



6

INDIA

Steve Dunk



Christmas Eve

## DOUGHNUTS TO DOSAS: A TALE OF CHRISTMAS IN INDIA

By CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT

**It was 2003 and time for the talk. Like many propositions put forward to tweens, it might not go well.**

And the proposition we were making to our son and daughter? We wanted to take them travelling at Christmas.

The "being away" would not be the issue. My family had a long tradition of travelling at Christmas, since the year my own parents scraped together the funds to take my sister and me to Disneyland. Dad's seasonal business shut down in winter; our grades could handle some absence in class. So, we scheduled the turkey for an early December day, and hit the road to California in a truck camper. On December 25, we attended Spanish mass in a beautiful church — speaking not a word of Spanish, but discovering Christmas Mass is Christmas Mass everywhere — and we went for a swim.

It was weird.

Weirdest was the big doughnut hole in the afternoon that would have been filled with cousins and aunties and uncles and grandparents playing games and building puzzles and eating way too many Christmas cookies. But the swim and the sun took the edge off the weirdness, and the travel adventures made it an experience worth repeating. Again and again. Over the years, we celebrated "early Christmas" on various convenient dates more times than I can remember.

We reverted back to December 25 when my own kids came into the world (Santa's schedule being fixed and all). Even after a move to Indonesia, we celebrated our first Christmas Day in our Jakarta home. There were presents from Canada under the tree; an imported turkey steaming on the table; friends over for dinner accustomed to the geckos that chirped from the ceiling.

It was awful.

Thirteen thousand kilometres from the cousins and grandmas, in a country where the only signs of Christmas seemed to exist at the mall, that doughnut hole yawned cavernous.

We vowed to never repeat the mistake, scheduled subsequent turkeys and gifts for early December,

and spent the holidays in nearby Australia or New Zealand. On December 25, we lit Advent candles in hotel rooms, decorated camper van windows with Christmas decals, or read Christmas stories by a condo fireplace while the air-conditioning kept summer temperatures at bay. It became less weird and more wonderful.

No, travelling at Christmas would not be the problem. It was the destination that might be a hard sell to the kids.

We wanted to take them to India.

Not an obvious choice for a couple of Canadian kids of Anglo-Dutch heritage. Especially for our daughter, who subsisted on naan and mango chutney whenever meals with our Jakarta friends consisted of Indian fare. But we promised turkey dinner. A comfortable hotel to retreat to whenever the cultural immersion got too intense. And the trip's centrepiece adventure: a weeklong train tour to explore the exotic forts and palaces of Rajasthan.

They bought it.

Delhi brought fog and a biting chill - and a friendly stranger who led us to his brother's carpet shop rather than the Connaught bookstore we were looking for. But it also brought the Red Fort and Gandhi's Memorial, and another friendly stranger who explained the world of *dosas* as we queued up outside a buzzing cafe. Our daughter deemed the crispy crepe wrappers to be palate possibilities and our son devoured the savoury fillings in double-time.

In this country that embraced all things festive, Christmas was everywhere in twinkling lights and colourful stars. We found a cottage craft store offering wares from every corner of India: pashminas for the grandmas and aunties, mini Taj Mahals for the cousins, scarves for the uncles. Shopping for "Christmas in July" — when there was always more time with the cousins (our son's observation) and less angst from the adults (mine) — had become the filling for our doughnut hole.



Qutb Minar Complex

C. Van Brunschot &amp; Steve Dunk





Awaiting Christmas dinner



Camel ride in the desert



Saag Paneer

## ❧ The 12 Tastes of Christmas ❧

### Saag Paneer

Paneer is an unaged, non-melting cheese that is set with vinegar or lemon juice (rather than rennet) to create the curds. You'll find cubed paneer in the freezer sections of Calgary's South Asian groceries and at Superstore.

2 Tbsp ghee

1 tsp turmeric

1 tsp Kashmiri chilli powder

400 g cubed paneer

2 Tbsp ghee

½ tsp mustard seeds

¼ tsp cumin seeds

1 onion, diced

½ tsp salt, or to taste

3 garlic cloves, minced

2 Tbsp ginger, crushed

1 serrano chile, diced fine

2 tsp garam masala

450 g spinach and/or mixed greens (kale, mustard greens), chopped

\*Melt 2 Tbsp of ghee in a medium bowl; stir in turmeric and chilli powder.

Add cubed paneer and toss to coat. Allow a few minutes to absorb the flavours, then cook paneer in a large non-stick pan over medium heat, turning often until lightly golden. Remove from pan and set aside.

In the same pan, melt 2 Tbsp of ghee over medium heat. Add mustard and cumin seeds. When seeds start to pop, add onion and salt and cook until just starting to turn golden. Add garlic, ginger, and serrano chile and cook for 2 minutes. Stir in garam masala; cook one minute.

Add spinach and cook until soft, stirring in a splash of water from time to time in order to release flavours from bottom of the pan and to maintain the consistency you like.

Stir in paneer and cook 2-3 minutes to heat through.

Spoon into a bowl and serve with naan.

Serves 4-6.

\*Omit this step if you are in the mood for a milder, creamier flavour. Simply add paneer to the cooked spinach at the end and heat through.



**Mangia! Mangia!**  
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C. Van Brunschot & Steve Drink

## CHRISTMAS IN INDIA...

On Christmas Eve, we boarded the train. Its elegant interior whispered of Indian dynasties and its nightstand provided a spot for our tiny tree. A kind Himalayan waiter, noting our daughter's proclivity for the menu's Western choices, offered a small spoonful of saag paneer. "It's cheese," he told her. "I like cheese," she said. We read Christmas stories in our wood-panelled cabin, hung stockings on the bedpost, and rocked to sleep along the midnight rails.

The stockings were plundered before breakfast on Christmas morning. A shower of rose petals greeted our descent from the train. A resplendent elephant escorted us to Jaipur's Amber Palace, where we prowled courtyards and colonnades, and imagined bejewelled kings and princesses who once walked there.

Dinner arrived on the train that night with aplomb and pageantry — and a big Christmas turkey with all the trimmings. As dish after dish was proffered at the table, our daughter watched and waited for her now-favourite waiter — then requested a big scoop of paneer right next to her butternut squash.

The days to come would bring more forts and palaces. A camel ride. A tiger sighting. And snow, too, in Darjeeling, hometown of our Himalayan friend.

But most of all they brought family time and memories and gratitude — all the essential elements of Christmas — and a shared love for Indian cuisine.

And that, we learned, is a wonderful thing indeed.

Catherine Van Brunschot and her husband now host extended family at Christmas every year at their home in Calgary — on whatever day is most convenient for everyone. Christmas Eve always includes Indian food.

Red Fort, Delhi



## JAMAICA

By SHAWNA-KAY THOMAS

Our Christmas food (or should I say drink?) tradition begins about eight months before Christmas when we plant the sorrel (*hibiscus sabdariffa*) seeds. In early December, when the plant is mature we remove the petals from the plant and then remove the seeds from the petals. That part is torturous as it is itchy, but we know the reward so we press on.

To get the perfect flavour we steep the sorrel petals, pimento and ginger for hours, usually overnight, then we strain it and sweeten to taste. The drink is usually prepared just in time for Christmas Eve and we have it through to New Year's Day. Some people add rum or wine to the drink as well. Judging by how sleepy we felt after drinking it as children, my bet is that my parents were those people.

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