

TEENTIMES 30

FOR THE YOUTH, BY THE YOUTH!

DECEMBER 2025

*From
all
of us...*

*...To
all
of you*



Merry Christmas

Teen Times Toy Drive: Why we should give back during Christmas

BY ADITI RAMCHANDANI

Christmas is known as a time of joy, family, and celebration, but not everyone gets to enjoy it in the same way. Many families struggle during the holidays; they cannot afford food, gifts, or even basic needs. This is why giving back at Christmastime is so important.

Christmas is about being kind. When we give food, clothes, and toys, we show the true meaning of the season. Even a small gift or warm meal can make a big difference. Giving back also makes us feel appreciative. It helps us remember the things we often forget to be thankful for like having food, home, good health and family.

When we help others, it makes our Christmas feel more meaningful. Even small acts of kindness are important. They can make someone feel happier and show them that someone cares. When others see people giving, they often want to help, too. This helps create a kinder and stronger community.

The Teen Times Annual Christmas Toy and School Supplies Drive is a perfect example of giving back to the community, so come to Super City on December 19 and 20 to buy toys and school supplies that will be donated to the orphanage. By coming out and purchasing an item to give, you help make Christmas more special for children who may not receive much this time around. Every donation helps!

Join us and help bring joy to our community this holiday.



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Youth Cabinet - Don't sleep on it!

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (MECYS) just launched the MECYS Youth Cabinet, and it's honestly one of the best moves we've seen in a while. Minister Melissa Gumbs is not doing the usual "youth photo-op" thing, she's creating a real space where students can sit with her, her cabinet, and policy people and talk about what actually affects us – fair access to education, student well-being, school safety, mental health, and planning for the future.

Starting Thursday, February 5, 2026, Youth Cabinet members will meet every two months. That means this is not a one-time meeting where adults nod and move on – it's ongoing, structured, and meant to lead to real changes. Schools will soon get the details on logistics and work plans, but the most important thing right now is nominations.

Every secondary school is included, no exceptions. Academic schools; vocational and technical schools like SMVTS, Sundial, and Academy VBC; plus private schools like Learning Unlimited Preparatory School and Caribbean International Academy. That matters, because it sends a clear message that every student-voice counts, not just one type of student. Respect.

Here's the part where school admin needs to cooperate fully and quickly: Each school has to nominate one main representative and one alternate. The alternate is not a "backup who disappears," they're supposed to stay engaged the whole time and be ready to step in fully if need-

ed. So, schools should not pick names and then leave students to figure it out on their own. Support them, guide them, and make sure both students can actually participate.

There are also basic requirements: Nominees cannot be in their exam year, they must be in good academic and social standing, and they should show leadership and a real interest in civic participation. In other words, pick students who will show up, speak up and follow through.

The deadline schools were asked to meet is Friday, January 23, 2026, using the MECYS Youth Cabinet Nomination Form. That is close. Admin cannot drag this out, and they definitely should not play favourites or keep it quiet as if it's some secret opportunity. Students deserve a fair shot, and schools should make the process clear, fast, and transparent.

Minister Gumbs has been very clear about what this is supposed to be. Youth engagement, to her, is not symbolic. She has said more than once that she does not dismiss young people's ideas or ambitions, and she has backed that up with action. At the United Nations, she put it plainly: Youth voices get celebrated on big stages, then ignored the second they ask hard questions. Real respect means standing with youth even when what we say challenges people.

That's the whole point of the Youth Cabinet. It's a platform for students to help shape policies and programs during the Minister's tenure – not performative, not cute, not "for show." A real struc-



ture where student perspectives can influence what happens in education and youth development.

The Ministry's goals are solid: Give students hands-on experience with democratic process and decision-making, strengthen policy by bringing in real life student perspectives from classrooms and communities, build civi-minded leaders who un-

derstand how government works, create stronger links between schools, the Department of Youth, and policymakers, and push youth to see ourselves as partners in nation building, not just people receiving decisions made about us.

There's also a real advantage for government here: When youth are involved from the start, issues get spotted earlier, programs can be designed better, and students are more likely to support and trust what's being rolled out because we helped shape it.

Some schools will pick representatives through their Student Government Associations, and that's fine. Schools without an SGA should not use that as an excuse to move slow or do nothing. If your school doesn't have an SGA, students can still step forward and show interest and school management should make space for that. The expectation is also that Youth Cabinet reps do not just attend meetings and disappear, they should report back to classmates and bring

student feedback to the table. That means schools should help create simple ways for reps to gather input, like short check-ins, class surveys, or lunchtime feedback sessions.

Big respect to Teen Times, too, for helping push this initiative in a youth-friendly way, including sharing a video encouraging students to step up. That's what partnership looks like, adults and youth working together without talking down to us.

