

**Coastal Holiday Celebrations
Around the World**
By Sue Mayfield Geiger



Cultures worldwide observe many seasonal days of celebration during the month of December. Most people value the range of these celebrations, because it is evidence of the diversity of belief within our common humanity. They respect both their own religious traditions and those of other faiths for their ability to inspire people to lead more ethical lives. Religious diversity is to them a positive influence. Here at *Small Change News*, we honor the diversity of all cultures, all religions and respect their traditions. This particular article reflects on water celebrations around the world, but since our planet is so vast, this is only a small sampling.

Water people. Are you one of them? Chances are, the answer is “yes.” The coastal regions of Texas provide opportunities galore for water people. As the holiday season approaches, it is interesting to note how other

water people celebrate. In some places, without snow and chestnuts roasting on an open fire, there is merriment to be had where the sun is warm, the water inviting, and Christmas trees are non-existent.

The obvious choice of what to put in first place is none other than the Christmas Islands. Actually, there are two Christmas Islands. One is in Micronesia in the Pacific Ocean and one is administered by Australia in the Indian Ocean.

The **Christmas Islands located in Micronesia** got its name because it was discovered on December 24, 1777, by Captain Cook. True to its name of Christmas, the island has been an island of peace. No fighting occurred on Christmas Island during World War II; however, it was a staging area for the Pacific theater, and the roads and airfield created for these purposes are quite extensive. The island received its independence from Great Britain as part of Kiribati in 1979. The native Christmas Islanders are mostly of Gilbertese decent and though most of the local people speak English, the native language is I-Kiribati. (The Gilbertese people originated from the Gilbert Islands, a group of 16 islands in the central Pacific. One of the island groups forms the Republic of Kiribati.) Christmas Island remains largely unspoiled with very little commercialism (population about 1,800). With year-round, near-perfect weather, temperatures of between 74-84 degrees, there is minimal rain and low humidity. Coconut groves, sandy beaches, enormous land crabs, sea birds, vast reefs, endless flats and lagoons abound. There are few traditional Christmas trees to be found, so most of the islanders cut off a large branch from a tree in their back yard. After removing all its leaves, it is either painted white or covered with strips of Japanese colored paper. Once set inside (in a can filled with stones), it is decorated with an assortment of ornaments.

The **Christmas Islands located in the Indian Ocean** off the coast of Australia are

administered by Australia and flies the Australian flag. On December 25, 1643, the island was discovered by Captain William Mynors. Only 17.7% of the population of Christmas Island claims to be Christian whereas Buddhism is the leading religion at 36.1%, followed by Muslim at 25.4%. The population of these islands is made up of many races including Caucasian, Chinese, Malay, and Indian. Dialects of Chinese, Malay and Tamil Indian are also spoken. With summer-like weather during December, Christmas or holiday dinner may be a picnic in the woods or on the beach.

The smallest island in the world is **Bishop Rock**. It lies at the most southwesterly part of the United Kingdom. It is one of 1,040 islands around Britain and has only an uninhabited lighthouse, so no holiday celebrations here.

The most remote island in the world is **Tristan da Cunha**. It is in the South Atlantic, 1,600 miles south of St Helena, which is an island a few hundred miles off the coast of South Africa. Tristan da Cunha offers no television, but does have one radio station. The population totals less than 300 with only seven surnames between them, so everyone is basically related. Being almost circular, at the core of a volcano, with steep cliffs plunging into the sea, the anchorage is completely unprotected, and a heavy swell is constant. There are two long-established and flourishing churches, one Anglican and the other Roman Catholic, so a traditional Christmas celebration is to be found here. Most cottages have a vegetable patch, families keep their own hens, wool from the sheep is knitted into socks, sweaters and other articles, and many of the older women still card and spin their own wool (lots of homemade holiday goodies). The main external link with the island is Cape Town

in South Africa.

Seven thousand islands comprise the **Philippines** of South-East Asia. From December 16 to December 24, Filipinos rise at 4 a.m. to the sound of church bells. They get up before sunrise for "Misa de Gallo," (the mass of the rooster), a custom that is as much of a social gathering as it is a religious observance. After mass, everyone gathers outside the church where they can purchase a variety of traditional foods. Also, it is Lolo and Lola (grandfather and grandmother), not Santa Claus, who give out the gifts to their grandchildren.

