

Merry Christmas in Lisbon !

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LiL



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Christmas? With these temperatures?

Christmas in Lisbon does not always correspond to the idea we have adopted, i.e. that Christmas in Europe has snow or rain, or is at least cold...

However, if the weather turns wetter, you can bet we will feel the cold!!!

Nor is this a southern hemisphere Christmas, where you can walk around in shorts and go to the beach. It is a Christmas of Southern Europe, with well-defined characteristics, and with less cold than those countries where Father Christmas visits houses wrapped in a blanket of snow.

During this period (as in the Western world in general), we decorate the city with lights that remind us of the season, and which certainly help to create a festive atmosphere prone to generosity. This is anxiously awaited by shop owners who expect this season to bring them nice presents for their stockings (sorry, I mean pockets), just like little boys and girls, well and badly behaved.

This is how the city transforms itself, bathed in myriads of lights creating shapes amongst the tree branches, some already leafless, building bridges over streets and above our heads, shaped like reindeers, stars, bows, gifts, candles or allusive figures, more or less stylized. Some buildings are decorated with nets of tiny lights like stars, redesigning their architectural lines as if they were made of light.

It is in this ambience that “Lisboetas” (citizens of Lisbon) argue whether or not this year’s decoration lights are prettier than last year’s, and in which Christmas comes closer to families and, sometimes, to people’s hearts.

In this season we witness the proliferation of initiatives that aim to support those who are less cared for, through Christmas bazaars where the money goes to charity associations or non-profit institutions, representing sick people, children, the homeless, victims of aggression, etc...

I confess that I find the idea of Christians associating the birth of Christ to generosity and solidarity appealing. But let us not forget that there are also people whose greed makes them care less about using other people's generosity to obtain an easy and illegitimate profit; therefore you should know as much as possible about the organization you may decide to support.

It is also in this spirit of generosity that people look for presents that will be given to family and friends, as well as the ingredients with which to make the delicious fare that will fill the tables on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Obviously this demand causes prices to rise, especially those of toys, clothes and food, but as these are times of generosity, everything is permitted!

It is the children who receive the most attention during this period, so circus shows appear and we can see the giant familiar tents going up in some areas of the city. Also music and dance are part of the tradition, events pointing to the festive season: every year we can see performances of the "Nutcracker" by Tchaikovsky, as well as Christmas music concerts; new versions of "Peter and the Wolf" by Prokofiev are played, and new editions of Christmas Stories (classic and new), can be found at bookshops.

This is the globalized Lisbon of the 21st century, that manages however to maintain some characteristics of the past...

Since Portugal is a country of catholic traditions, the crib has throughout time been the centre of all commemorations. There is a long tradition of representing the Nativity scene, with all the familiar elements. In the first place, the Holy Family with Baby Jesus in the manger, Our Lady as a caring mother, and St. Joseph, protective and attentive with his staff, the whole scene warmed by the presence of the cow and donkey. The star above the stable will indicate the way for Gaspar, Belchior and Balthazar. The shepherds and their flock are also usually present, depending upon the space. The representation can also be embellished with cottages, streams, bridges, small lakes, valleys, trails and vegetation, over which the figures are arranged.

This follows a tradition started in the Baroque period (end of the 18th century) with very elaborate and mechanized crib scenes, where all the figures were carefully produced to create the feeling that we are looking at a live scene. They are known as "Aparelho de Presépio", with mills and streams in movement. The most famous are those created by the artist Machado de Castro, with hundreds of figures, that can still be seen today at the Ancient Art Museum or at Basílica da Estrela.

Today in our homes we still set up cribs, although on a much smaller scale, sometimes reduced to just the Holy Family, but nevertheless remaining a fundamental part of our Christmas tradition.

During the 20th century, the Christmas tree became popular and a part of the season's decorations, that came to us from Northern European traditions.

On Christmas Eve, families usually gather together for a dinner of which the main dish is "bacalhau cozido" (boiled codfish), accompanied by potatoes,

cabbage, greens, carrots, eggs and onions, all boiled and garnished with olive oil.

For Christmas Day lunch, gastronomic tradition centers around the turkey, served with a variety of accompaniments like roast or fried potatoes, rice, vegetables, chestnuts or salads, in ways that contemporary creativity and aesthetics may dictate.

Desserts are indispensable on the table, crowned with the “bolo-rei” (“king-cake” with crystallized fruit) and the “bolo-rainha” (“queen-cake” with dried fruit), followed by “rabanadas” (similar to French toast) , “azevias” (fried pastry with sweet filling), “lameiras de fios de ovos” (egg yoke, sugar and ground almonds), “bolinas”, “aletria” (vermicelli pudding), “arroz doce” (rice pudding), “filhoses”, “coscorões” and “sonhos” (basically all fried dough sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar). Dried fruits have also an important place reserved at the table at this time of year, especially almonds, pine nuts, walnuts, hazelnuts and raisins.

Christmas is also about trying to keep alive the magic of childhood, and the innocence of believing everything adults say... so some families remain faithful to the belief in Father Christmas, who brings Christmas presents to children and adults alike. I recall the 12-year old girl who, already knowing Father Christmas does not exist, continued pretending to believe so as not to spoil the magic moment for her smaller cousins... thinking about it, besides being generous, it also seems educational to me.

And this is the city at Christmas time: more traffic, more lights, more shopping, more smiles, more hugs, more Christmas lunches and dinners, more attention paid to the poor, the children, the sick and the elderly... but are these people really reached, and in the measure they need?

Best places to buy Bolo Rei (the King Cake) :

- National confectionery on the Figueira Square.

- Confeitaria Aquarius in Alto de Algés.

Galo mass :

- in Sé cathedral in Lisbon : celebrated for the Cardinal Patriarch.

- Galo Mass in Cardaes Convent : very beautiful, with a choir of nuns.

- Galo Mass in St. António of Estoril.

Thanks to Javhlan Byamba for Lisbon Photos

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