V.I.P. ARTICLE SUBMITTED BY:
Camila Zies
Doctoral Student in Mechanical Engineering and Materials Science
Rice University

Christmas in Brazil

A typical Brazilian nativity scene from Juazeiro, PE [1]

Together with Carnival, Christmas is the most celebrated holiday in Brazil. This would not be a surprise as it is known that Christianity accounts for 89.4% of the population's religion, according to the 2000 Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) census, although, given the inclination of the Brazilians to syncretism – the union, or attempted fusion, of different systems of thought or belief – is not uncommon to see people that practice other religions, such as Afro- Brazilian religions or Spiritism, to be celebrating as well.

The day starts early on December 24th, as people gather together to start cooking for the big evening event. It is very important to highlight that December is summer in the Southern hemisphere, when daytime temperatures exceeding 38° C/100° F are not very rare. Contradictorily, the holiday dishes have a lot of influence from Europe, although some might have African and also native American cuisine touches. The main course is composed by Codfish and Christmas turkey that is eaten with white rice with walnuts, "Maionese" (potato salad with apples and raisins) and "Farofa" (Fried milled manioc) as side dishes. To accompany it is very common to have refreshing drinks such as beer and Caipirinhas or natural juices. For dessert we have "Rabanadas" (French toast covered with cinnamon and sugar), Passion fruit Mouse, "Pave" (Chocolate cake), Panetone (a sweet bread) and Fruit Salad. The table is usually decorated with tropical fruits such as pineapple, watermelon and bananas.

The turkey is also decorated with tropical fruits and cherries

The house hosting the party has a fake lightened Christmas tree, as it is not very easy to find pine trees in Brazil. Usually the gathering reunites much more than one family, in my case we are usually around 70 people together at Christmas night. We start the night playing Bingo, singing "Noite Feliz" ("Silent Night"), dancing and having an "Amigo Oculto" (Secret Santa). It is lots of fun and also a great chance to make jokes about the person you are giving the present. Sometimes you are assigned someone on your immediate family, such as your dad or sister and then people are supposed to shout: "E marmelada!! E marmelada!!" (This is a joke!!).

The Lagoa Christmas tree in Rio de Janeiro [2]

When midnight approaches the kids become really excited about meeting with Santa Claus. A quarter to midnight, all the lights, except for the Christmas tree light, are shut off. This gives the chance for one adult to put on the Santa Claus costume to distribute the presents. At midnight, as the fireworks start and illuminate the sky, people greet themselves with "Feliz Natal!" (Merry Christmas) and Santa Claus arrives. He sits by the tree to give the gifts and to ask the kids if they behaved themselves the year that has passed.

Santa Claus's life in Brazil is very hard, with so high temperatures and the absurd amount of clothes he uses, even when it is made of silk, it is not hard to see him sweating a lot! Santa Claus says he needs to fly to other houses and leaves the party where kids wave good-bye. The party continues until it is 2 or 3 a.m. when people go home to take a rest. This creates the impression that there is a relatively tight and disciplined timeline for celebrating Christmas in Brazil, but my German husband asked me to clarify that a delay of 2 or 3 hours for any communicated party agenda item is considered normal.

The Christmas day starts in the morning with kids playing with their new toys and adults organizing to get together again in the host house for the "Enterro dos Ossos" (Bone's Funeral), when all the food that was not consumed the night before will be eaten during lunch time.

Some curious facts about Christmas in Brazil:

1. Brazil holds the record for the biggest Christmas tree in the world, the Lagoa Christmas tree in Rio de Janeiro, with 82 meters the equivalent to a 27-floor building.

2. The Panetone was brought to Brazil by Italian immigrants after the Second World War and was popularized by Carlos Bauducco, the most popular Panetone brand in Brazil nowadays.

3. In Brazil, some people have roosters at home in the Christmas night, because they are thought to be the ones that announced that Christ was born. If the rooster sings at midnight the year to come will be full of happiness.

4. The word Natal (Christmas) has its origin in the Latin *natalis* and means to be born.

[1] www.iande.art.br

[2] www.flickr.com/photos/claudiolara/67500488/