So, here's the clear message to school administration: Cooperate fully. Move fast. Communicate openly. Nominate students fairly. Support both the representative and the alternate. Do not treat this like extra paperwork, because this is literally our chance to speak directly into the system that shapes our lives.

If we're serious about building a stronger St. Maarten, then schools need to treat the Youth Cabinet like the opportunity it is, and not let it slip because of delay, silence, or poor coordination.



Feature

MY MIND MATTERS REGIONAL DEBATE

BY ADITI RAJPAL

On November 21, I took part in my first regional debate, and it completely changed my view on many discussions about mental health and youth voices. Lots of people only listen for the arguments, fixated on who wins or loses. But what grabbed me wasn't the result; it was actually looking into the real issues, stepping beyond classroom walls during that Regional Debate on the Rights of the Child.

Young people came from six separate islands – Dutch Sint Maarten, French Saint Martin, Saint Barthélemy, Martinique, Anguilla, and St. Kitts-Nevis – for the sixth regional debate on the Rights of the Child. The theme for this year's debate was mental

health, under the motto: "Strong minds. Safe spaces. Bold voices. My mind matters!" The topic caught our attention because, although it affects youth, it is not always talked about in public. Students were able to voice views, argue against theories, and have open discussions about topics that affect our daily lives – thanks to the debate.

St. Dominic High School proudly represented Dutch Sint Maarten in the competition. The team consisted of Nyah (Form 5), Aditi (Form 4), Tamanna (Form 4), and Tanishka (Form 4). Even though some of us hadn't debated before, the team did a great job and won the regional debate overall. From the St. Dominic High School par-



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ticipants, Nyah Kalmera was also named Best Speaker, showing the success of the team's planning and

execution.

A lot of people don't get how much effort it takes before a debate. Thanks to our coach, Ms. Daniella Arrindell, we definitely checked out a lot of research websites. We also ran through arguments while learning to stay calm when we were trembling from the fear of making a mistake. Instead of just fighting points, our coach showed us it's more like listening to others, looking at ideas carefully, then actually having a discussion. For people like us, who were stepping into a discussion as heavy as this for the first time, her guidance made the biggest difference.



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The debate counted on the backing of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth & Sport, which collaborated with the French counterparts. Minister Melissa Gumbs brought a breath of fresh air into the debate with her impassioned speech about children's rights and how the ministry is a source of help to youth and their mental wellbeing.

The event was overseen by Mr. Lenworth Wilson, who was assisted by co-moderator Ms. Shanica Romney.

What stayed with me the most was realizing how important youth voices are. Mental health is often discussed by adults, but this debate allowed young people to speak for themselves. It showed how safe spaces and open conversations can help break stigma and encourage understanding. Being part of this experience taught me confidence, teamwork, and the value young people bring to the table by speaking up.

Overall, the Regional Debate about Children's Rights was about much more than just taking part in a contest. It taught me about how our voices, as students, are just as significant; that I can use my voice as a representative of my school and of my island – and I will always cherish this. I have gained a greater understanding of the strength of words when purposeful.



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CHRISTMAS IN SINT MAARTEN: How local businesses can help teens

BY ADITI RAJPAL

Christmastime in Sint Maarten is loud, colourful, and just full of energy. There is music everywhere, lights are going up, and the spirit of Christmas starts to lighten people. While many people focus on shopping and celebration, the Christmas season is also a big chance for local businesses to help teenagers in important ways. Christmas can be a time for young people to grow beyond sales and decorations.

One powerful way businesses can support teens during the holidays is by having or sponsoring events. Imagine local shops helping to organize things like Christmas markets, talent shows, or even light-up shows like the ones you see online. This can be a safe place where teens can hang out and connect with one another. Workshops hosted by businesses, such as arts & crafts, cooking, music, and dance businesses, can give young people something

positive to do while learning a new skill. Teen-friendly pop-up booths where teens can sell their own Christmas decor can also create a space where youth feel included during the holidays.

Education is an area where businesses can make the biggest impact. Small scholarships of holiday grants for school projects, supplies, or extracurricular activities can really help a struggling teen out. Some businesses can host Christmas contests with prizes that support teens' education and skill development. These initiatives motivate young people to show them that their efforts matter.

Employment during the holiday season is also important for many teens in Sint Maarten. Local businesses can provide students with part-time holiday work opportunities and brief internships that focus on retail and hospitality and tourism sectors. Working during Christmas provides teens with the opportunity to gain financial



resources while they develop their ability to handle responsibilities and learn how to work with others and provide good customer service. The work-based mentorship programs, which teenagers join, provide necessary guidance that helps them build self-assurance which leads to better career decisions.

