



Santa visits Pantai Cenang beach!
Photo by Gitti Gibona, Christmas 2010

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By Teviot Fairservis*

Christmas in Asia

*There's the religious holiday and then there's
the secular celebration –
Christmas is a multicultural holiday!*



CHRISTMAS IS FOR EVERYONE!

daily from all over the world. With the kids having holidays from school in December, whole families are traveling to the island. Langkawi at this season hosts people of many faiths and cultural backgrounds. I've been wondering how many will celebrate Christmas here this year? What traditions do they have – and how do those who are non-Christian consider the holiday? Who doesn't like Santa Claus, especially when he arrives on a jet ski at Pantai Cenang on Christmas Eve?

This month, Langkawi restaurants, hotels, and attractions are gearing up for the high season as more tourists arrive here



1 Christmas in north China.
Children of my students dressed
up as Santa's elves.

Christmas is not just for Christians, to my mind. It seems people throughout Asia agree. The decorations come out each year in Bangkok and Beijing. Gifts are exchanged and Christmas music is broadcast endlessly on the radio and public address systems. Kids of all ages and from all kinds of backgrounds get into “the Christmas spirit” as they line up to meet Santa.

One thing I like most about the holiday is that it honors the birth of a baby – the ultimate gift.

Rejoicing in the birth of a child is a concept that cuts across racial, ethnic, cultural, religious or other lines. The holiday also can serve as a reminder that each of us comes into the world pure, innocent, vulnerable, and equal. How our lives work out

and what we grow up to believe depends in large part on the circumstances we are born into. But the bottom line is we are all human and children are precious gifts!

In spite of or inspired by its commercialization, the holiday honors love and good fellowship. It's a time for connecting with family and friends with cards, letters, visits, phone calls, parties and gifts. It is about hope and the value of peace. Even on the darkest days, twinkling lights, a glittering garland or a package with a big bow is a reminder that there is light somewhere in the world – a silver lining in every cloud. Perhaps most of all for me, it is a time when I find myself appreciating the friendship I have received from my family and friends over the years.



2 A Chinese Santa? Why not?

Christmas has always had a very personal meaning for me because my father made it the grandest event of the year. We developed many family traditions: decorating the Christmas tree on Christmas Eve, breaking a pinata filled with candy, drag races across the diningroom with battery-operated toys. It was the one time of the year that we were sure to be together for the retelling of family stories and reading of St. Luke's version of the birth of baby Jesus. Christmas morning we all raced to our parents' room at dawn. My father would go down ahead to light the Christmas tree, then call us to come down. Magically under the tree there would be stacks of gaily wrapped presents that would take hours to open as we oohed and ahhed over each one.



3 Santa and I hosted a Xmas Party in Baotou, China

In recent years, I have been far from my New England USA roots spending each Christmas in a different country in Asia. I have lived among Buddhists in Thailand and

Japan, Communists in China and Laos, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus in Malaysia. Everyone I ever asked anywhere could sing "*Jingle Bells.*"

Christmas Day 2005 in Inner Mongolia, north China was one of the proudest and happiest days of my life. I hosted a Christmas party attended by more than 100 of my students -- graduate students from the medical college and doctors and nurses from the hospital, engineers and administrators from the iron and steel factories. Each of my classes performed songs and skits in English. A highlight was the advanced class performing Clement C. Moore's famous poem, "*A Visit from St. Nick,*" otherwise known by its first line: "*'Twas the night before Christmas...*" As we began to collect props and costumes for the show, I realized that Christmas seemed to be everywhere in this Chinese city. Shopkeepers posted wreaths and portraits of Santa in their windows. Students took me to a mall that was lined with Christmas goodies where we found headbands with deer antlers and

ears, elf hats, and even a full Santa suit. In this Communist country where people told me they "did not believe in God," still they understood and shared the Christmas spirit.



4 Christmas in China.
Children (of all ages) everywhere love the holiday!

No matter your beliefs, *Christmastime* can be a time of celebration for you and your family. I had Jewish friends in New York who got married on Christmas knowing that they could always have an anniversary party which would be well-attended because it is a legal holiday in the U.S. -- as it is here in Malaysia.

Create your own holiday rituals! One of mine is that I try to go swimming on all public holidays – especially in the winter months when I can remind myself I'm staying in a beautiful, tropical place and not shivering or slipsliding in the snow like folks back home.



Here's a few favourite traditions to get you into the holiday mood!

GIFT-GIVING. A wonderful lesson for children (and an important reminder for adults) is that, "*It is better to give than to receive.*" Putting thought and care into choosing or making a gift for someone is an exercise in good citizenship and social responsibility. If it is true that "you reap what you sow," the practice of giving is one of the best ways to build positive relationships and compassion for others. Always it seems you get a surprising amount back when you give – whether to a loved one, a co-worker, or to a charity for a good cause. Gratitude is another of the real benefits that come with giving and receiving of gifts – some say it is a key that "opens all doors of possibility." Offices and factories the world over hold employee parties with a "Santa's Gift Exchange" -- instead of having to give to everyone, you bring one gift, get one gift. You can start early -- in parts of Germany and elsewhere, St. Nicholas brings gifts on December 6th.

FOODS OF THE SEASON Marzipan (almond paste) shaped into animals, cakes stuffed with dried fruit, eggnog and hot cocoa with marshmallows on top, gingerbread cookies, roasted meats, toasted nuts, puddings flambéed, sweets of all kinds – just a shortlist of favorites. One family friend delivers a quiche to her neighbors every Christmas Day so we always knew what we would have for lunch. In Mexico, papier mache animals and stars are filled with candy and children compete to swing a bat to break open the piñata. There is nothing like a child's joy when a mountain of candy spills out. Many island restaurants offer seasonal specials this time of year.

MUSIC You won't be able to avoid hearing Christmas music every time you enter a mall and you may start humming along. On the 'net, you can find Christmas music 24/7, 365 days of the year in whatever genre you prefer: soul, rock, pop, jazz... You can also find the lyrics. A few years back, I had my Thai students hunt up songs about Christmas symbols – bells, candles, pine trees, the 12 days of Christmas. Learn some new songs in a foreign language. You can

find “O Christmas Tree” in the original German “O Tannenbaum,” and “Silent Night” in almost every language in the world.

DECORATIONS Twinkling lights (any leftover from *Hari Raya* or *Diwali* holidays?) somehow transform a house into a home and a place of business into a festival. Candles in a window call weary travellers home. Make garlands, wreaths, or simple paper cutouts of snowflakes and stars, and post them on windows, doors, stair rails, or shelves. In place of a cut pine tree, decorate a flowering bush or stick homemade paper roses or cutouts of holiday symbols to a wall in a tree shape.

FESTIVALS AND PARTIES This year, the annual **Christmas Bazaar** will be once again hosted by **Pondok Keladi** at the resort near Pantai Cenang on **Saturday, December 17th**. Head out to this festival to pick up handmade holiday gifts, delicious baked goodies, and to stop by the booths hosted by island charities like the *Charity Club Langkawi* and other organizations. Host a party at one of the island restaurants offering special menus and discounts. Or make the rounds this coming New Year’s Eve of the many bars and discos to meet others celebrating the end of the old year and the start of 2012!

MEET SANTA. Santa will be stopping by various island locations throughout December. I’m looking forward to meeting him on the beach at Pantai Cenang this holiday season! Hope to see you there, too!

HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO EVERYONE!

