

## Christmas in the Spanish-speaking World



Christmas in the Spanish-speaking world is much more solemn occasion than in the United States and Canada. That is why Latin Americans normally do not put up Christmas trees nor send Christmas cards (except where there is a lot of North American influence). On the other hand, almost all families put nativity scenes, big or small, extravagant or simple, on their lawns.

In Mexico and in other Latin American countries, the Christmas celebrations begin on the sixteenth of December. For nine evenings they celebrate “las posadas”, which literally means “stops” or “resting places”. These represent the nine days of Joseph and Mary’s trip to Bethlehem. They carry figurines of Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus from door to door asking for lodging. But at the first eight doors, a voice always tells them that there is no room at the inn. Finally, when they arrive at the ninth door, someone tells them that they can spend the night in the stable. The procession enters the house. They place the figurines on an altar, and then the party begins.

After setting up the nativity scene, the children play at breaking the “piñata”. A piñata is a figure in the shape of an animal or any original thing, decorated with coloured paper and ribbons and full of candy and small toys. With their eyes blindfolded, each child tries three times to break the piñata with a stick. Finally, one of the children breaks it and they all scramble to pick up the candy that falls to the ground.

Christmas Eve is called “Nochebuena”, and the families go to midnight mass. Later, they return home to eat a late supper and to sing their traditional “villancicos” or Christmas carols. Unlike here, Christmas isn’t a day to give presents to your friends and family. The children receive their gifts on the sixth of January, and it isn’t Santa Claus who brings them, but the “Reyes Magos” or the Wise Men. Children who await the arrival of the three kings put their shoes on the balcony or in the window of their room and fill them with straw for the camels that carry the kings. When morning comes the straw is gone, and gifts await. This is the last day of the Hispanic Christmas celebration.

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1. What do nearly every family in the Hispanic world set up for Christmas?

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2. When do the Christmas festivities begin in Mexico?

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3. For how many nights do they celebrate “Las Posadas”?

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4. What is a “piñata”?

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5. What do they call the night before Christmas in Spanish?

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6. What is a “villancico”? When do they sing them?

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7. When do the children receive their presents? Who brings them?

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8. How is Christmas in the Spanish speaking world different from your holiday?

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