The **Portuguese** have many traditions relating to the Christmas holiday. Christmas Eve is spent in preparation for the festivities to come. At midnight, you will find the family at church for Midnight Mass. They return home early in the morning and begin a feast called "consoado." Extra places are set at the table for "alminhas a penar," or souls of the dead.

The Greek Isles. While other cultures have Christmas elves, the Greek equivalent is not so benign. Mischievous and even dangerous sprites called the Kallikantzari (or Callicantzari), prey upon people only during the twelve days of Christmas, between Christmas itself and Epiphany on January 6. Descriptions of them vary, and in one area they are believed to wear wooden or iron boots, while other areas insist that they are hooved, not booted. Almost invariably male, other regions see in them the forms of wolves or even monkeys. Some households keep fires burning through the twelve days, to keep the spirits from entering by the chimney, a curious inversion of a visit from Santa Claus. In this country, St. Nicholas is the patron saint of sailors. According to Greek tradition, his clothes are drenched

with brine, his beard drips with seawater, and his face is covered with perspiration because he has been working hard against the waves to reach sinking ships and rescue them from the angry sea.

Christmas time is summer in **Madagascar**. People go for picnics or to the beach. Few Christmas trees will be found here as pine is not native to Madagascar, and while some can be bought in the capital, the government discourages this use of trees. In fact, deforestation is a major environmental issue in Madagascar. There are few decorations in stores and homes; Christmas is not the major commercial experience it is for many in the United States. Especially since the poorer Malagasy have difficulty in just having a special meal for the occasion. Santa Claus is called "Dadabe Noely" or "Grandfather Christ-mas." He wears a red outfit like in the United States, but he does not bring toys – just hard candies.

Malta isn't just old, it's mythic. The narrow cobblestone streets of its towns are crowded with Norman cathedrals and baroque palaces. The countryside is littered with the oldest known human structures in the world. Despite their relaxed disposition, the Maltese spend much of the year throwing confetti while carrying statues of their patron saints through the streets and drinking toasts to the Knights of St. John. The religious festival season is six months long, ending just in time for the holidays. If you overdose on nougat and wine, you can slip off to the tiny neighboring islands of Gozo or Comino for some serious peace and quiet. Mangers are everywhere, from private houses to small wayside chapels. Visiting public mangers (cribs) is the thing to do at Christmas; some are very elaborate, obviously the work of dedicated craftsmen. There is plenty to do around Christmas time in

Malta, but probably the most popular outing, for children and adults alike, is the annual pantomime held at the Manoel Theatre, Valletta. It is a happy mix of slap-stick and good humor.

Lest we forget, there are water people who live in very icy climates.

Greenland is the largest island in the world and is blessed with a peaceable people whom have never waged war with anyone. The population of Greenland is predominantly Inuit, a people bearing an affinity and solidarity with the Inuits of Canada, Alaska and Siberia. The Greenlandic people are few in number (56,000) residing in an enormous country. Magnificent glaciers, stunning fjords, mammoth icebergs, hardy seacoast villages and the fascinating culture of its people, Christmas in Greenland is enchanting, shared joyfully by the two predominant religions of Evangelical Lutheran and Shamanism. Christmas trees are imported (no trees live this far north), and they are decorated with candles and bright ornaments. In the past it was common to make one's own Christmas tree out of driftwood and decorate it with heather. Some people still prefer this to buying an imported tree.

Iceland. Not only do they have plenty of snow and cold weather, they have 13 Santas. Here they believe in thirteen mischievous Santas who come down from the mountains one by one starting on December 12. Each carries out his particular mischief: the one known as the Meat Hooker tries to run off with a piece of meat, the Candle Beggar snatches candles; every day it is something and someone new. The Christmas celebration starts with the arrival of the last Santa. They return to the mountains like they arrived, one at a time until the last one

leaves on January 6, (known as The Thirteenth) the end of the Christmas celebration, the day that the decorations are taken down.

Coastal or inland, holiday celebrations are as diversified as the people who make up the universe. Whatever your culture or religions affiliation, happy holidays to all!