

# SEASONAL SPAIN

Spain's Christmas traditions differ massively to British ones, leaving expats to choose how much to adopt, and how much to carry over our favourite seasonal pastimes from Britain

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Ah, Christmas, the biggest celebration of the year as offices close, families gather together and we enjoy a huge wealth of traditions. Innumerable rituals shape the hours that lead to Christmas Day, from the lighting of a new candle on each weekend of advent to the hanging of stockings on Christmas Eve. Each family has its own traditions, but they all add up to the same thing: a Christmas that mirrors all those that have gone before in some small way, giving a sensation of warmth and familiar celebration. But what happens if you move your family to a new culture and even a new climate? Do the rituals hold true, or do you take on new rites of passages to mark this holiday?

Christmas in Spain comprises three main stages: Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve and the Day of the Three Kings. However, the first event is the drawing of El Gordo, one of the largest lotteries in the world. This takes place on December 22nd, by which time most people have dozens of tickets, as you can buy percentages of different numbers, increasing your chances of winning 'the fat one'. When the top prizes are announced, the country goes into a mad frenzy searching for the winners.

### The days before Christmas

Although Christmas trees are becoming increasingly popular, most families still prefer to have their own replication of the nativity scene, called a *Portal de Belén*, which is sometimes quite elaborate, with pieces passed down from generation to generation.

"All homes have a *Portal de Belén*, and Spanish shops are full of accessories for them, from the Three Wise Men to Maria and José (Mary and Joseph) to various types of little Jesus and, of course, lots of different stables! It's just like the Christmas tree decoration and gift wrap section of a British shop, but instead they're full of little figures. Some figures can be extremely expensive as they are real works of art," says Andrew Forbes, who lives in Marbella. "Just as British town squares have huge municipal Christmas trees, Spanish towns have huge, extravagant *Beléns*, some even with live actors during the day! The Catholic church, with its strong tradition of



ABOVE: Poinsettias bring Christmas cheer into the sunshine

iconography, also makes sure that each community has a large still-life nativity scene in each church."

However, Christmas decorations really vary from area to area, with the costas particularly influenced by their large communities of British expats.

"On the Costa Blanca, the streets are bedecked with lights and decorations by the local authorities, plus there are firework displays, which accompany every celebration in Spain."

"In Spain the run up to Christmas is much less frenetic than it is in Britain"

Elsewhere, the run up to Christmas is much less frenetic than it is in Britain, which many expats are very happy about.

"We enjoy the simplicity of the festivities here," says Kate Pullen, who lives in Extremadura with her husband Ian. "We're in a very rural and traditional part of Spain, so I am sure that things will be different to the parts of Spain with a greater influence of British people."

"There is so little hype here. It used to be that we didn't notice it was nearly Christmas until two weeks before, although it's becoming more commercial," says Rachel Webb, who lives with her family near Jaén. "The kids don't finish school or college until two or three days before and only Christmas Day"

LEFT: Nativity scenes, Beléns, come in all shapes and sizes

FAR LEFT: Lights tend to be put up in areas with expat populations





**ABOVE:** Andrew Forbes celebrates in Spanish and British fashion

is a bank holiday, which limits the celebrating as most people have to work the day after."

**Family feasting**

Christmas Eve, or Noche Buena, is more important than Christmas Day, with lots of family parties.

"Christmas celebrations here are very family-orientated, with three or four generations getting together for meals," says Kate Pullen.

The meal is one of the most important in the year, and usually begins with plates of shellfish and cold meat, followed by soup and baked bream with potatoes, then roast lamb, pork or more fish. The feasting culminates in mounds of sweets such as marzipan or *turrón*, a nougat made with almonds.

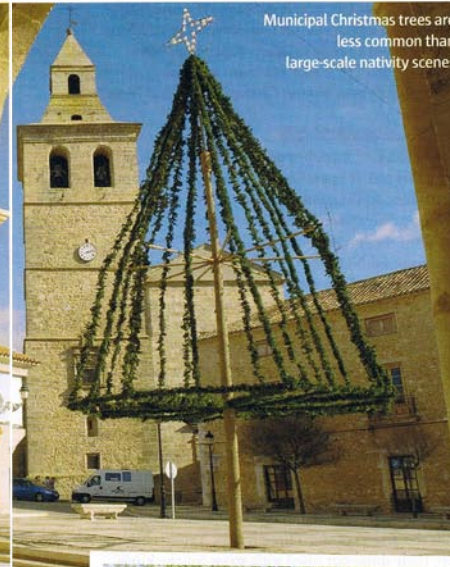
Kate says, "Festive food in stores will include shelf after shelf of *turrón*. *Turrón* is as popular in Spain as chocolate is in Britain."

Family members exchange small gifts at this point. "Last year we were invited to dinner on Christmas Eve, which is the traditional 'get together' time. We shared a meal with these Spanish friends at 10pm then watched as they gave each other their presents," says Rachel Webb.

