



CHANTAL DESJARDINS

Kettner found a not-so-Christmassy tree in balmy Australia.

They're dreaming of a blue Christmas

Wistful Winnipeggers lament holidays away from home

By Chantal Desjardins

T WAS the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a... dingo?

For most of us, the holidays represent fresh snowfalls, turkey dinners and feigning surprise over yet another plaid flannel shirt or pair of granny underwear.

But 23-year-old Winnipegger Joanne Kettner is spending Christmas in Australia, and travelling Down Under is definitely turning her holiday traditions upside down.

"It will be weird waking up on Christmas morning with no snow... and no gifts!" she laughs.

As Santa makes his rounds, Kettner plans to hang her stocking in a trailer in the backyard of a friend's house in Brisbane. She admits that it's a little unconventional, and says it's quite the opposite of the large formal family gatherings she's used to during the holidays.

"I feel like I'm going to miss out on certain things by not being home," Kettner says. "My sisters live out of town and Christmas is the one time where we all get together."

"Catching up with them always gives me a warm, fuzzy feeling," she continues, "although it could be the spiked eggnog that goes along with catching up!"

Katherine Glanville is trading in her snow boots for rain galoshes this holiday season. The 26-year-old social worker and her partner Ken have accepted jobs in England, and are set to move before Christmas.

"I'm one of those people who have always gone home for the holidays, no matter what," says the Osborne Village resident. "One year when I was away at university I got out of one of my Christmas exams by saying I had to

appear in court just so I could be home longer. So I have very mixed feelings about leaving now."

Clinical psychologist Dr. Vivienne C. Rowan says that the main reason people are apart on Christmas is due to work and the cost of travelling home. And although more people seek her counselling services in the fall and early winter than at Christmas, she says it can be a difficult time.

"Some people may feel blue at this time of the year," Dr. Rowan says, "but they generally are able to pull through it by attending community events or spending it with someone they care about, even if it is their pet cat or dog."

According to Rowan, there are a number of tips people can follow to survive the holidays apart from the family. The first is to bring an article from your home celebration dinner table, such as an ornament or napkin.

Once in England, Glanville is opting for "the year of the handmade decorations and ornaments," a family tradition using popcorn and cranberries. She would also like a tree — but needs a house to put it in, first.

"In a way it won't feel like a normal Christmas," Glanville says, "but then again, I am excited to start a new chapter in my life, explore new places, and develop my own Christmas traditions that build on those my family started."

To avoid having a blue Christmas, Rowan also advises spending the holiday with a friend, regardless of whether it's an old pal from home or someone you've recently met.

Kettner agrees that travelling Australia with a close girlfriend will ease any loneliness on Christmas morning by allowing them to share memories.

"We've been through so much together, and she really reminds me of Christmas," she says. "She's even brought stockings to hang and a really cheesy Andy Williams CD that we used to listen to."

For people travelling on a limited budget, Rowan says that staying in a hostel might be the way to go. The Funk House Hostel in Sydney, Australia, claims to help Canadians feel at home on Christmas with themes based on the Toronto Maple Leafs, the Tragically Hip, Kokanee beer, eggnog, mistletoe and even poutine.

For some families, Rowan confides, there may be circumstances when separate holiday celebrations are for the best.

"For some people, it is better to be away from family at Christmas," she says. "Some family members find it too stressful, especially if there have

been past chaotic feuding events of this nature."

Finally, she notes that regardless of where you are in the world, a great way to get into the Christmas spirit is to show charity to someone less fortunate.

Rowan suggests contacting an agency such as the Mennonite Central Committee to financially support a holiday meal for an underprivileged family, or even inviting a homeless person to share in a meal.

"Unfortunately, homeless people are in every country," Rowan says. "You will be surprised at what you will learn from that person and from the culture."

And although Kettner is looking forward to certain new traditions like a Christmas Day barbecue on the beach, she says there are some things that shouldn't be changed.

"I'm really excited to experience the holidays on the other side of the world," Kettner says. "But the one thing I'll never get used to is that the Santas in Australia carry surfboards and wear flowered boxers."

"There's just something wrong about seeing Santa Claus in his undies!"