



# Christmas time in Barcelona through the glance of a tourist

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## **Santa Llúcia's Fair, since 1786**



Picture 1

If a tourist wanders around in Barcelona during the Christmas festivities he can find, if he is in the celebrating mood, the more genuine Barcelona atmosphere around the Cathedral Avenue, and some neighboring streets, at the famous **Santa Llúcia's Fair**. Away, far away, from the many commercial “Santas” all dressed in red and with a long white beard, located mostly at the entrance of department stores and heavily trafficked commercial streets. The very old air of **Santa**

**Llúcia** fair – dates back to 1786 – and there you will find all the necessary items related to Catalan traditions and the other more typically traditional ones since a month before Christmas.

**Santa Llúcia** (Saint Lucy) is the female patron saint for eyesight and has originated many popular expressions like “Wish that Santa Llúcia keeps your eyesight”. This is the reason why many professions, like dressmakers, electricians, drivers, knife sharpeners, graphic designers or writers have chosen her as their patron.

**Santa Llúcia's Day** is December 13th but the Christmas market begins quite in advance: on November 25th, Saint Catherine's Day. Talking about Saint Catherine, there is an old popular saying which states: “From Saint Catherine until Christmas, is a quite important month of the year”. And indeed it's a very important month to gather

and prepare all the necessary items to make the traditional cribs, the moss, the sand, the cave where the Infant Jesus was born and all the terracotta figurines, ( or plastic ones ), which bring the crib to life, like shepherds, little houses, farm animals, “**caganers**”, and so on. And more, many more things are displayed and can be bought at the **Santa Llúcia’s** fair. Walking around and listening to Christmas carols and other Christmas songs, the passers-by will also find all kinds of decoration for their home, such as Christmas trees, lights, candels, mistletoes - which bring good luck – as well as eucalyptus and branches of holly-tree and knee-holly, and all sort of hand-made objects which could be an excellent gift for Christmas.

The visitor might also find “Tions” or “Tions de Nadal”, which are popular elements of Catalan mythology related to fertility and the winter solstice. It consists of a piece of a



Picture 2

log or a thick branch which should be bought days before Christmas, usually at the beginning of Advent and, thereafter, brought home. It is placed on a corner with a blanket on top so as not to freeze and it is fed until it defecates, usually Christmas Day or Christmas Eve. The children, after singing Christmas carols gathered around the crib, hit the log with a stick asking it to defecate. Then, under the blanket appear “Turons” (a sort of sweet made of nougat or almond paste ), “Neules” (sweet made with flour, sugar, essence and with a cylindrical shape), “llaminadures” ( delicacies ) and all kind of gifts.

## Christmas Market in the holy Family Park

It is a fair, similar to the one of **Santa Llúcia**, but of smaller dimensions. It is held on the same dates (starting November 25th ) in another emblematic place of the city. We are talking about “**Fira de Nadal de la Sagrada Família**”, in the Eixample district, which takes place in the park in front of the Holy Family Basilica, the magnificent church created by the genius Modernist architect, Antoni Gaudí. Apart all of the items related to the crib and the Christmas atmosphere, other Christmas celebrations take place. These are workshops to make small lanterns to greet the three Kings, donations, pick-up of letters to the three Kings, and all sorts of Christmas shows for the little ones.

## Pessebres i Caganers (Cribs and “Caganers”)



Picture 3

The representation of the Infant Jesus’ birth in the crib and the worshipping of the shepherds and the three Kings is a tradition which is deeply rooted in Catalan homes. It is also present in shop-windows all around the city, in churches and some public spaces. Amongst all of them , one stands out in a rather special manner - with modern features - which takes place every

single year at Sant Jaume's Square, headquarters of the top government Institutions of Barcelona and Catalonia.

A quite peculiar and scatological figurine of the Catalan crib is the “**caganer**”. He is, in fact, a shepherd who is defecating and who is usually placed a bit hidden from the principal Christmas ornaments. Originally the “caganer” symbolized the earth he had fertilized with the food he had previously eaten.

The visitor who would like to find something amusing and astonishing to bring home, at the **Santa Llúcia's Fair** will surely find a “**caganer**” to suit every taste, even with the face of worldwide famous people like the President of United States of America and Russia, Obama and Putin, among others, and even very well known football players like Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo. It goes without saying that these “Caganers” so media hype and ironical are not conceived at all to be regular shepherds in the crib but to be exhibited for fun as decorative figurines put in any bookshelf of the home when Christmas is over.