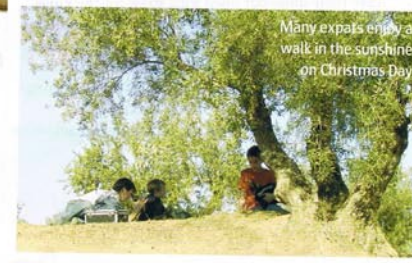
After dinner the family usually heads to church for a special mass. Again this is a tradition that varies from area to area. Peter Kerr, the author of *Snowball*

**BELOW RIGHT:** What will your Spanish friends think of these?

**BELOW:** Spanish shops sell a wide assortment of nativity figurines



Municipal Christmas trees are less common than large-scale nativity scenes



Many expats enjoy a walk in the sunshine on Christmas Day

*Oranges* and other novels about his family's years on Mallorca, recalls their Christmases on the island. "Although not habitual church-goers, we'd make a point of going to the local Christmas Eve service for an event that is unique to Mallorca, namely the unaccompanied singing by a boy soprano of the haunting *Sibilla*, an ancient prophecy of the end of the world. On the face of it, not very Christmas-like, but a moving experience all the same!"

**"Christmas Eve is more important than Christmas Day, with lots of family parties"**

Andrew Forbes enjoys combining Spanish and British traditions. "On Christmas Eve, I typically go with my partner to the family home in Ronda for a meal. All the family and kids are there and the meal lasts well into the night," he says. "I normally bring some British mince pies or pudding just to mix things up a bit. Last year when I set light to the Christmas pudding with brandy, I certainly raised a few eyebrows – if not singed my own!"

**A reprieve for turkeys**

Unlike Christmas day in Britain, the biggest events of the season are still centred around the church, with church

services taking place between feasting and socialising with friends and families. A strange, but traditional, custom is 'swinging', for which swings are set up in courtyards and the young Spanish swing while everyone else gathers round and joins in a jovial singsong.

Then the feasting begins for the second day in a row. "In Extremadura there won't be a turkey in sight and certainly no Christmas puddings," says Kate Pullen. "Instead, the seafood sections in stores will be massive, and the ham section increases significantly. The drinks aisle includes a special range of cavas."

Keith Wildman and his wife Audrey live in Calpe on the Costa Blanca. "Lobster, prawns and various exotic fish, followed by duck, venison or wild boar, are all washed down with wine and cava," says Keith. "Many Brits attend church services in the morning, gorge themselves in the afternoon and walk it off in the late sunshine on the local promenades, perhaps pausing to enjoy a sherry or brandy in a seaside bar."

"Although turkey is popular on Mallorca, with the traditional stuffing said to have included thrushes, it was a relief for a fed-up-with-turkey bloke like me

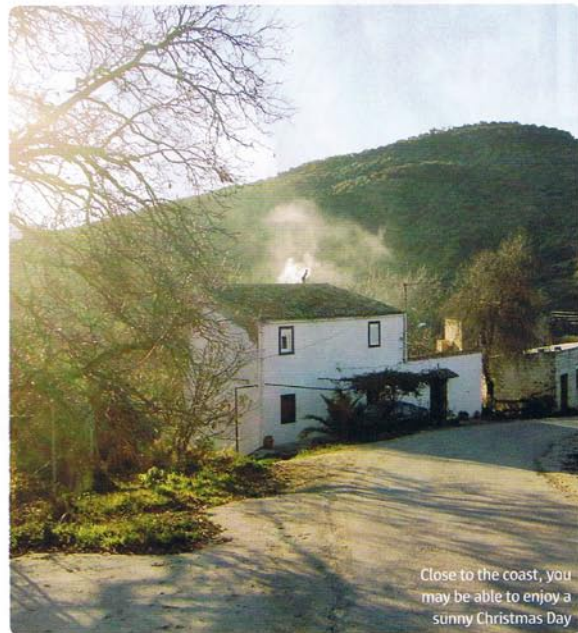


'Papa Noel' won't need to wear his warm red coat and hat when he delivers to Spain



ABOVE: Christmas lights are also common in the larger cities

BELOW RIGHT: Nut-packed turrón is the traditional sweet



Close to the coast, you may be able to enjoy a sunny Christmas Day

experience over Christmas in Spain. We usually go for a walk or a bike ride on Christmas Day and New Year's Day – it's rarely weather-dependant," says Rachel Webb. "This year my mum is coming over so I'm thinking about having Christmas lunch *al fresco*."

**Grapes, cava and gifts**

New Year's Eve is celebrated with family and friends, with most people spending the evening in bars and restaurants, spilling out into the plazas for the midnight countdown before heading back into the bars until the sun rises on the New Year. The most quintessential New Year's tradition was introduced at the beginning of the 20th century, and is called *las uvas de la suerte*, 'lucky grapes'. As the clock chimes for midnight, people eat one grape at each stroke of the clock, making a wish for the New Year.

