

Our kind of Christmas

Under a cloud or up a mountain... *Times* writers describe their day

From Africa to the Andes, Christmas could find Matthew Parris anywhere on the map



For the original players, Christmas had to be improvised. Bethlehem was an inconvenient venue for a family holiday; the stable was not ideal for the gathering; and donkeys and sheep would hardly

have been high on any guest list. Mary and Joseph just happened to be there, nature took its course — and the Christmas bash, like most of the best parties, was very much a last-minute affair, no worse for being crashed by angels.

Ad hoc is good, and Christmas is no exception. Christmas is a date, not a place. It occurs on December 25 regardless of where you are or whom you are with. It should not impose upon you company you do not wish to keep, food you do not wish to eat, or jollities you do not find jolly. It does not require your presence at any particular address. The world is wide and the choice is yours. I recommend Africa or the Andes.

But I like my family. If I can join some of them at Christmas, or they me, so much the better. If one of their houses, or mine, is free, fine. The time-honoured seasonal question, however — “our home or yours?” — ought to permit the answer “neither”. I am one of six children so the goal of getting father, mother, half a dozen offspring, spouses or partners, and ten children and babies — let alone the pets — all into one room at one time is blessedly unattainable.

At any given Christmas we are capable of a range of family Christmases in a range of places. This year some of us will be in the Catalan Pyrenees, where some of us live. Last year some of us converged on my house in the Peak District in Derbyshire.

Last year I did accommodate the pets and a couple of them, my brother's dogs, Foxy and Tiger, carried away by the festive spirit, ganged up, hunted down, and partially ate, a sheep. The sheep belonged to my neighbour. My five llamas were fascinated.

For Foxy and Tiger, the most exhilarating Christmas they ever had. For my llamas, a seasonal entertainment. For the sheep, a nightmare. My neighbour couldn't have been nicer, my father paid for the sheep and my brother John furiously chastised his dogs. As he did so, something unmistakable in their furry faces said “whatever”. They left in disgrace.

Memorable. But not as memorable as Christmas four years ago, when, with the end of the

millennium approaching fast, I got it into my head that as many of us as could make the climb should spend New Year's dawn, 2000, on the summit of Kilimanjaro. This entailed spending Christmas on the slopes of Africa's highest mountain.

My father, approaching 80, took a little persuading that camping in the African bush, followed by game-spotting, then Christmas at 6,000ft (1,830m) in the village of Marangu on Kilimanjaro's lower slopes, followed (after the younger members of the family had conquered the mountain) by a bus trip to Dar es Salaam and a boat to Zanzibar, was his idea of fun, but he entered pluckily into the spirit of the expedition. My mother was, as ever, up for anything.

My sister Belinda and her Catalan husband, Quim, are go-anywhere people, and their three children were all keen. My friend Julian was accompanied by his mother and a French family friend. It was a colourful assortment of ages, types and nationalities who flew into Kilimanjaro airport on a cut-price KLM flight from Europe on a hot December evening, frogs and crickets serenading us, moths and flying ants an airborne swirl around the runway floodlights, and a huge moth-eating bat scything his way through the swirl as though all his Christmases had come at once. As others back at home opened the cute little cardboard windows on their

advent calendars, we headed in a Jeep for some tents on the rim of the Ngorongoro crater.

It was almost Christmas Eve when we met the hunter-gatherers. Not far from Ngorongoro live some of the last pre-Iron-Age humans left on the face of this planet. Believe me, the mental leap back 2,000 years to a Nativity in Palestine is as nothing compared with the age aeon which seemed to separate us, with our four-by-fours, our safari clothes, our Timberland boots and our video cameras, from this woebegone little tribe of half-naked and shoeless humans with no fixed abode and only a temporary brushwood shelter, living and roving under trees, shooting monkeys with bows and poisoned arrows, and eating grubs and roots.

My mother loved them, and was soon on friendly if wordless terms. But I couldn't help thinking that were my family part of this tribe, half my brothers and sisters would be dead already and my parents long-abandoned in the bush to die.

The Marangu Hotel, among the gardens of an old coffee-estate on Kilimanjaro's slopes, is a civilised and tranquil place and Seamus Brice-Bennett and his staff created a homely Christmas Eve and as authentic a Christmas dinner as can be assembled in Tanzania.

But the carols had hardly concluded before, tossing tinsel aside, everybody under 60 in the party (and my niece Cristina was only 9) were in

walking boots and sun-hats and heading up through the jungle, a huge caravan of porters and guides in our wake: tents and torches, paraffin and hurricane lamps, bedding and food, swaying uphill on their heads.

We had over two days traversed the little-visited north side of the mountain and, under a burning sun, were toiling our way up a high-altitude desert of stones when we came upon a couple of climbers and their guide, resting. One climber, looking exhausted and depressed, was leaning on his stick. The other was prostrate on the ground, his face covered by his jacket against the sun.

Their guide engaged ours in animated conversation in their language of KiChaga.

“How's it going?” I asked the upright climber. “Badly,” he said, in a foreign accent. We discussed the accommodation in the hut where he and his companion had spent the previous night. But he sounded so dispirited that there was little more to say.

“Well,” I said, “we must be on our way if we're to make that final climb on New Year's Eve. Good luck. I hope your friend perks up. Sacked out there on the ground he looked like he was dead.”

“He is dead,” said the man.

ONE CLIMBER WAS PROSTRATE ON THE GROUND...

