



Magical Madrid

Madrid pulls out all the stops to celebrate Christmas. From early December, zillions of lights are strung across and down the main avenues and on many of the major storefronts. The Plaza Mayor is transformed into a Christmas market, selling Christmas trees, decorations, crafts, roasted chestnuts and everything you need to create your own nativity scene. One unseasonal note of warning: beware of pickpockets working the Plaza!

Seemingly every church in the capital, and even many businesses and public buildings, erect beautiful nativity scenes, or *beléns*, as the Spanish call them. The most important *beléns* don't appear until Christmas Eve, as students are often responsible for putting up the Christmas scenes in their parish churches, according to Barbara Carballal, who for years has led an INC tour of Madrid nativity scenes.

This year, Barbara is taking a group to El Escorial on December 27 to see the life sized nativity scenes set up throughout the mountain town. (Details on page 12)

Why not discover some of the more beautiful *beléns* in Madrid on your own? Barbara says one of the first scenes to go up each year can be found at the Hospital of San Rafael, at the corner of Serrano and Concha Espina. Follow the small signs that say "A Belén".

From December 24 on, she recommends seeing Nuestra Señora de Delirios parish church, which puts up what she calls one of the loveliest manger scenes in Madrid.

A more contemporary, but striking, *belén* is erected at Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, on c/ Puerto Rico, 1, metro Concha Espina.

Every Christmas a long line forms at the Royal Palace to view the *belén* that King Carlos III brought back from Naples. Viewing is free.

Madrid also has a society dedicated to creating nativity scenes. They meet every Tuesday night from 6 to 9 pm at c/Gobernador, 11. You may visit and see their *beléns*. For details, call 91-429-7430 during the meeting times of the *Asociación de Belenistas*.

While the preparations begin long before, Christmas doesn't officially begin until December 24, Christmas Eve, when Spanish families move mountains, fill trains, planes and buses to be with their extended family for the most important dinner of the year.

Barbara explains that traditionally, Spanish ate fish and red cabbage on Christmas Eve as it was a fasting day. Today, however, the December 24 meal is far more elaborate and caloric! After a rich meal, many families will attend midnight mass and then stay up well into the early hours of Christmas day, talking, singing and playing card games.

Traditionally, gifts have been exchanged on the night of January 5, the eve of Epiphany. The Three Kings, or *Tres Reyes*, leave toys and other presents by the shoes left out by good children. Lumps of coal are left in the shoes of naughty children, or so the tradition goes.

Today, some Spanish families have adopted the foreign custom of Santa Claus, or *Papa Noel*. Ever practical, many Spanish parents say the arrival of Santa's presents on December 24 or 25 gives children plenty of holiday time to play with their new toys. School often resumes the day after Epiphany, cutting short any playtime!

The Madrid tourist office in the Plaza Mayor will receive the official Christmas event calendar around December 15. Check newspapers or the *Guía del Ocio*, sold weekly at newspaper stands throughout Madrid. The city's most widely read guide to what's on has a small English section.