

Christmas

ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS...



On 25 December 1994, my little sister, aged 11, squealed with delight as she tore the wrapping paper off Mariah Carey's 'Merry Christmas' CD. She played it on repeat all day – and for weeks to come – to the point that the track 'All I Want for Christmas is You' still gets stuck in my head every Christmas. To try to banish it, every Christmas I play the Bing Crosby song 'White Christmas,' which is apparently the best-selling single of all time. I've listened to it so many times at Christmas that the song has become synonymous with the day.



This year, as the song goes, I'm dreaming of a white Christmas. Having spent all my 33 Christmases in New Zealand, I'll be in London and hoping for snow, even though it only comes once in every six Christmases or so. Curiously, curling up beside the fireplace and sipping mulled wine as the snow patters on the roof feels like the proper way to spend Christmas. Perhaps that's because the pioneers who settled in New Zealand brought with them centuries of wintry Christmas traditions. Perhaps it's because my late father was English and our family celebrated Midwinter Christmas in July, with family friends converging to drink mulled wine and sing songs by the fireplace.

That said, the Kiwi Christmas is what I know and love. Sure, we've kept up some winter traditions that don't work so well in summer: eating far too much hot, rich food; decorating pine trees that aggravate seasonal hayfever; going to see street lighting displays that keep tired kids up well past dusk at 9pm. But though the Kiwi Christmas shares some traits with its British forefather, it's a creature of evolution. We've made it work for us. Summer-ised it, if you like.

Rather than staying home, we might be at the bach, the beach or the campground. Rather than playing cards or video games, the kids might be kicking balls, playing backyard cricket or paddling in the sea. Rather than sipping mulled wine by the fire, we might be drinking beer and

lemonade in the sun. Rather than eating a traditional roast, we might be throwing sausages on the barbecue or picnicking under the pōhutukawa (New Zealand's Unofficial Christmas Tree). Rather than eating Christmas pudding, we might be salivating over pavlova (New Zealand's Unofficial Christmas Dessert).

As we've replaced wintry Christmas rituals with summery traditions of our own, they've become part of popular culture. We send Christmas cards depicting pōhutukawa trees standing sentry over sand and sea. We read our kids home-grown books like *Christmas in the Bush*. We've made up our own festive songs like 'Sticky Beak the Kiwi' and 'It's Christmas in New Zealand'; turned 'The 12 days of Christmas' into 'A Pūkeko in a Ponga Tree'; even put a Kiwi twist on 'Jingle Bells' by singing not about a one-horse open sleigh but a sunny summer's day and a Kiwi holiday.

Because as every New Zealander over five years old knows, the good moods on 25 December aren't just down to the presents and pavlova. After the rush of work dos, Santa Parades, late-night shopping and last-minute errands, Christmas Day escorts us into the summer break. Stretching out in front of us are days – perhaps weeks – of sleep-ins and lazy afternoons, whether that's getting away on holiday or having a 'staycation'.





"If the weather's good, we're outdoors: reading, swimming at the beach, playing backyard cricket: The Unofficial Game of the Kiwi Christmas."

13

CELEBRATIONS
Take a closer look

When I'm hunched over my computer in mid-winter, I cheer myself up by remembering and looking forward to summer breaks spent lying on a picnic blanket under a pōhutukawa, swimming in the sea and devouring novels. Sometimes it's just my husband and I. Sometimes it's the whole family.

For many people in this increasingly secular country, the focus of Christmas is family rather than faith. For my immediate family – my husband, my mother, two sisters, brother, brother-in-law and nephew – Christmas is our date with each other. It's the same for many Kiwi families: just visit any airport on Christmas Eve. The Christmas before last, my nearly 90-year-old grandmother, her five children and their spouses, her 14 grandchildren and one great-grandchild all gathered in Masterton for a Morrison family Christmas, soaking up the sun and enjoying a barbecue as the youngest cousins climbed trees and put on an impromptu dance recital. I love the way Christmas creates these moments and memories that wouldn't happen on any other day.

To me, Christmas is a shadow of itself without a child's excitement. Few are more excited than my nephew from the moment he wakes up – 6am at

the latest – to check the status of his stocking: full, bulging, overflowing? Now that he's eight, though, he's asking curly questions about Santa – though hearing that Santa only comes if you believe in him has satisfied him for now. I remember my own elation (and, later, disbelief)

that an old fellow would fly around the world to personally fill my stocking. We four Lang children had the most beautiful stockings imaginable, made by a family friend who cross-stitched our names and rows of colourful images: boxes tied with bows, striped candy canes,

reindeer and more. We didn't get a dozen presents like kids today, and the stocking was padded out with fruit, but it was more than enough. I was just thankful that Father Christmas (now Americanised as 'Santa') hadn't got too busy in Australia and forgotten New Zealand.

