

CHRISTMAS A LA CREOLE IN MARTINIQUE: **A Season for Caroling and Festivals in the Sun**

Christmas in that colorful little corner of France in the West Indies called Martinique is every bit as festive as in Paris or Provence, but here the year-end holidays are celebrated with a distinctively Caribbean touch.

Private homes and public buildings and squares are gaily decorated, often with twinkling lights on the sapin de Noël, as the traditional Christmas tree is called throughout France. But in Martinique, the tree most likely will be a filao instead of a fir, and during the holidays, it often sparkles as much as the sun, sand and sea. It is not unusual to come upon one of these Caribbean evergreens, its boughs decorated with tinsel, even on the most remote beach.

The typically French crèche, or manger scene, is re-created either in miniature or, on December 24 and 25, alive in village squares or churches, with human figures and real animals. While traditional French carols are sung at Mass, at home spirited local folk songs are accompanied sometimes by the beat of Caribbean steel drums, and sometimes by old-fashioned violins and accordions. Sugarplums no doubt dance the biguine in the heads of Martinican youngsters as they await the arrival of Père Noël. The biguine, after all, was born here; and Father Christmas arrives promptly at midnight.

Holiday Begins with Carol Singing

Christmas events, however, begin several weeks before the actual holiday. In 1999, for example, a “Festival de Cantiques de Noël,” scheduled from November 27 through 29, will kick off the joy of carol singing in the inland town of Saint-Joseph. Started some seven years ago by the Association Mazincouin, a group of 120 local singers, the festival begins with an open-air concert on Friday, November 27, at 7 p.m. in the town’s Place des Fêtes. The following day is celebrated with a daylong market for produce and local culinary specialties and highlighted with an evening concert by three of Martinique’s leading carol singing groups: the Mazincouin from Saint-Joseph; Ravine Plate from Vauclin, and La Fammi’ from Gros Morne. The weekend concludes with singing by regional church choirs, a parade, and similar outdoor activities.

Other pre-Christmas events this year include the “Fête du Rhum” on December 12 at the Saint James Rum Museum, with music, dance, exhibits, and a sale of local products, and the “Fête du Cochon” in Vauclin from December 19 to 24, devoted to pork specialties.

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From December 24 through January 1, every town and village in Martinique is in a holiday mood. There are picnics, dances, fashion shows, and much merry-making. On Christmas Eve itself the family stays together, usually attending Midnight Mass, which is accompanied by glorious choral singing. The church service is followed by a late night feast known as le réveillon. On Christmas day, families frequently go from home to home, singing, dancing and sampling each other’s specialties.

Menus blend classic French fare with a hint of Creole spices and usually center around a roast pork, a smoked ham soaked in advance for five or six days, a turkey or other fowl, garnished with exotic fruits. Accompaniments include raw oysters, warm pâtés, yams, boudin créole (a spicy West Indian sausage), and pork ragout with congo peas, all topped off with the Bûche de Noël, or Christmas log, for dessert.

Another specialty in Martinique at Christmas, when oranges and tangerines are in great abundance, is shrub, a delicious and very fine liqueur made from the dried peels of the fruit, sugarcane syrup, and white rum. Still other festive drinks include Creole rum punches and spirits flavored with licorice, coconut or cocoa.

A Champagne Welcome to Y2K

Throughout Martinique, as in most parts of the world, New Year's celebrations tend to be a bit more tuned to adults. Incorporating noisemakers, balloons, and the traditional hoopla associated with this holiday, the New Year's Eve réveillon also includes a meal much like that at Christmas, without the Bûche, but with, of course, Champagne. And this being Y2K, there will be bubbly galore! While the partying on both holidays may begin with the biguine, in no time flat the dancing is to zouk, a more recent musical genre that blends French Caribbean rhythms with African tempos and uses Creole as the language of expression for its lyrics. Zouk is hot the year round, but at the Christmas and New Year réveillons it becomes a sizzling invitation to sing, dance and party, to shake, rattle and roll.

Visitors can enjoy the holiday réveillons at most hotels, wining and dining the night away. Large hotels also present special entertainment with live orchestras and combos, fashion shows, and often a Père Noël. Discos, both in hotels and in cities such as Fort-de-France, Martinique's capital, are busy every night. And, on Christmas Eve, visitors are, of course, welcome at the Midnight Mass.

Shopping is livelier than ever at holiday time. This year there will be a two-week celebration in Fort-de-France from December 15 to 31 called "Capitale en Fête," with special displays of apparel, gifts, gold jewelry, French perfumes, and other luxury items filling the windows and stores. A special weekend for children is planned for the Place de la Savane, the capital's main square, from December 20 through 23. Called "Savanoël," it will include music, dance, exhibits, a traditional chouval bwa, or merry-go-round, and a visit from Santa Claus.

Visitors, caught up in the whirl, find wonderful presents to bring back home, including a variety of locally made rums. There'll be no blanket of snow at Christmastime in Martinique, but a tropical sun and moonlit nights make a delightful background for holiday fun.

For more details on the special cachet of Christmas vacations in Martinique, contact the Martinique Promotion Bureau, 444 Madison Ave., NY 10022, Tel: (800) 391-4909, Fax: (212) 838-7855. On the Internet: <http://www.martinique.org>. By e-mail: Martinique@nyo.com.

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