Picture 4

Christmas cribs are a tradition so deeply rooted in Catalonia that some of them are exhibited a month before Christmas and even a month later, like the one in the parish church of **Nostra Senyora de Betlem** – at a short distance from the **Rambles** – or the one at the Pedralbes cloister. Exhibitions can also be seen in a Dioramas exposition at Carrer Lladó, 11.

## **Shepherds, Christmas Popular Theatre**

A very typical stage play during Christmas in Catalonia is “**Els Pastorets**” ( little shepherds ). It comes from popular dramaturgy which combines the whole story of Christmas and the fight between Good and Bad, between angels and devils. Popular piety is mixed up with a bit of comedy on the shepherds way to Bethlehem. It amuses and sometimes scares the little ones. It's a play which became popular at the end of the 17th century though its origins date back from Medieval religious dramas. “**Els Pastorets**” or “**The Advent of Infant Jesus**”, written by Josep Maria Folch i Torres (1916 ) is the most popular version and has attracted tens of thousands of popular actors to perform it. For the most part, actors come from amateur theatres and the play is performed in parish churches, social centers or theatres. In Barcelona one can find these plays run between Christmas and the three Kings (the equivalent of the traditional Santa Claus ) in places like “Teatre dels Lluïsos d'Horta or “Foment Hortenc”, at the “Centre Parroquial de Sant Vicenç de Sarrià, or even in a most sophisticated way like the musical “Pastorets Superestel” every year at the “Teatre Regina”.

## **La Misa del Gall I el Cant de la Sibilla (Midnight Mass and Sibyl's Song)**

Apart from religious ceremonies concentrated in the “**Missa del Gall**” (Midnight Mass) which takes place at midnight on December 24th in all the city parish churches or in the early morning of Christmas Day. But a unique musical and liturgical celebration on Christmas Eve is the “**Cant de la Sibilla**” ( Sibyl's Song ). It comes from a drama in Gregorian Chant originally from the Middle Ages and announces the end of the world and also proclaims the Last Judgment, with the Messiah presiding. Our Lord who also comes to human life in the Holy Christmas night. The Sibyl's Song is very well known in the churches of Mallorca and Barcelona and can be listened to after the Midnight Mass, in the Cathedral or also in the magnificent Gothic Basilica of “**Santa Maria del Mar**” ( Our Lady of the Sea ), in the Born district and in Bonanova's Church, as well as in all of Bonanova district.

### **Holy Innocents' Day , December 28<sup>th</sup>**

Another quite funny tradition in Barcelona which the tourist snooping around might fall into, during Christmas time, are the “Inocentadas” (practical jokes ) and all sort of jokes which take place all over – sometimes even in newspapers, by publishing fake news - is the “Holy Innocents' Day”, which is on December 28th. On this special day it is a custom to pull somebody's leg with fake news or stories. This a tradition which can give way to a lot of confusion. Infact in former times, it was a tradition to hang a “llufa”, human silhouette cut from a page of a newspaper, on the back of a friend or just a passer-by which meant that the poor soul had been hoaxed. The little puppet can be seen, with some luck, hanging on somebody's back. Even though it takes place only on the 28th but it's certainly worth waiting for.



Picture 5

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## Escudella i carn d'olla, torrons i neules



Picture 6

The typical dish for Christmas lunch is “**L’escudella i carn d’olla**” (vegetables and meat stew) a winter dish which merges a main course – a soup with special small pasta – with a second course – composed of vegetables ( potatoes, chick-peas, celery, carrots... ) and the meat ( porc sausages, chunks of chicken, beef and “pilota” ( small balls of forcemeat with eggs and spice ) .