He visited until I was in my late teens, mainly because my little brother had seen the sleigh in the sky and believed in Father Christmas until age eight or nine.

After Father Christmas was outed as a fraud, the best part of Christmas Day became the handing-out of presents from under





the tree – partly because as a poor university student I got desperately needed undies and socks. Even now, I like to make the ritual last as long as humanly possible, and my family humours me by watching and waiting until the recipient expresses thanks.

I've had to feign delight at three sets of pyjamas in a row, but usually I'm pleasantly surprised. One year, Dad gave us our Christmas presents by way of a treasure hunt (with separate clues for each child) that led us around the property for hours then to a spade where X marked the spot. I can't remember what the actual present was, but it's still one of my favourite Christmas memories.

Another favourite present came last Christmas, when my mother presented me with a hand-written notebook of family Christmas recipes. This is an important historical document, because Mum could win *MasterChef* with her Christmas dinner: beef, new potatoes, a thick tomato-and-onion sauce, bread sauce, and various gourmet salads that are anything but diet foods, followed by Christmas pudding drizzled in alcohol and set alight then smothered in brandy sauce. I'm salivating just thinking about it. My lean, sporty brother eats three helpings of Christmas dinner and two of Christmas pudding – minimum – before lying down on the floor, groaning. Others nap off the lethargy that accompanies digestion. After last year's Christmas dinner, my family disappeared one

by one for a brief snooze, leaving just myself and my sister. Having had a glass or two of bubbly, we found it hilarious to sneak up to the nappers and take photos – arms and legs sprawled, snoring and dribbling.



And the festival of food doesn't end with Christmas dinner. It continues into Boxing Day (Beach Picnic Day) and sometimes beyond, because it would be wasteful to throw out the leftovers, right? Mum made three other desserts, so it would be rude not to eat them, yeah? And isn't leftover pav a breakfast of champions? I make sure to wear a roomy maxi dress or pants with an elasticised waist all through Christmas.

For my family, Christmas is as much about games as it is eating to excess. If it rains, we play Taboo: a board-game for four or more where you must describe a word to your team

without using any of the five words most commonly associated with it; try describing 'wave' without using the words 'hand', 'goodbye', 'Queen', 'surf' or 'Mexican'.

If the weather's good, we're outdoors: reading, swimming at the beach, playing backyard cricket: The Unofficial Game of the Kiwi Christmas. Generations of Kiwis have spent long afternoons hitting boundaries into ridiculously close fences or climbing trees to retrieve balls. My little brother used to make invitations to the Christmas cricket match and insist we RSVP well in advance.

It used to seem so long between innings, but as I get older, time seems to slip away and Christmas seems to tick around ever more quickly. But I'm hoping for another 50 Christmases. When I'm an old lady, I'll think back on our cross-stitched stockings, Mum's legendary Christmas dinner and desserts, backyard cricket, treasure hunts, Taboo, a four-generation family reunion, and memories yet to come. I won't be dreaming about a white Christmas but about the moments that make up a Kiwi Christmas – and make it my favourite day of the year.

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itself without a child's excitement."*



Author: Sarah Lang

An award-winning feature writer and North & South alumna, Sarah Lang has written freelance articles for more than 20 stand-alone and newspaper-insert magazines, including NZ House & Garden, Next, Canvas, Good, Sunday, Alive, Viva and Unlimited. You may have read her TV previews, film reviews and entertainment stories in the Herald on Sunday's View magazine, or her book reviews in North & South. Sarah, 33, is also a contributing editor for Reader's Digest NZ and a magazine-journalism tutor for the NZ Writers' College, and does a bit of copywriting and book editing. She lives in Wellington with her husband.



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Martin Bailey began his career as a freelance illustrator after completing a Diploma in Visual Communication Design at Wellington Polytechnic School of Design. He has freelanced in Wellington, Sydney, Tokyo and San Francisco, and now works from his home northwest of Auckland, New Zealand.

Martin completed his first stamp design in 1989, he designed New Zealand Olympic stamps in 1992, 2000 and 2008, his 1992 issue winning a gold medal for the World's Best Olympic Stamp. Martin's stamp design for the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra's 50th anniversary in 1997 won the World's Best Music Stamp for that year.

