Christmas in Colombia

Christmas celebrations in Colombia, shaped by the 90 percent of Colombians who are Roman Catholic, begin in early December with a ceremony in honor of the Virgin Mary. In the evening of December 7th, families light scores of candles and use them to outline streets, sidewalks, and parks so that entire cities are illuminated. December 8th brings a national holiday commemorating the Immaculate Conception during which more prayers and candles are offered to the Virgin Mary. Christmas trees are raised and decorated on December 16th with the start of the *Novena*, which in Colombia involves a nine-day prayer ritual with a rosary in anticipation of Christmas day.



During this time of celebration of Christ's birth, groups of families and friends, often encompassing an entire village or neighborhood, gather together each night to pray. *Villancicos*, better known as Christmas carols, are also sung around the nativity scene that plays a significant part of Colombia's Christmas celebrations. Most Colombians attend Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve before returning home for dinner. The Christmas meal often includes a special chicken soup called *Ajiaco*, homemade breads, fritters, roast pork and *natilla* (a corn-based dessert). Presents are brought by "El Niño Jesus" to the foot of children's beds by the next morning, and after a relaxing day spent with family, the Christmas season is complete.

Colombian Christmas and New Year's traditions



Christmas Lights: Every December, Colombian cities and towns are filled with wonderful decorations with lights. During the Christmas season, plazas, parks, rivers and streets, shine with the most colorful, beautiful and creative art made with lights. People use to take rides with friends or family to see these lights on a *chiva*, a colorful and rustic open bus, which literally translates "goat". There are drinks and loud music and people sing their favorite songs throughout the ride around the city, while looking at the *Alumbrados.*

The Christmas Tree: This tree is usually located beside the nativity. People place gifts for family and friends under the tree and they exchange them on December 16th, when the *Novena de Aguinaldos* starts. *Aguinaldo* means Christmas gift in Spanish.

Nativity Scene (El Pesebre): The nativity is the representation of Jesus' birth that traditionally decorates Colombian homes in the Christmas season. It is usually composed of figurines depicting the infant Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Other figures in the scene may include angels, shepherds, and various animals.



Little Candles Day (El día de las velitas): December 7th is when people light candles in front of their houses or on their balconies in honor of the Virgin Mary. This is when Christmas lights are turned on for the first time and fireworks start appearing in the sky.



Christmas Prayers (Las Novenas): Novenas are daily prayers beginning nine days before Christmas, to prepare for the arrival of *El Niño Jesus* (baby Jesus). People go from one relative's home to another every night and gather round the *pesebre* (nativity) and have Christmas appetizers, pray and sing *villancicos* (Christmas carols).

Christmas Eve Dinner (Noche Buena): These festivities start late in the evening with family members gathering round a table filled with all the traditional Colombian Christmas food. The parties are full of joy, drinks, music and dancing. Children wait for *el niño Jesus* in Colombia to bring the gifts.



KEY VOCABULARY

I. Holiday
II. Candles
III. Prayers
IV. Carols
V. Nativity
VI. Mass
VII. Eve
VIII. Gifts/Presents
IX. Fireworks
X. Appetizers

READING COMPREHENSION

1. What do people do in the evening of December 7th?

2. What is the "novena"?

3. What typical food do Colombian have for Christmas?

4. What is a "Chiva"?

5. Does Santa Claus bring the Christmas gifts in our country? If not, who does it?

6. What do people usually do in the novenas?

7. Is there any other Christmas or New year's tradition that you know? Which one?

8. Do you like Christmas? Why (not)?