

# TOKYO TALES

By Carole Hallett Mobbs

## A Tokyo Christmas

Christmas in Japan bears little resemblance to the same celebration we know in Britain, apart from the commercialisation, which starts just after Halloween. Most of this is down to the fact that only a tiny minority of the population are practising Christians; the major religions here being Shinto and Buddhist. However, the Japanese love a good festival, so pay lip service to Christmas, but its form is more akin to our Valentine's Day where romance comes foremost. Celebrating is done on Christmas Eve when smart restaurants and hotels are fully booked with loving couples.

Emperor Akihito's birthday is on the 23<sup>rd</sup> December so there is a national holiday on that day instead of Christmas Day which is a normal working day here. This came as a pleasant surprise last year when the postman delivered gifts and cards from friends overseas while we were closeted indoors with our traditional Christmas mayhem.

Before moving here, I took the opportunity to throw away my old, tired decorations, fully intending to buy some fancy new ones here as soon as possible. As I had neglected to do my research though, very few were to be found, so we settled on a minimalist look for the house. We managed to find a tree though, albeit artificial. There is no market for real Christmas trees here. Public Christmas decorations are mostly small, tasteful lights decorating the many trees around the city and anything remotely Christmas related is removed on 25<sup>th</sup> December.

This time last year, we had only just arrived

in Tokyo and had no idea where to buy familiar food, so planning a traditional family Christmas dinner was quite an ordeal. Large, familiar joints of meat are just not available at most supermarkets here but I did manage to find a chicken which served very well. I hadn't had time or the ingredients to bake a fruit cake, so instead bought the Japanese version of Christmas cake, which is a sponge cake covered in whipped cream and strawberries. Delicious!

Most Japanese have little concept of the history of Christmas, many believing it to be Santa's birthday. Due to a very successful advertising campaign by Kentucky Fried Chicken, many Japanese now use this outlet for their Christmas Eve dinner, with queues forming at the doors to collect their pre-ordered chicken meals. There is a large statue of Colonel Sanders outside the shops and at Christmas he is dressed as Santa.

Christmas-time also coincides with the wind-down of the year in preparation for the far more important and sacred New Year's Day celebrations. So end-of-year parties are thrown by companies and groups. These are known as *bonenkai*, "forget the old year" parties. At these parties, it is fairly compulsory to get extremely drunk and it seems to be quite in order for everyone to tell their bosses and co-workers exactly what they think of them without fear of repercussions, as all will be forgotten in the New Year.

**So, from Tokyo, I'd like to wish you all a *Meri Kurisumasu!***

