in 1828 in the United States after discovering it in the wilderness in southern Mexico. He was a botanist, physician, and the first United States ambassador to Mexico.

After becoming engrossed with the blooming of the plant, Poinsett sent some plants to

South Carolina where he began growing and sending them to friends and botanical gardens. Poinsettias are named in honor of him and the House of Representative created National Poinsettia Day on December 12 to mark his death as well as to appreciate the splendor of the holiday plant.

Paul Ecke Jr. is considered the father of the Poinsettia industry. He developed a secret grafting technique, which resulted in a fuller more attractive plant. In 1991, an article describing the secret method for causing Poinsettias to branch was published. Hence, Poinsettias' availability became widespread.

There is a Mexican legend about Christmas that is associated with Poinsettias. A little girl, who was very poor, was distraught because she could not afford to buy a present to honor the baby Jesus in a Christmas procession at her church.

She knelt outside to pray and an angel told her that any gift

given with love is a glorious gift. She then decided to pull weeds from the soil and she made a bouquet. On her way to the church, she was ridiculed and mocked relentlessly by other children for presenting a weed bouquet as a gift. As she looked at the scraggly bunch of weeds, she felt a tinge of embarrassment as she fought back a tear. But she proceeded to walk to church determined to present her gift.

As she approached the manger scene in the church, suddenly the bouquet of weeds burst into beautiful bright red star-like flowers and the congregation became speechless in shock. They had just witnessed a Christmas miracle and were ecstatic with the little girl's gift.

The preacher then declared that the red star-like flowers is a symbol of the Star of Bethlehem; and the red of the flower represents the blood sacrifice through the crucifixion of Jesus for the world.

So wherever Poinsettias are, think not only about how lush the plant looks around the festive Christmas season; but also think about how will you bloom and make a significant difference, impacting the lives of others in a positive way. This is one of the messages of the Christmas story.

### Happy Holidays



# Life: An Extraordinary Gift At Christmas

By Edgar Johnson

Christmas is one of the most celebrated holidays around the world, particularly in the United States of America. Every year as the Christmas season approaches following the Thanksgiving celebration, then comes the thunderous excitement, Black Friday, Christmas shopping, wrapping gifts, parties, and a host of fun-loving events, decorating Christmas trees and other activities.

By Christmas Day, it is estimated that over 80 million Christmas trees will be sold, millions upon millions will use social media to express goodwill and millions will attend Christmas services.

It is interesting to note that with the growth of Christianity in the Roman Empire, church leaders sought to counter the pagan and sun god's birth on December 25 and in so doing, celebrate the birth of the Son of God on that day, beginning about AD 350.

Over the centuries, Christians have combined both religious and secular customs. In fact, the homes of the ancient Druids were not short of decorations. Their homes were decorated with holly

as a charm to turn away ghosts. Many Christians saw the prickly leaves as representation of Christ's crown of thorn.

Also, behind the Christmas stocking custom, is a story about Saint Nicholas, who had no dowry and had sympathy upon three daughters who could not get married because they had no dowry. So he threw three sacks of gold down their chimney and the gifts went directly into the stockings, which were being dried by the fireplace.

In fact, in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, the Puritans did not look beyond the pagan customs of merrymaking at Christmas time. Consequently, they opposed any Christmas activity.

Should believers do the same today? Some Christian believers feel that Christmas is sheer paganism and that they should have nothing to do with it. Others see the holiday as embracing hope, joy, and peace needed in the world today.

Yes, those who cite the pagan origins of the holiday and protest that we have the timing wrong have a point, but an ultimately inconsequential one.

To observe the secular

aspects of the holiday in the giving of gifts, cards, lights, and the decoration of trees are simply a part of our culture. As families and friends come together, who is not excited about Christmas? And where does this remarkable holiday spirit come from?

The accounts of Jesus' birth in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke nowhere enjoin his birth with any notion of celebration. Jesus was born about 4 BC but the Bible gives no exact date of his birth.

On the night Jesus was born there was no mad rush of people hurriedly finishing holiday shopping, and no pilgrims traveling to be near one of Christendom's most revered shrines.

There were no Carolers and no decorations. As an ancient city, Bethlehem was a mere ordinary place, nothing extraordinary or exciting happenings. The people knew nothing worthy of celebration.

Those who thronged Bethlehem's narrow city streets wanted only to carry out their duty as common citizens (taxpayers) to Rome and quietly return to their villages.

Joseph and Mary were ordinary people who experienced an

encounter with the supernatural and even then, there was nothing to suggest that the event of that evening in Bethlehem's world to any degree changed the course of cosmic history.

To Mary the incredible message was, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35) and to Joseph the message was, "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because he will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 2:21).

In Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, he spelled out the fact that Jesus came to earth as a babe. His parents taught Him sound principles and values of life. He grew up in obedience. As Savior of the world, those who believe Him will have life forever.

So for Matthew, Jesus' birth by a virgin, his flight to Egypt, the murder of the boys in Bethlehem, his early life in Nazareth—all confirmed Jesus as the Messianic Savior.

What a gift of salvation and the blessing he has bestowed upon us. What an opportunity for us to be ever thankful for God's great gift of salvation and the hope of eternal life that it carries.

Yes, there is something special about Christmas. And as we observe the religious aspects in the

singing of Carols, sharing and exchanging gifts, may we take the opportunity to retell the story of God's gift to us, retelling the story to ourselves in a way that will penetrate the reality of the God behind the baby in a manger, the Emmanuel, who came and identifies with us.

Thus a pertinent question is raised: Does one become a pagan by observing aspects of a culture that had a pagan origin in the distant and dim past?