Giving back is a big part of the holiday spirit, and businesses can lead by example through donations and sponsorships. Christmas can be a tough time for some kids. Toy- and clothing-drives are initiatives that make sure every kid has something to smile about. Helping out youth sports teams or local groups lets teenagers have fun and stay involved. Also, teaming up with charities that care about young people makes our whole island feel more like one big community.

Want to help teens? Encourage them to be young entrepreneurs. Local shops can help teens to sell handmade crafts, artwork, or even baked goods during this holiday season. This allows young creators to show their talents while gaining experience in how business works instead of just learning it in theory. Mentorship from experienced business owners can boost up teens who dream of starting their own projects or company in the future.

Christmas in Sint Maarten is more than gift-giving and the decorations. It's about people. When local businesses choose to invest in the youth during the holiday season, they build a stronger connected island. Supporting teens means investing in the future of Sint Maarten, and that's the most important gift of all.

Feature

A mother's effort and a blessing

A Christmas story

Marisol kept the Christmas tree in the corner of the living room where the light from the one working lamp could reach it. It was an old artificial tree she had bought second-hand years ago, its branches a little thin and uneven, but she fluffed them the same way every December, like she was smoothing out a rough year with her hands.

Her son, Jayden, sat cross-legged on the floor, carefully threading popcorn onto a string. He was eight and took every task seriously, as if the world might come undone if he rushed. His sister, Alana, five, held up a construction paper star she had coloured with a yellow crayon down to a nub.

"Mommy, does it look like a real star?" she asked.

"It looks like the kind of star that knows where it's going," Marisol said, and she meant it. She meant it in the way mothers sometimes mean things into being.

Outside, the neighbourhood had dressed itself in lights that blinked and pulsed, bright and careless. Marisol's window looked out toward a row of houses where inflatable snowmen bowed in the wind. She didn't resent the brightness. She just wished, for once, it did not make her own dim room feel like an apology.

The week before Christmas was always the hardest. Work got busier, bills stacked higher, and expectations, especially those of children, grew their own legs and ran ahead of her. Marisol worked double shifts at the diner – a place that smelled like coffee and fried food and other people's mornings. She kept a jar in her kitchen labelled "SANTA," and

every night she dropped in what she could, coins and folded bills – the sound a small promise.

Jayden had started pretending he didn't notice the jar.

Alana, who noticed everything, would stand on a chair and rattle it gently with both hands. "It's getting heavier," she'd announce as if it were a scientific discovery. "Santa's going to be so happy."

Marisol's smile always came, even when her throat felt tight.

But on the Monday before Christmas, the jar sat stubbornly light. A surprise fee had come out of her account, something she had forgotten about in the blur of days, and the number on her banking app had dropped like a stone. She stared at her phone in the break room of the diner while the other servers laughed over something loud and easy.

Her manager, a tired-eyed woman named Denise, walked by and squeezed her shoulder. "You good?"

"Yeah," Marisol lied, because lying was sometimes a kind of survival.

That night, after the kids had fallen asleep with a movie playing softly in the background, Marisol sat at the small kitchen table with her phone in front of her like a dare. She hadn't called their father in months. Not because she was proud. Not because she didn't need help. But because she had learned the shape of disappointment and the way it could cut more deeply when she let it near her children.

Still, Christmas did things to a person. It made you remember who



should be there. It made you believe, for a second, that people might be better than they had been.

She dialled.

It rang twice before a voice answered, too cheerful, too far away. "Hello?"

Marisol's chest tightened. "Darius. It's me."

Silence followed, the kind that measured her worth in seconds. "Marisol," he finally said, the name flat like a closed door. "What's going on?"

She swallowed. "I'm not calling for a fight. I'm calling because it's Christmas week. The kids need some things. I've been doing what I can but... I could use help. Even something small."

Another pause. A faint sound in the background, laughter, dishes clinking, someone calling his name. A home that was not hers.

"Listen," Darius said, and the word listen felt like a lecture beginning. "I'm not in that place anymore. I've got responsibilities here. I've got a family now."

"They're your family," Marisol said quietly. She tried to keep her voice from shaking, like her steadiness could persuade him.

He exhaled as if she were being unreasonable. "I'm just saying, my new family comes first. I can't be pulled back into old stuff. I've moved on."

Old stuff. Like Jayden's laugh. Like Alana's missing front tooth. Like the nights she stayed awake with fevers and nightmares and school projects. Like their birthdays and scraped knees and the way Jayden still looked for him in every crowded place.

Marisol felt heat rise to her face. "They're not 'old stuff,' Darius."

"I'm done with this," he snapped, and there was steel in it now, impatience sharpened into finality. "Don't call me about money. Not now. Not ever."

Before she could answer, the line went dead.

