



JOY TO THE WORLD

Missionary Christmas

Christmas in Panama

Panama is rich in Christmas traditions. If you desire to celebrate Christmas with a warm, tropical breeze, go to Panama. The joy and excitement of the holiday are seen and felt throughout the country. Coming from Catholic traditions, the birth of Jesus is celebrated every year.

The evangelical churches maintain many traditions with a true biblical slant. Children and adults prepare programs, music, and plays for the days before Christmas Eve. It's a joyful time celebrating Christ's birth. Sometimes the church family shares a meal, but the main Christmas meal is a family affair at midnight on Christmas Eve. All day, people cook and prepare a traditional feast, filling the air with delicious aromas and Christmas music. It's a joyous time!

On Christmas Eve, church families visit each other with small gifts, ensuring they return home for the evening meal. The Catholic church holds a mass, while some evangelical churches have a short service.

Most homes display a Christmas tree and a “Nacimien-to” (nativity). At midnight, the baby Jesus is placed in the manger, signaling His birth, followed by the family meal. The extended family gathers in one house, talking, laughing, eating, and enjoying music. Across the country, fireworks and firecrackers light up the night sky. The Christmas Eve table in Panama is a sensory feast, with dishes like arroz con pollo (rice with chicken), tamales, pernil (roast pork), turkey, ham, ensalada de papas (potato salad), “rosca” (a special woven, sweet bread), and sweet treats like fruitcake, flan, and grapes.

About the Writer: Judy, originally from Southeast Missouri, met her husband Steve Lytle at Welch (then FWBCC) College and soon discovered God's call to serve beyond her hometown. In 1976, they moved to Costa Rica for language school before serving 30 years as missionaries in Panama. Since retiring in 2015, they have lived in Nashville and remain active at Cofer's Chapel FWB Church, where they minister to the Hispanic community and senior adults. Judy also leads the women's ministry and spent 10 years teaching children in a Good News Club

Christmas in Uganda

Christmas is a much-anticipated holiday in Uganda. Families begin saving their money to buy a goat or chicken to fatten up for their Christmas dinner. For people who live on beans and posho (a cornmeal and water mixture with a texture like 3-day-old potatoes), this is a special treat. Families gather from all over their villages and communities, each bringing different foods—boiled cassava, greens (similar to collard greens), purple yams, goat, chicken stew (a broth with a piece of meat), and other traditional favorites.

The area is decorated with streamers and balloons. Festivities begin with traditional dancing. Girls wear colorful dresses made from Ugandan fabric, while boys wear outfits resembling leopard skin. Drums covered in animal skins begin to pound as children begin to dance, soon joined by excited elders. As the children dance, older men and women join in with excitement. The little children begin imitating the elders.

The celebration is rarely filled with gifts; instead, it is filled with laughter. The adults talk while the children play jump rope, “futball” (soccer), and other games. What is important to the Ugandan people is relationships, not things.

About the Writer: A graduate of Welch College, Cindy Cunningham has spent 40 years in ministry, working with Youth for Christ, Josh McDowell, and ALARM (African Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries). Her work has taken her to countries around the world: Japan, Russia, Romania, Belarus, Congo, Sudan, Rwanda, Kenya, and Uganda.

In 2006, while in northern Uganda, Cindy witnessed the suffering of children forced into war and young girls enslaved, as well as thousands devastated by conflict. Burdened, she prayed, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” Out of that call, she left her job and founded Village of Hope Uganda.

“Village of Hope—where God transforms children of war into children of HOPE”

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