With all these ingredients one makes the stew broth. It’s “the” Christmas dish, no question about it, even if one can also find it in the menu of some local and traditional restaurants in Barcelona during winter. Nowadays this tasty dish is also combined with excellent meat or fish , and always with “Cava” ( Catalan sparkling wine ) as a drink and “Torrons” and “Neules” for dessert. These two different kinds of pastries cannot be forgotten in a Catalan table during Christmas festivities. The day after Christmas, December 26th, “Sant Esteve” is also a holiday in Catalonia and the gastronomic feast goes on with a second Christmas lunch which traditionally consists on a main course “ Canelons” ( cannelloni ) , tubular pieces of pasta filled with meat ) and on top the “Beixamel” ( white sauce made with flour, milk and butter ) . The pastries “**Neules**” and ”**Torrons**” keep on being served during Christmas and all celebrations until New Year’s Eve and the three Kings.



Picture 7

## Campanades de Cap d’Any (New Year’s Eve Strokes)

In order to say farewell to the year which is fading away and to welcome the new one, the typical twelve bell strokes on December 31st, celebrated all around the world, in Barcelona it’s celebrated with friends and family in parties but also outdoors or in big places. Tradition says a

person is to eat one grain of grapes for each bell stroke until all 12 grains are eaten and the year is officially over. As part of recent tradition young people concentrate in the centrally located “Plaça de Catalunya” where music and dance combine to form a very special farewell.

By the way, on the last day of the year in Barcelona one can also see the “**Home dels Nassos**” ( Man of Noses) walking around. He is a visionary character belonging to the Catalan tradition, who has to have as many noses as days of the year. He is still a



Picture 8

fascinating character who makes children happy as they endeavor to discover him somewhere around the city...

## **Els Reis d'Orient, La Festa Màgica (The Three Kings from the East) a magic Day**



Picture 9

When Christmas festivities are over, “**La Diada dels Reis**”, January 6th, brings all kind of presents to the little ones and to the not so little... It commemorates the worship of the three Kings to the Infant of Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. On the three King’s Eve Barcelona has a captivating atmosphere for visitors who profess other

religious beliefs. In the afternoon of January 5th, the streets of the centre of

Barcelona will be full of families with children holding small lanterns and waiting for the “**Cavalcada dels Reis**” (Kings’ Cavalcade). The children are aware that on this night “the three Kings” will bring presents to their homes. The three Kings traditionally arrive at the port of Barcelona by ship and soon after set off on a cavalcade full of fantasy, candy throwing, hand waving and joy through the streets of the city. A lot of boys and girls will strive with hope to give their letters to their Majesties with their requests and wishes. All this is managed through the precious assistance of the many pages who escort the Kings. Even though Page Gregory, an efficient assistant of their Majesties, has already collected the children’s letters full of hope and tenderness.

But in order that nobody – specially children – remain without gifts, on the Eve, January 5th, stores and commercial centers work until very late to give the opportunity to help those looking for presents with all kind of toys and other presents. From December 20th until the eve of the three Kings, the sides of Gran Via avenue – between Muntaner and Calàbria streets – are filled with stands full of toys, jewellery and handcraft, among other objects. Barcelona celebrates its very popular “**Fira dels Reis**”, Kings fair.

To make festivities sweeter days before the arrival of the three Kings, one can already find in all the pastry-shops the typical desserts made for this wonderful day: The “**Tortell de Reis**” or “**Coca de Reis**”. It is a ring-shaped pastry, more or less round or egg-shaped, made of “pasta de briox” filled with marzipan and decorated with candied fruits (cherries, oranges...) and dried fruit (like pine-nuts or cut almond). The “**Tortell**” has two surprises inside: one nice and little figurine of a King in ceramics and a bean. The one who finds the King’s figurine will receive a golden paper crown as a prize, which will crown



Picture 10

his head the whole time that “Tortell de Reis” is being eaten on that day. On the

other hand, the one who unexpectedly finds the ring-shaped faba bean will be extended the courtesy of paying for the whole “Tortell de Reis”. Don’t miss this occasion and the “Tortell”: you’ll lick your fingers clean.

#### Descriptions:

Picture 1 : Cathedral Avenue and Santa Llúcia’s Fair

Picture 2 : “Tions de Nadal”

Picture 3 : Nativity figures

Picture 4 : Traditional Christmas lighting

Picture 5 : Passeig de Gràcia and Casa Milà

Picture 6 : Dish: “Escudella I carn d’olla”

Picture 7 : “Torrans and neules”

Picture 8 : Cava

Picture 9 : “Els Reis d’Orient”

Picture 10 : Passeig de Gràcia Street