For a long moment, she didn't move. Her phone lay on the table, screen dimming, like it was ashamed. In the living room, the movie's characters sang about miracles, their voices bright and effortless. Marisol pressed her



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A mother's effort and a blessing

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fist against her mouth to keep the sound inside.

She had promised herself she wouldn't cry where the kids could hear. She was good at keeping promises, even when other people weren't.

The next day, she went to work with swollen eyes and a smile that felt stapled to her face. She poured coffee, carried plates, laughed at jokes she didn't find funny, and accepted a handful of small tips like they were priceless. She kept thinking: How do you explain to children that someone can be alive and still choose to be absent?

In the afternoon, Denise called her into the office. Marisol's stomach dropped. She pictured cut hours. Bad news. Another door closing.

Denise slid an envelope across the desk. "This is for you."

Marisol hesitated. "What is it?"

"Open it."

Inside was a grocery store gift card and a folded note with messy handwriting. Denise

watched her face soften, confusion cracking into disbelief.

"What..." Marisol started, but no words came.

Denise leaned back in her chair. "I asked the staff if anyone wanted to pitch in for a family in the neighbourhood who's been having a rough time. I didn't say names. People gave what they could."

Marisol blinked hard. "I can't take this."

Denise lifted an eyebrow. "You can and you will. Because you've been taking care of everyone else with your whole chest. Let somebody take care of you for five minutes."

Marisol felt tears press behind her eyes again, but these were different. These were warm. These were heavy with something like relief.

When she got home, she hid the gift card in her wallet like it was fragile. The kids were at the table colouring. Jayden looked up. "Mom, you okay?"

She set her bag down and knelt beside him. "Yeah," she said, and this time it was true enough to feel solid. "Just tired."

Alana hopped down from her chair and wrapped her arms around Marisol's neck. "We can make Christmas anyway," she said with the confidence only a child could have. "We can make it with popcorn and paper stars."

Marisol hugged her back, breathing in the scent of crayons and shampoo and home. "We can," she whispered.

Over the next two days, she stretched the gift card like it was elastic. She bought ingredients for cookies, a small ham, fruit, hot chocolate, and a little bag of candy canes. She found two modest gifts at a discount store, one a set of drawing markers for Jayden, the other a doll for Alana that came with a tiny comb. She wrapped them in brown paper from the dinner, tied with leftover ribbon from last year, and tucked them under the tree.

Christmas Eve arrived with a soft rain tapping at the windows. The power flickered once, then held. Marisol cooked while the kids danced in socks on the tile floor. They made cookies shaped like stars, some more like blobs, and Alana insisted on leaving two for Santa and one "for the reindeer because they work hard too."

Later, when the kids were finally asleep, Marisol sat on the couch in the dim light of the tree. The paper star Alana made sat at the top — crooked but proud. Marisol stared at it, feeling the ache return, smaller now but still present.

She thought of Darius's voice, the way he had said new family like it was a medal and not a wound.

Marisol stood and walked to the window. Across the street, the lights on a neighbour's house blazed in a gentle pattern. Somewhere a radio played a Christmas song, muffled through walls and distance. For the first time all week, she allowed herself to imagine that this might be enough. Not perfect, not extravagant, but enough.

She returned to the tree and ad-

justed the popcorn garland Jayden made. "We did it," she whispered to the room, to herself, to whatever force kept her upright. "We did it anyway."

In the early morning, before the sun was fully up, she felt small feet on the couch cushions.

Jayden and Alana climbed onto either side of her, warm and sleepy, their hair sticking up.

"Is it Christmas?" Alana breathed.

Marisol smiled, the kind of smile that came from somewhere deeper than exhaustion. "It's Christmas."

They ran to the tree, squealing when they saw the gifts. The room filled with the tearing of paper, the laughter that made everything else fade. Jayden held up his markers like they were treasure. Alana hugged her doll and spun in a circle.

"Mom!" Jayden said suddenly, standing still. His eyes were bright, serious again. "We got gifts."

Marisol nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. "We did."

Jayden looked at the tree, then back at her. "You're kind of like Santa," he said, as if he'd just solved a mystery. "You make stuff happen even when it's hard."

Alana nodded fiercely. "Mommy Santa," she declared, and then burst into giggles.

Marisol laughed too, and the sound surprised her with its steadiness. It was not the laugh of someone who had everything. It was the laugh of someone who had made something out of almost nothing, and who had learned, painfully, that love could be more dependable than promises.

Later, when they sat at the table eating warm cookies and sipping hot chocolate, Marisol watched her children's faces, the soft focus of their happiness, the way they leaned into the day like it trusted them.

Christmas had come without Darius. It had come without his help, without his apology, without the version of him she used to hope might show up at the last moment and do the right thing. Christmas came anyway.