There is still one major event to come, Los Reyes Magos, and a special ring-shaped cake called *roscón de los reyes* is made to celebrate it. This is the Spanish equivalent of our fruit cake, and tastes similar to a hot cross bun, covered in sugar and fruit-flavoured jellies. The cakes contain plastic toys as charms, and if you discover one you'll have good luck for the whole year.

On January the fifth, Spanish children excitedly await the arrival of the Three Kings. Young children leave their shoes out filled with straw for the kings' camels. In the morning they hope the straw will be replaced with presents, commemorating the gifts given to baby Jesus. The children believe that they travel all the way to Bethlehem every year, reaching Spain 12 days later on their way back home.

"This is the time when the Spanish give each other

"Young children leave their shoes out filled with straw for the Three Kings' camels"

and their kids presents," says Andrew Forbes. "There's always a *cabalgata*, a street parade, on the night of the fifth or sixth of January, and it's a public holiday."

Celebrations vary from town to town. "In our village in Extremadura, tractors pull the Three Kings around the village on the night of the sixth of January and they throw sweets to people watching," says Kate Pullen. "They end up in the town hall where presents are given to the youngsters."

"In Calpe, gifts are handed in at the local church and subsequently distributed to the children with much ceremony by the priest," says Keith Wildman. "This is then furthered by traditional food and drink parties."

**A Clubhouse Christmas**

David Forbes and his family own a holiday home at the Los Arqueros golf course near Marbella. "I spend Christmas with my wife and

son at our apartment at Los Arqueros, which we have done for the last two years, since getting the keys to our apartment in October 2005. Los Arqueros Golf and Country Club boasts a superb clubhouse, so we booked a table there for Christmas Day and looked forward to our first Christmas lunch on the Costa del Sol," says David. "We opened our presents on Christmas morning as usual, and later we joined our neighbours in their apartment for a glass of champagne before walking in the sunshine to the clubhouse."

The five-course meal cost €25 a head including wine, far cheaper than it would have been in Britain.

"While not quite what we would call a traditional Christmas lunch, it was close enough. The food was excellent and we all enjoyed being waited on and not worrying about who was going to do the washing up!" David says. "My sister Sara and her family came out on Boxing Day and stayed with us until after New Year. Most of the holiday was spent sightseeing, exploring new restaurants, sun bathing and playing golf – idyllic! Who could ask for more? On the 31st of December we went back to the Club House for a fantastic New Year's Eve ball for an all-inclusive price that included a magnificent multi-course meal, live music and whatever you wanted to drink. Believe me, we drank! Our walk back to the apartment was 'unsteady' to say the least, but we arrived there in one piece and were grateful not to have had to pay a fortune for a taxi. Both adults and children had had a great time."

New Year's Day dawned bright, warm and sunny so the family headed to Marbella for a walk along the beach there. "The shoes came off and we paddled in the sea – a little bit chilly but great fun!" says David. "We spent last Christmas and New Year at Los Arqueros too. By that time we had made many friends and were inundated with invitations. This made Christmas even more enjoyable and we can't wait for this year's celebrations."

**Changing times**

The volume of expats living in certain parts of Spain has led to some popular British traditions being taken on by the Spanish.

"Living in Andalucía, on the coast, it is impossible not to see how northern European interpretations of Christmas have impacted on this traditional Spanish festival. Our traditional festive tree, cards and Christmas Day lunch are now found all along the coast," says Andrew Forbes. "On a Saturday in late October I was in a car park and I looked up to see Santa's Sleigh and reindeer being installed in lights between some lampposts ready for the all-important November and December festive trading periods."

"Over the last 20 years we've seen tremendous changes in the way Christmas is celebrated in Spain," says Keith Wildman. "Germans and Brits brought a whole new concept of hedonistic celebration with parties, gifts,



The visit of the Three Kings ends Spain's festive season



food and booze, the partaking of which lasted until New Year."

Even the custom of Spanish children waiting for January the sixth for their presents is now changing in areas more heavily populated by Brits.

"Father Christmas is an increasingly popular concept," says Andrew. "You see Papa Noel in shopping centres with the huge Christmas trees, and increasingly you see families giving a few gifts to each other on Christmas Eve 'from Papa Noel!'"

However, Andrew is pleased to say that there are still plenty of unique seasonal characteristics that bear no resemblance to Britain's celebrations.

"As an expat in Spain I think I get the best of both worlds," he says. "I get to celebrate Christmas Eve with my Spanish relatives and then on Christmas Day, which isn't a special day here, I get to have a traditional English meal with friends and we all bring a dish and exchange gifts. Then later on the sixth of January I get to enjoy all the gift giving, and receiving, again when the Spanish traditionally celebrate the Three Kings Festival!" **SMH**

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Christmas in Spain is becoming traditional for the Forbes family!