

Sun soaked green leaves.
The swaying waltz
of coconut trees,
Healing seas, island ease,
Bask in the joy of
Jamaica's Christmas breeze.

JAMAICAN CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS



Christmas in Jamaica features Gran' Market, elaborate church services, parties with sumptuous food, community gatherings and warm interaction with friends and family. Every activity is made more significant with the sharing of gifts, the traditional Christmas pudding or cake, ham, sorrel, rum punch and egnog, among other treats. Many Jamaicans cannot celebrate the season without adding Christmas lights to brighten freshly painted houses, whitewashed fences and trimmed hedges.

Anticipation heightens in September with the countdown to year-end, and by late November, with Christmas breeze cooling the mornings and balmy evenings, anticipation gives way to frenzied activities as almost everyone gets ready for the holidays. By then, store fronts are decked with new stock to entice buyers and Christmas carols fill the airwaves. This is the Jamaican Christmas!

Christmas Traditions

The celebration of Christmas in Jamaica dates back to the period of slavery in the 17th century, when the island was a colony of England. During that period, plantation work would cease from Christmas Eve until Boxing Day, every year, and plantation owners would give each of the slaves the annual gift of a piece of cloth and meat. For slaves, who usually had only the entrails and other leftover scraps of the animal, the treat of meat was a delight, but what triggered even more merriment was the rare gift of wine the slaves received. The plantations then had all-night dances that included masqueraders and plenty of drumming.

It is from these all-night dances that one of Jamaica's most enduring Christmas traditions emerged — Jonkunnu.





Jonkonnu

Jonkonnu, a fusion of African masked dances and British folk plays, used to be prime street-side entertainment in Jamaica at Christmas. In colonial days, these bands would move from house to house, enjoying gifts of food and drinks or coins from the wealthy. One of the earliest descriptions of the masked dancers appeared in Edward Long's History of Jamaica (1774). Long supposed that the Jonkonnu dance was named after a West African merchant known as "John Canoe" or "John Conny", from Axim, West Guinea:

"In the towns, during the Christmas holidays, they have several robust fellows dressed up in grotesque habits... followed with a numerous crowd of drunken women, who refresh (them) frequently... whilst he dances at every door, bellowing out John Connú... This dance is probably an honourable memorial to John Conny..."

Jonkonnu bands play drums, rattles, fifes and even bottles and graters. Traditional Jonkonnu features costumed characters such as King, Queen, Devil, Pitchy-Patchy, Belly Woman, Cow Head, Policeman, Horse Head, Wild Apache Indian, Bride and House Head.

Page 424. Edward Long's The History of Jamaica Or, General Survey of the Ancient and Modern State of the Island: with Reflections on Its Situation Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws, and Government Volume 2. Printed for T. Lowndes London 1774.





Gran' Market

Gran' Market is held in all major towns and cities across Jamaica, on Christmas Eve, and continues into the early hours of Christmas Day. As the name suggests, it is a "grand" affair which brings buyers and sellers together for last-minute shopping. This festive event involves vendors selling their wares on crowded streets that are closed to vehicular traffic but open to impromptu dancing, as there is usually music to which people can dance as they shop.

Christmas Carols and Carolling

In this Christmas tradition that is heartwarming and fondly welcomed by Jamaicans, community or church groups walk through rural neighbourhoods early in the mornings leading up to Christmas Eve, singing Christmas carols. Traditionally, carollers used to receive a token of appreciation; however, carolling was and is its own reward, and a means of evangelism





Church Services

Across denominations, communion services, candlelight ceremonies, concerts, all-night prayer meetings and the singing of Christmas carols are all expressions of reverence and acts of worship during the festive season. Roman Catholic and Anglican churches have Midnight Masses on Christmas Eve, while other Christian denominations have services on Christmas Day.

Tree Lighting

In capital towns across Jamaica, Parish Councils organise Christmas tree lighting events. This tradition involves the official “switching-on” of giant trees or tree-shaped structures in town squares that have been beautifully decorated. This is sometimes accompanied by firework displays, the singing of carols, delivery of Christmas messages from Local Government officials, and the distribution of gifts.

Gift Exchanges

Christmas is the festive season for giving. Parents reward their children with the latest gadgets, and co-workers surprise their “office pixie” at Christmas parties. Most important is the giving of gifts and Christmas treats to the more vulnerable groups in communities and state-run institutions.





Christmas Food and Drink *Sorrel*

The Sorrel Drink is also known as Red Tea, Roselle or Sudanese Tea. Made from the Jamaican sorrel plant, a member of the hibiscus family, which has its origin in Sudan, Africa, the drink is an integral part of Jamaican Christmas tradition. Jamaicans make the refreshing beverage way in advance of Christmas Day; traditionally, it was stored in stainless steel, earthenware or enamel containers. To make the drink, boiled water is poured over sorrel, grated ginger, cloves and pimento. After at least four hours, it is sweetened with sugar, and flavoured with rum or wine. Sorrel is served on ice.

Eggnog

Served warm, eggnog is a popular feature of breakfast on Christmas Day in many homes. The sweetened dairy-based beverage is made with whipped eggs, milk, cream and sugar, and flavoured with vanilla. For adults, rum or brandy is often added. Usually, eggnog is garnished with a little ground cinnamon or nutmeg.





Christmas Fruit Cake

A “must have” for Christmas is fruit cake. Many persons start ‘soaking’ the fruits – prunes, cherries, raisins and currants – months in advance. In most families, baking Christmas cakes or puddings is a whole-day family activity. Young children are tasked with washing mixing bowls or preparing baking utensils lined with grease paper, while older men cream the butter and sugar for the batter. Many Jamaicans give cakes as gifts or exchange them with neighbours.

Christmas Day Dinners

Christmas is a time of sharing; family and friends from near and far usually gather to share special Christmas meals. Although menus vary from family to family, many tables are laden with honey-glazed ham with pineapples, curried goat, roast beef, stewed pork, fried fish and chicken dishes, accompanied by fresh salads and gungo peas and rice.





Boxing Day

Boxing Day, which follows Christmas Day, got its name from the tradition of tradesmen receiving gifts in boxes (a "Christmas Box") from their employers for a year's work well done. Boxing Day is linked also to an older English tradition in which servants who had to keep working in their masters' household throughout Christmas Day would be allowed to visit their families, on the day after Christmas. The mistress of the house would give each servant a box with leftovers from the household's Christmas Dinner and items of clothing from the annual pruning of the household's wardrobes. The workers, therefore, always looked forward to Boxing Day, since this was when they could take home that box of gifts. Today, Boxing Day is better known as a bank or public holiday observed within the Commonwealth of Nations. In some families, Boxing Day is used to celebrate and visit with other relatives and friends, since Christmas Day often is reserved for closest family.

The New Year

A new year offers the opportunity to reflect and plan, and Jamaican folk customs suggest that there may be serious "seeing" into the future on the dawning of the year. One custom is to fill a glass with soapsuds on New Year's morning and place it outside the door at noon, when the shape of its contents would dictate the destiny of the one who filled the glass. However far-fetched this folklore might seem to the sceptics among us, everyone invariably admits that Jamaica's Christmas is among the most spiritually colourful and soulfully enjoyable of all events!