It came in popcorn garlands and paper stars. It came in a manager's envelope and coworkers' quiet kindness. It came in a mother's tired hands still choosing to build joy. It came in the simple truth that family was not defined by who walked away, but by who stayed.

Marisol lifted her mug and clinked it gently against Jayden's and Alana's, three cups in a small, bright circle.

"To us," she said.

"To us!" they echoed, and their voices filled the room, hopeful enough to sound like a beginning.

Feature



I SMELLED THE HAM

The first thing I smelled was the ham – not the plain, everyday ham you throw in a pan on a random Tuesday, I mean the real Christmas ham, the one that takes its time. The kind that starts sweet, then gets smoky, then turns into something you can almost taste just by breathing. I wasn't even inside yet; just stepping off the sidewalk, and there it was in the air like a signal.

Christmas on St. Maarten does that. You can be minding your business, walking to the corner shop, cutting through a side road to avoid traffic, and the island will remind you what day it is – not with snow, not with cold winds and chimney smoke, but with food.

Food, everywhere.

I adjusted the bag on my shoulder and kept walking, letting the scent lead me the way it always did. Around me, the island was lit up in its own style, not too perfect, not too planned, but alive. A neighbour's lights blinked off beat, somebody had a Santa hanging sideways on their balcony, and the street had that December energy where everyone looks like they're in a hurry, but also smiling for no reason.

I was headed to my Auntie Marva's house, which is really just everybody's house on Christmas, because the door stays open, and people come and go like it's a train station. That's how our family is. People might argue all year, block each other for weeks, get stubborn about petty things, but Christmas food has a way of pulling everybody back in like a tide.

I couldn't explain it to my cousin from New York when she came down one year and asked, "Why is everyone acting like they're competing in a cooking Olympics?"

I told her, "We're not competing, we're proving we love each other."

She laughed like I was joking, until she tasted the mac pie.

That year, I was seventeen and feeling grown. You know how it is; you start acting like family traditions are "whatever," you start pretending you're too cool to be impressed by anything, you start staying on your phone through everything. I wasn't trying to be difficult; I was just in that stage where I thought nothing could surprise me.

Then Christmas Eve happened.

I was walking home after meeting friends in Philipsburg, and it hit me hard, the smell. Not just one house either. The whole street smelled like a kitchen.



Ham glaze. Turkey seasoning. Something buttery, probably scallop potatoes. A little thyme and garlic. Sweetness, like someone had rum soaking into cake. You could smell peas soup in one corner and baked chicken in another. It was like each home had its own signature, and the wind was mixing it into one big island announcement.

Here's the thing, food is not just food on Christmas. Food changes people.

It makes adults soft.

It makes everyone generous.

It makes people who don't talk all year suddenly show up with a covered dish, acting like nothing ever happened.

I turned onto our road and saw my Uncle Des at the gate, standing like he was security. He had on a white T-shirt, Christmas shorts with little Santa heads on them, and that serious face he always wore when he was "supervising."

He pointed at me like I was late for a meeting. "You reach now? Come, come, bring that bag inside. We already start."

I walked in and the kitchen was loud. Not music loud, people loud. Pots clanging, voices overlapping, somebody laughing, somebody complaining, somebody asking where the foil went like it was a life-or-death situation. Auntie Marva was by the stove stirring something creamy and thick, her face shiny from the heat, her hair tied up in a scarf like she was preparing for battle.

"You hungry?" she asked without looking up.

"I just reach," I said, like that was an answer.

She waved a spoon in my direction. "Christmas don't care. Taste this."

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I SMELLED THE HAM

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I tasted the scalloped potatoes, and it was like the island itself melted in my mouth. Creamy, salty, soft, with that baked edge that makes you close your eyes for a second because you don't want the moment to end too fast.

"Eh eh," I said, because sometimes words can't carry what food does.

Auntie Marva smiled like she'd been waiting for that reaction all day.

In the corner, my cousin Zaire was layering mac pie with the seriousness of a surgeon. Macaroni, cheese, more cheese, a little pepper, a sprinkle of something secret he refused to name. He looked up at me and smirked.

"Don't watch too hard," he said. "You go end up trying to steal my recipe."

"I don't need your recipe," I said, lying.

Then the front door opened again and in came my aunt who nobody expected. Not because she was busy, but because she had beef with half the family and had said she wasn't coming "ever again."

Yet there she was, in a red dress, holding a tray like a peace offering.

"Evening," she said, carefully, like she was testing the ground.

The kitchen went quiet for exactly two seconds, then Auntie Marva wiped her hands and said, "Put it right there, girl."