Should one overlook the event of his birth because there is uncertainty as to the precise day Jesus was born? If this holds true, then one would have to stop using the common names for days of the week and for the months of the year.

The greatest danger inherent in the Christmas season is that we spend extravagantly and needlessly. We forget the significance of the story of Jesus' birth, the fact that He came as the Savior of the world. He is the Emmanuel, "the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, and the True "Heavenly Gift."

As we celebrate Christmas, may Christ be born anew in our hearts. Let's celebrate heaven's example and God's opportunity to share the greater Christmas story of God's gift, and God's love.

Let no one steal your joy this Christmas.

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# When Packing Christmas Barrels: 7 Things Your Jamaican Relatives Want You To Know

By Tameka Heath-Harding

When the Christmas season nears, anticipation builds in Jamaica, not just for the festivities but for a special ritual. Families are setting aside funds and bracing for the freight fees that come with the cherished tradition of *receiving barrels* from ‘far-rin’ (foreign/abroad). These barrels, symbols of love and connection, are eagerly awaited. They’re typically packed with essentials—food, household items, clothes, and sometimes a few gadgets may or may not be included. If you know, you know. That said, despite the arm and the leg paid to Jamaica’s Customs Agency for clearance, the joy of uncovering the treasures inside makes it all worthwhile, if done right. Here are seven things your Jamaican relatives want you to know when packing Christmas barrels:

**- Send a recipient list**

Collecting barrels can be the source of joy or contention based on how it is sent. To ensure your relatives know what to expect (and to check against any sticky customs fingers), send a detailed list of the barrel’s contents, ahead of its expected arrival date. On the list, specify who each item is meant for. This will prevent headaches and year-long malice among family members.

**- Remove tags**

While your Jamaican loved ones want to receive items from the biggest American and UK brands, take the tags off before placing them in the barrels. They will appreciate the missed customs fees.

**- Signature Scent**

A barrel without the familiar aroma of Irish Spring or Dove soap bars might as well be sent back!

Don’t skimp on these scents; their scent is the hallmark of a proper barrel from abroad.

**- Food Essentials, Not New Tins**

Go easy on the Campbell’s Tomato Soup (your relatives probably have leftovers from 6 years ago!). Instead, focus on essentials like the two-liter oils, large packs of flour, rice, and sugar and of course the basic staples – canned fish and some packs of macaroni and cheese. Pack enough food items to last at least three months.

**- No Electronics**

If you insist on sending electronics, wrap them in the clothes and remove the tags.

Pro-tip: Phones are safe in shoes and laptops wrapped between a few thick wads of clothes.

**- Secure Liquids**

Anything that can leak, from toothpaste to cooking oil, will leak.

Ensure containers are properly sealed and secured with duct tape. A spill can not only ruin the contents, but also, dampen spirits.

**- Beyond Christmas**

While the barrel might arrive during the holidays, think ahead.

Pack items useful for the upcoming year, like school supplies for January and fresh linen and sheet sets for the New Year.

As you pack your barrel for your loved ones in Jamaica, remember, it isn’t just about filling it with items. Pack it with thoughtfulness, care, and an understanding of their needs and expectations.

This Christmas, let your barrel be a true gift of joy. Tailor it to the hearts and homes of those awaiting it on the island. (Source: [jamaicans.com](http://jamaicans.com))



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# The 5 Must-Haves For An Enjoyable Jamaican Christmas

By Denise Clarke

Jamaicans love Christmas time—for the lights, decorations, and shopping. Food and drink are at the center of a Jamaican Christmas, with family reunions and catching up over a huge meal playing a huge part in the celebrations.

Many things have changed in Jamaican culture over the years, but the traditions that make the season enjoyable still hold strong.

**Curried goat** – Early in the year, a ram goat is selected, dutifully cared for and fattened for his judgment day on December 25. On Christmas morning as the sun peaks out, the rammy will be marched to the slaughterhouse. Apart from the huge pot of curried goat, the animal’s entrails will make a hearty soup called **mannish water**.

**Christmas Ham** – For many Jamaicans, Christmas is not complete without a delicious leg of roasted ham. Heavily seasoned and marinated, it goes into the oven early Christmas morning and makes its grand entrance to the table dressed in an assortment of cherry and pineapple decorations. People have been known to take ‘washout’ (laxative) for this.

**Gungo peas** – Also known as pigeon peas, these come into season just in time for Christmas. While red peas will suffice for the rice and peas dish the rest of the year, the Christmas meal requires the unique taste of gungo peas and rice.

**Sorrel** – This is ultimate Jamaican holiday drink. The sorrel plant is ready for harvest in late November to early December, exactly what many Jamaicans have been waiting for all year. The rich red bud of the plant is steeped with ginger in hot water for several hours and usually

requires lots of sugar to sweeten. Some folks add rum to preserve the drink to enjoy after Christmas or just to add zing to the taste. Whatever the preference, a tall glass of ice-cold sorrel is the ‘must-have’ ‘wash dung’ to accompany the Christmas dinner.

**Christmas cake/pudding** – A delicious fruit cake with loads of dried fruits and saturated with wine/rum. It makes the perfect snack throughout the holidays and is the only acceptable dessert after the Christmas meal. Every home is expected to have this even if you have to buy it. You’re not considered a good host if you don’t offer guests a slice.

**About the Author:** Denise Clarke is a freelance journalist based in Kingston, Jamaica. She has written for print and online newspapers in Jamaica, Barbados, and the British Virgin Islands. Email her with feedback at [drb.mediaja@gmail.com](mailto:drb.mediaja@gmail.com). (Source: [jamaicans.com](http://jamaicans.com)).



Sorrel Drink



Christmas Fruit Cake



Curried Goat

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