

Las Posadas: Finding Room in the Inn

From Living at Lake Chapala, December 2009, By Paul Boorah



An Angel leads Joseph and Mary on their search for a *posada* (inn) in which to rest on their journey to Bethlehem.

The nine Christmas *posadas* are one of the old traditions the Spanish missionaries brought to Mexico, and other parts of the Americas. *Las posadas* are a series of processions leading members of the community to Christmas Eve and the celebration of the birth of Jesus.

The Spanish word *posada* translates as inn and these celebrations which begin on December 16 reenact the trials of Mary and Joseph on their journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census. In their simplest form, children walk in a procession through the streets of their neighborhood stopping at various houses to ask for shelter. Joseph and the assemblage in the street sing the pleas for a place for Mary to rest. Meanwhile the innkeeper and others inside sing back, refusing entry.

At a prearranged stop on the journey, the innkeeper recognizes the weary travelers and welcomes them into his stable—the only remaining space in his property. At this point, the participants take part in a celebration, often around the nacimiento (nativity scene). Villancicos (Mexican Christmas carols) are often sung and prayers and the rosary are said. Later the children gather to break one or more piñatas and dive for their share of the candy, tangerines and other treats.

Most towns, villages, and neighbors gather for *las posadas*, all emphasizing different traditions and customs left over from the old days when the nine *posadas* were used to depict the story of the birth of Christ and to link this birth of God to the rebirth of the Sun, the highest god in indigenous lore after the Winter Solstice.

In the modern Hispanic world *all* Christmas parties, even those for co-workers, businesses, and organizations are called *posadas*—even though they seldom include the original religious aspects of the old days.



(Left:) The angels appear to the shepherds and their sheep in this San Antonio Tlayacapan tableau. (Right:) This scene depicts the spirit descending as John the Baptist pours water onto the head of Jesus.

Even among the more traditional *posadas*, there are as many local customs as there are celebrations. Some places now have only one *posada*, on December 24. Others are elaborate with parades, masked dancers, live animals, large dinners, enormous parties, and *pastorelas* (delightful plays in rhyme featuring a band of devils who try to persuade the shepherds to join into their sinful ways instead of continuing to visit the manger).

At Lakeside, most public *posadas* are simple festivals in which a different *barrio* (neighborhood) sponsors each of the nine night's processions and parties. In Ajijic, the children (who represent the shepherds and who carry beribboned shepherds' staffs jingling with bells) follow Mary and Joseph to a series of homes asking for shelter each afternoon.



(Left:) By Christmas Eve many of the homes along the procession route have established a live nativity scene out front—with live babies. (Right:) Spanish-style shepherdesses have come to greet this baby Jesus.

Four of the children carry a platform carrying the *perigrinos* (pilgrims), figures of Joseph, Mary and the angel who leads and protects them. At their destination, they entrust their hosts with the *perigrinos* and have a simple party with *bolos* (bags of candy and fruit) and several *piñatas*. The next night's procession begins when the children arrive at the house to pick up the *perigrinos* to carry them to the next destination.

In San Juan Cosalá, other, older traditions are observed with more focus placed on the church. In Chapala, Jocotepec and other area villages still other customs and traditions are remembered from year to year.



(Left:) By the shores of the Galilee, God proclaims, This is my son of whom I am well pleased. (Right:) The children listen avidly to the lesson they are taught at this tableau.

Some *posadas* are simple gatherings featuring the beloved old Christmas songs and the rosary—as in the nine *posadas* which are celebrated at the La Floresta home of Octavio and Carmen Robles. Sra. Carmen, who is continuing the tradition begun by her great-grandparents in their Guadalajara home more than 125 years ago, reports that with so many people attending their *posadas*, it's just not possible to walk in a procession. How many people? Over 6,000 guests visit this loving couple's garden from 6 p.m. to about 7 p.m. beginning on December 16. On December 24, Carmen, Octavio and their children end the celebration of the Christ Child's birth with a shower of used clothing, food, and gifts for those in need who have attended most of the nine evenings events.



(Left:) Many homes along the procession route have large, detailed *nacimientos* (nativity scenes). (Right:) As delightful as are the *nacimientos*, nothing can be more precious than these nativity tableaus with the costumed children.

Each evening San Antonio Tlayacapan parents gather with their children in a different assigned spot in town and then move in a procession led by actors in the guise of Mary, Joseph and the Angel. To the strains of guitars and the singing of traditional Christmas carols, the procession continues a search for shelter. Along the way neighbors have created tableaus representing biblical events at each stop to request a space to rest.

Then the scene depicted in the tableau is explained to a very attentive crowd of children. In one very memorable recent tableau, the neighbors attempted to construct a shallow pool in the street. When live fish from the lake were added to the water for realism, it was apparent that the water was too shallow for the fish to swim upright. Instead they lolled in the water on their sides.



(Left:) Journeying from the east the wise men stop to ask the assistance of King Herod. (Right:) How refreshing to see the wonder in these children's eyes as they absorb the true meaning of Christmas.

By Christmas Eve, most households have a *nacimiento* (nativity scene) representing the night of the birth of Jesus. Some, including that at the church in San Antonio are quite large and very elaborate. The manger in these scenes remains empty until Christmas Eve when the baby is placed into the rustic crib.

We encourage you to take part in the magic of this old tradition in San Antonio. The crowd gathers at a different spot each night and the procession starts around 7 p.m. (Mexico time of course). A map of these nine routes is posted on the door of the church just prior to the December 16 kickoff of the first *posada*.

You can then join in the procession, enjoy each tableau, and watch the excitement and anticipation building in the children. Each procession ends at the church for 8 p.m. Mass. On Nochebuena (Christmas Eve), when the procession arrives at the church, it's time for the *piñata* fun.

As in most Mexican parties, a number of *piñatas* are on hand with different age groups each having a chance to swing at the *piñata* with a stick in an attempt to smash it and reach the prizes within.

The Parish also provides a small gift for each child—these are piled around the *nacimiento*. After this event everyone then enters the church for the *Misa del Gallo*, (Mass of the rooster—recalling the legend that says the rooster crowed when the baby was born.) During this Christmas Eve Mass, the baby Jesus is placed in the crib to signify His birth.

The celebrations aren't over after the late night Mass — they are just beginning as families and friends gather together for a meal and fellowship that lasts most of the night. Then the children look forward to a visit from the Nino Dios who bestows gifts upon all good children.

While north of the border Christmas customs are becoming more popular in Mexico each year with Santa Claus, Christmas trees and wreaths and piles of presents, we are fortunate that the traditional *posadas* are among the many old traditions being kept alive in Lakeside villages.