No argument. No speech. No drama. Just a tray sliding onto the counter and the room filling back up with sound. Like the food had already decided the night would be good.

I watched it happen and felt something shift inside me, something warm. Christmas food wasn't just about eating. It was about this. The way it made people drop their pride. The way it filled the space between old fights. The way it turned a house into a place everyone could come back to.

Later, as the sky got dark, the music started. Not a playlist, a real speaker outside with somebody's uncle acting like a DJ, switching between parang, soca, old-school R&B, and whatever song made the aunties start dancing with their hands in the air like they forgot their knees had limits.

Kids ran up and down the yard with sparklers. The neighbours called over the fence, asking what we cooking, and shouting compliments before they even tasted anything. Somebody from next door brought a bowl of black cake "just to share," and we suddenly had more desserts than we had plates.

That's another St. Maarten thing. Christmas is not contained by walls. It spills over.

You could stand outside and smell the whole community cooking. You could smell love in different forms. You could smell effort. You could smell people choosing to make something special even if the year was hard.

At one point, I slipped out front to get some air, and the street looked like a movie scene. Not because it was perfect, but because it was real. Lights on porches. People walking with foil-covered dishes. A car passing slow with music playing. Smoke from a grill. Laughter from somewhere down the road.

And the smell, everywhere.

Ham.

Turkey.

Mac pie.

Scalloped potatoes.

Rice and peas.

Stuffing.

Souse.

Johnny cakes.

Guavaberry in a cup somebody was hiding from the kids.



The island smelled like a promise.

When I went back inside, my little cousin Nia tugged my sleeve. "Come help me make a plate for Daddy," she whispered.

Her father was working night shift, security. He was missing Christmas Eve, but he'd come home early Christmas morning, tired, half-asleep, still wearing his uniform. Nia wanted his food waiting, like a surprise.

I knelt beside her and helped her build the plate slowly and carefully. A slice of ham with glaze shining. A piece of turkey. A scoop of mac pie. A spoon of scalloped potatoes. A little extra gravy because that's what made it taste like home. We covered it with foil, and Nia pressed the edges down like she was sealing in love.

"Food makes people happy," she said, seriously.

"It does," I told her. "But it also does something else."

"What?"

I looked around the room. People laughing. People passing plates. People finally talking to each other again. People showing up. People staying.

"It brings them back," I said.

Christmas Day morning, I woke up to the sound of forks scraping plates and somebody arguing about who ate the last piece of ham. I walked into the kitchen and saw my father standing there in his slippers, holding a cup of coffee, staring at the counter like he was watching a masterpiece.

He glanced at me and nodded toward the food. "You smell that? That is Christmas."

I smiled because he was right.

I made my plate and sat down with everyone, squeezing into a chair that was too small, in a room that was too full, eating food that tasted like history. Ham that reminded me of my grandmother. Turkey seasoned the way my uncle insisted was "the only correct way." Scalloped potatoes that felt like comfort. Mac pie that made people argue over who got the corner piece. Everything traditional, everything familiar, everything loud.

And while we ate, the stories started: The kind people only tell when they're full and happy. The kind that makes you laugh with your mouth full. The kind that brings back people who aren't here anymore but feel close for a moment.

That's why I love Christmas food.

Not just because it tastes good, even though it does, and not just because you get ham, turkey, scalloped potato, mac pie, and every other dish that shows up like it owns the table.

I love it because food turns the whole island into one big kitchen. You can smell it in the streets, in the wind, through windows, past fences. It pulls families together even when they're stubborn. It softens people. It makes them show up, share, laugh, forgive, and remember.

On a tiny island like St. Maarten, Christmas food isn't only a meal.

It's a language.

And every December, the whole place speaks it.

Feature



Christmas in Saint Martin

BY SHILOH WILLIAMS

Christmas is a joyful and glorious time of the year. It is a season filled with love, happiness, family, and togetherness. Unlike New York, where there is snow, St. Maarten is warm all year round, but the Christmas spirit is just as magical. People feel kinder, more thankful, and more connected during Christmas. While Christmas is special everywhere, it feels even more magical in the Caribbean. In Saint Martin, Christmas has its own rhythm, colours, flavours, and traditions that make the season warm and unforgettable. From the food to the music, the lights, and the busy streets, Christmas in Saint Martin is a feeling you can carry in your heart.

One of the things I love most about Christmas in Saint Martin is the food and seasonal treats. During Christmastime, every house smells sweet and comforting. Coconut tart is a must-have, with its rich coconut flavour that reminds you of home. Guavaberry is another big part of our Christmas; whether it is the drink or the syrup, it brings the season to life. Sweet potato pudding is also very popular during Christmas. It is soft, sweet, and full of spices that make it perfect for the holidays. These treats are not just food; they are memories. They bring families together in the kitchen and remind us of our culture and traditions passed down from generation to generation.

