

# Christmas without borders

Christmas is a time for family and fish braais, but what happens when you spend the special day thousands of miles from home? Nick Dall found out. A few times.

ILLUSTRATIONS NICOLENE LOUW



I spent my first Christmas at Betty's Bay near Cape Town, and I spent the next 22 Christmases there, too. My parents met in Betty's when they were both 11 years old, playing with dinky cars in a pile of sand. Their parents had holiday houses there.

Since I can remember, every last great-aunt, grand-niece and cousin-by-association has descended on the holiday town for a fortnight of potjies and sleeping under the stars. Christmas day is a huge, bulging affair of braaied crayfish and turkey on the Weber, followed by traditional family games which are too embarrassing to describe here.

With memories like that, it wasn't easy to take the plunge and spend my first Christmas out of the country, but the travel bug had bitten hard and the ridiculously long university holidays meant that December was the best time to hit the road.

I crammed all my warmest clothes into my backpack and set off for Italy with dreams of teaching English in a hill town and sipping chianti in front of a log fire every evening after work. But dreams and reality can be very different, especially when you're travelling on a South African passport. The only work I could find was selling calendars door to door for the Italian equivalent of the SPCA. I had answered a somewhat cryptic advert in the

local paper in Bologna: "Do you love animals?" it read. "No work permit required."

Before I knew it I was dressed as Father Christmas and traipsing the icy streets of Emilia-Romagna. Every morning, long before the sun had risen, I'd grab an espresso at my local café and head to a tiny office in one of the back streets near the University of Bologna – the world's oldest. There I met my boss Rodrigo, sporting a ponytail and cowboy boots, who would gather his flock of non-EU refugees and drive us off somewhere.

The pay was terrible and it was extremely cold at times, but I did get to glimpse some of Italy's oldest and loveliest villages (and a lot of industrial parks that were Italy's answer to Paarden Eiland) and I got lots of opportunities to practise my Italian.

**A few years later**, I once again found myself on foreign soil during Yuletide, at the beginning of what would turn out to be a three-year stint in Latin America.

My first Christmas in Argentina was tame. I shared it with a family whose kids were students of mine. We ate rabbit and drank full-bodied Argentine red wine.

Fast forward exactly one year to the Jesuit Missions region of eastern Bolivia; San Rafael, to be specific, where I found myself on 23 December. San Rafael is the least appealing town in the whole province. A timber boom (endangered Amazonian hardwoods) had brought hastily constructed houses and twin-cab pickups with pumping sound.

When I arrived, the town had been rendered even less hospitable by a lightning bolt that had put the water pump, phone lines and electricity supply out of order.

Before I had even found a bed for the night, a rotund guy with a brush cut called Jorge bundled me and a sizeable percentage of the town's adolescent male population onto the back of his pickup and ferried us all to the reservoir. We formed a production line and filled two giant drums with water to take back to the grateful hostess of the shack that masqueraded as the town's only hotel.

The next morning the region erupted into political revolt at the land reform policies of president Evo Morales. That's a story for another time – all you need to know now is that the burning houses, shops and buses put an end to my tour of the district.

Just when I'd resigned myself to spending Christmas in San Rafael, Jorge rocked up in a 40-foot truck with a load of millworkers and a rusty Hyundai Pony on the flatbed. He asked me if I wanted a lift back to Santa Cruz – the second biggest city in Bolivia and an altogether more pleasant Christmas option. It had taken me two weeks to get as far as San Rafael and the thought of getting back there in one easy ride was blissful. I gladly accepted his offer and jumped on the back with the workers, where I was given a beer and taught how to chew coca leaves.

Somewhere between San Ignacio and Concepcion it started to rain. Real, big, tropical rain that flooded the soya fields, streamed down the ruts in the road, and bent the palm trees double. I took refuge in the Hyundai Pony with six others; not the best night's sleep I've ever had.

We stopped along the way at various points for various reasons (the truck broke down; the road got washed away; we ran out of beer) and when we got going again, we moved at a snail's pace. The workers got rowdy and started setting off

firecrackers. One youngster fell off the back of the truck while relieving himself. Just when I was starting to wonder if the hell ride would ever end, the lights of Santa Cruz flickered on the horizon.

I begged Jorge to take me to the hostel I'd stayed at a few weeks previously, but he was adamant that I spend Christmas with his family. We arrived just in time for me to help his grandmother swab the gutted-but-still-slightly-pig with surgical spirits – dinner. The meal was a blur of creatively named relatives of all shapes, sizes and ages, and way too much cheap cider.

The 27-hour journey had taken its toll and Jorge passed out in a chair on the veranda shortly after 9 pm. His nephews and nieces had great fun putting cigarettes behind his ears and between his lips...

**My most recent overseas posting was to Vietnam.** Being a Buddhist nation, I didn't expect the Vietnamese to make much of a fuss about Christmas, but I hadn't factored in the irrepressible group mentality that comes from decades of communist rule. Every business and quite a few homes put up a Christmas tree, each one glitzier and flashier than the next, and I was invited to innumerable Christmas parties in soulless hotel lobbies. I even cracked an invite to a function at the local People's Committee, which involved lots of polite nodding, skewered prawns and trying not to laugh at the similarities between Ho Chi Minh and Santa Claus.

The real fun kicked off on Christmas Eve. Every man, woman and child swapped his (or her) helmet for a Santa hat, hopped on a bike and headed for the main street. At its best, Vietnamese traffic is chaotic and hair-raising, but on Christmas Eve it's utterly terrifying. Before I knew it, I was caught up in a parade of selfie-snapping bikers spluttering and spurting towards certain death, all set to the nauseating soundtrack of blaring hooters and ABBA's "Happy New Year".

**Now that I have my own family**, I'm back in South Africa and discovering the joys of being expected to be in two places at once on Christmas Day. Tricky though family life may be, I wouldn't trade it for anything. That Bolivian pig was succulent and that Argentine wine was sumptuous, but give me a slightly dry South African turkey and a bottle of Tassies any time.

Although I might have changed my mind come January...

