

Christmas in Coclé

Written by T. Rob Brown (aka Roberto Chocolate)

Sunday, 27 December 2009 22:36 - Last Updated Tuesday, 04 May 2010 18:40



I am not a grinch, nor do I bark out “humbug” - in fact I used to love Christmas. It is just that I find it hard to get into the Christmas spirit when it is over ninety degrees out, and decorating a palm tree is just not the same. I always thought I needed snow to make me feel “Christmassy”, but not any more.

This year my wife and I had the best Christmas we have ever had playing Mr. and Mrs. Santa to a small village in the mountains of Coclé.

Monique Woods of Woody’s Beach Bar planted the seed of the idea when she asked me to play Santa to the kids of the local fishing village in Farallon. I was discussing the prospect at Xoko’s Restaurant when Jose Arauz, the owner of a local tortilla factory challenged me – why stop there? Rolando Sanchez, the owner of Xoko’s offered his assistance as well, and together we decided we would do a tour of Santa Clara as well.

Jose then invited me to visit the mountain village of Guzman, located an hour north of Penonomé. It is considered one of the poorest villages in Panama.

We took a drive together and stopped at the local school. It seems Patricia, a local university student and her friends had started a tradition of bringing clothes and presents to this village a few years ago and had asked Juan for his help. He was now recruiting me.

The village of about 120 people suffers from 95% unemployment, no electricity and very poor growing soil. It is however; situated in one of the most gorgeous valleys I have ever seen.

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The teacher, Ms. Melisa Coriejo took us on the very short tour of the tiny school.

The children in their blue and white uniforms all greeted us in unison, smiling from ear to ear, curious about their surprise visitors. My white hair and beard looked understandably tantalizing, less than a week before Christmas. As soon as we left the room, we could hear the kids buzzing, some saying “Si, Si, es Poppa Noel” Little black eyes followed us everywhere we walked around the school.



The one-room school teaches all grades in three shifts per day. The teacher works from dawn to dusk, for next-to-nothing pay. She has no chalk, no reference materials, and no teaching aids, just a desire to help kids. The kids may not have had shoes, or books, or paper – but they had plenty of smiles.

She was excited to show us that there was hope in Guzman. Thanks to the hard work of the village elders, they were just installing new flush toilets and sinks with running water. The cinder blocks had been erected for a second classroom as well.

Inside the kitchen was a roster of chores posted for each child. Some well-meaning person had donated a fridge and stove, which sat rusting because the village does not have electricity. The children eat rice and beans every day, however there is never any meat.

Outside Ms. Cornejo proudly showed us the vegetable garden they had begun to help teach the children how to raise fruits and vegetables from seeds. A long row of bell peppers was almost ready for harvest.

We were hooked, and asked the teacher to invite everyone in the village for a Christmas dinner to take place in two days.

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The next day we drove into Panama City and bought everything we would need – decorations, costumes, rope lights, Spanish Christmas music, wrapping paper and 200 dollar-store presents for kids. Then we loaded up on the pop, water, ice and food we would need to feed 120 people.



For two days we decorated the roof rack of my Hyundai Galloper and my trailer, turning the top of the truck into Santa's reindeer-led sleigh using pine boughs, fake snow, a padded wooden couch, silver ropes, red and white rope lights, a flood-light for nighttime, a huge sound system and the obligatory sleigh bells.

The Vezeau family visiting Panama from Loughborough Lake Holiday Park near Kingston, Ontario got caught up – and roped into, the festivities. Del even bought and installed an inverter to run all the lights and sound, so we didn't have to bring my loud, stinky diesel generator along. The trailer became Santa's elves wagon, which they used to toss out candy to the kids as we rode by.

With bells ringing and Christmas music blaring we arrived in Guzman at noon. The dirt road was packed with clapping, cheering kids. Santa and Mrs. Clause dismounted and proceeded up to the school to help hand out plates of food to the hungry families.

Over 120 meals were served consisting of fresh country ham provided by Xoko's, Caesar salad, potatoes and vegetable salad, tortilla, soda pop, and afterwards a fresh peach flan and donuts.

Then came time to hand out the presents. Santa was swamped with excited kids, who, like kids everywhere, couldn't wait to rip open the presents that had been so carefully wrapped by our elves over the past two days.

It was time for the piñatas, as lines of kids eagerly waited their turn to try to smash open the candy-filled paper dolls.

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As Santa has an entire world to visit, it was time to mount up again and dash away. We rode on the roof for the entire 38 kilometer ride to the highway, singing out Merry Christmas and tossing candy to the surprised and thrilled children who came running out of their homes in the hills to greet Santa as he rode by.

Later, on Christmas Eve, Santa was seen in the village of Farallon, throwing out candy and handing out presents at Woody's. The sounds of Feliz Navidad and Santa's Ho Ho Ho rang out as hundreds of kids followed the ringing bells down the dirt lanes, catching candy as they ran.

The teacher has provided me with a lost of books the children need in Spanish. I will be asking everyone I know to help buy books, pencils, paper, chalk, and shoes for the children. We will be running fund raising events through out the year to pay for either a solar power system or an electrical power generator and a computer.



Thanks to Xoko's Restaurant in Santa Clara for providing the traditional Christmas ham.

Heartfelt thanks Del, Pam, Lauren and Seth Vezeau who donated their time, talent and money to help make this day possible.

Maurice of Playa Blanca Villas donated cash to help buy the candy for the kids.

A dentist from Canada who was having a drink at Woody's Two, Playa Blanca donated cash as well, and promised to send toothbrushes next year.

A special thanks to Juan Bernal, Dania, Nicole, Suzan, and Rosa Maria for their undying friendship, help, time and warmth. Although by North American standards they might be considered poor themselves, they are rich in life. They embodied the Christmas spirit by helping children less fortunate than themselves.

This was the best Christmas I have ever had. We already have two more floats for next year's parade, and we hope to raise enough money to bring what the elders of Guzman have asked

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for so their kids can study using the internet. They asked for nothing for themselves – just help for the future of their kids.

Merry Christmas and a **prosperous Happy New Year**.

Roberto and Yolanda Chocolaté (Claus)

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