Another beautiful part of Christmas in Saint Martin is the events and celebrations. There is Backstreet Bonanza, where people come together to enjoy music, food, and fun. Kids get excited seeing Santa, and schools are full of Christmas parties, decorations, and laughter. Many jobs also host Christmas parties where coworkers celebrate together. This year especially, the island is full of lights. You can see Christmas decorations everywhere, and it feels like the season is in every corner of the island.

Christmas in Saint Martin is very busy. The island gets crowded with tourists, cruise ships, traffic, and nonstop movement, but this busyness is part of what makes Saint Martin Christmas so special. The hustle, the noise and the energy show how alive the island is. It is different, vibrant, and full of life, just like Saint Martin itself.



The Meaning of Giving

BY ARTI BULLAND

Christmas is a season filled with light, music and joy. It is also a time when people give gifts to show their love and care. But over the years, gift-giving has sometimes become stressful. We rush to buy things, worry about prices, and hope our gifts are good enough. This Christmas, we can make the season more special by focusing on meaningful and memorable gift-giving instead of just buying more stuff.

A meaningful gift is not always expensive or fancy. It is a gift that shows thought, care, and understanding. It tells the receiver, "I know you; and I value you." When we give gifts like this, we create memories that last far longer than the holiday itself.

One way to give meaningful gifts is by paying attention. Listen to what people talk about during the year. Maybe your friend keeps mentioning something a lot, or they have shared that they would like to have something. These small clues can guide you toward a gift that feels personal. When someone opens a gift and realizes you truly listened, the moment becomes special.

Handmade gifts are another powerful way to make Christmas memorable. You do not have to be an artist or a craft expert. A handwritten letter, a photo album, or a simple homemade ornament can mean more than something bought in a store. These gifts carry your time and effort, and this makes them feel warm and personal. They also remind the receiver that love cannot be bought; it is created.

Experiences can be even more meaningful than objects. Instead of giving something that may be forgotten in a drawer, you can give a shared memory. A movie night, a day trip, a cooking class, or even a promise to spend time together can become a gift that lives in the heart. Experiences build connection, and connection is what many people truly want during Christmas.



Another way to make gift-giving special is to think about what someone needs, not just what they want. A cozy blanket for someone who feels cold, a journal for someone who loves to write, or a care package for a person going through a hard time can bring comfort and joy. These gifts show kindness and care, which are at the heart of the Christmas spirit.

Meaningful gift-giving also includes teaching the value of thoughtfulness. Instead of focusing only on how many gifts are under the tree, we can encourage people to think about others. Helping them make or choose a gift for a sibling, parent, or friend teaches empathy and gratitude. When people learn that giving can feel just as good as receiving, Christmas becomes richer for the whole family.

We should also remember that gifts do not always have to be physical. Words can be powerful gifts too. A sincere thank-you note, a message of encouragement, or a reminder of how much someone matters can stay with a person for years. In a world full of noise, kind and honest words can

be rare and deeply meaningful.

Making Christmas special through meaningful gifts also means letting go of pressure. There is no need to compete or compare. Social media often shows perfect trees and expensive presents, but real joy comes from simple moments. When gift-giving is done with love, it does not need to be perfect to be memorable.

It is also important to remember that your presence is often the best gift of all. Sitting together, sharing meals, laughing, and talking are moments that cannot be wrapped, yet they are the ones people remember most. When we slow down and truly

enjoy time with loved ones, Christmas feels fuller and warmer.

Overall, meaningful gift-giving is about connection. It is about choosing love over stress, thought over price, and memory over material things. When we give gifts that come from the heart, we make Christmas not just a holiday, but a lasting experience.

This Christmas, let us focus less on what we buy and more on why we give. A meaningful gift, no matter how small, can light up someone's heart – and that is what truly makes Christmas special.



Feature

The journey of Advent

BY ALISAH KIRTON

Advent marks the beginning of the Christian liturgical year and stands as one of the most spiritually rich and symbolically layered seasons in Christianity. Spanning the four weeks before Christmas, it serves as a period of preparation, anticipation and reflection. For many believers worldwide, Advent is not simply a countdown to Christmas; it's a journey of the heart, guiding the faithful through themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. While Christmas celebrates the arrival of Christ, Advent invites Christians into the mystery of waiting – a posture that holds profound spiritual significance.

Despite its contemporary prevalence, Advent's origins date back approximately 1,600 years. Early Christian communities acknowledged the significance of preparing for significant festivals, and by the 4th and 5th centuries, the Western Church commenced the establishment of formal preparatory seasons preceding Christmas. The initial iterations of Advent lacked uniformity. Certain places prioritized fasting and repentance – similar to Lent – while others regarded it as a preparatory phase for baptism. By the Middle Ages, Advent had developed into a specific liturgical season centred on



the arrival of Christ, adventus in Latin. This "coming" was interpreted in three distinct manners.

The primary purpose of Advent is spiritual preparation, inviting Christians to cultivate inner stillness amid distractions. One of the main themes is expectant waiting, where believers actively look for God's presence, just like the ancient Israelites did when they were waiting for the Messiah. Advent also encourages self-examination for healing and forgiveness, making space for Christ. Additionally, it emphasizes the reawakening of hope, coinciding with the year's darkest days, reminding believers of the stability of God's

promises even in darkness.

Each of the four Sundays of Advent carries a distinct theme:

Week 1 focuses on Hope, reflecting on God's faithfulness and the promise of a Messiah.

Week 2 centres on Peace, highlighting Christ as the "Prince of Peace" and encouraging reconciliation.

Week 3, known as Joy or Gaudete Sunday, shifts to joyful expectation, symbolized by the rose-coloured candle that represents God's love.

Week 4 emphasizes Love, inviting believers to express compassion and kindness in their daily lives, rooted in the celebration of Jesus' birth.

Advent traditions, while culturally diverse, share central symbols in Christian communities. The Advent Wreath, a circular representation of eternity, symbolizes God's unending presence through its evergreen branches, suggesting everlasting life. Four candles lit on successive Sundays illuminate the wreath, signifying the growing hope leading to Christmas. The purple candles symbolize repentance, royalty, and preparation, while the rose candle represents joy and is used on the third Sunday, and the white Christ candle is lit on Christmas Day to honour Jesus as the Light of the World. Advent Calendars, evolving from simple devotional tools with Scripture verses, now serve to heighten anticipation for the season, illustrating that Advent is a gradual unfolding. Additionally, Advent Hymns and Scripture readings guide believers, with hymns like "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" expressing longing and hope, and biblical texts from Isaiah, the Psalms, and the Gospels grounding the season in biblical narratives and promises.

Advent, despite the commercialization of Christmas, serves as a counter-cultural season that encourages believers to embrace a slower pace in a hectic world. It emphasizes the importance of spiritual growth over material preparation, advocating for practices that cultivate gratitude instead of stress and promote generosity and service. Many churches utilize this time for charitable efforts, such as food drives, gift donations, and outreach programs, which embody the compassion central to the Christmas narrative.

On a personal level, Advent can be observed in various ways, including daily Scripture readings or devotionals, lighting the Advent wreath at home, setting aside time for quiet reflection or journaling, and engaging in acts of kindness. Additionally, simplifying schedules to allow for prayer creates space for individuals and families to deepen their spiritual experience. These activities foster a meaningful rhythm of preparation and reflection, transforming Advent into a profoundly personal spiritual journey.

Advent is a spiritual journey that encourages believers to slow down, reflect, and prepare for the coming of Christ. It emphasizes themes of hope, peace, joy, and love, shaping both Christmas celebrations and the broader Christian life. Amidst distraction, Advent provides a sacred pause to rediscover meaning and strengthen faith. It serves as a reminder that light will emerge from darkness, inviting Christians to wait with expectation and celebrate the mystery of Emmanuel, "God with us."

ADVENT FEATURE

ADVENT WREATH SYMBOLS

(1) Evergreen Wreath - The circle of the wreath, which has no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God (the Alpha and Omega). The evergreen is chosen as the base because God is the foundation of all good. Green is the color that represents hope and new life.

Four Candles - represent the four (4) weeks of Advent. Traditionally, each week represents one thousand years, to sum to the 4,000 years from Adam and Eve until the Birth of the Savior. The first two purple candles symbolize (2) hope and (3) love respectively. The (4) third candle (which is pink/rose) symbolizes joy. The fourth and last purple candle represents (5) peace.

The light of the candles signifies the light of Christ to mankind.

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12 DAYS OF FESTIVE CHRISTMAS ACTIVITIES

Christmas is a season filled with meaning, emotion, and tradition. It is a time when people come together to celebrate love, generosity, and togetherness. For some, Christmas represents the birth of Jesus Christ and the message of hope and faith that comes with it. For others, it is about family gatherings, shared meals, giving gifts, and creating memories that last long after the season ends. No matter how it is celebrated, Christmas carries a special warmth that encourages kindness, reflection, and a deeper appreciation for the people around us. After reading this article, you will be able to make this Christmas one to remember in your own way with 12 fun-filled activities.

Day 1: Make a homemade gift for someone special.

Show your friends, family or partner that they mean the world to you by making a gift that comes from the heart. Create something that shows how much you care and value them. A homemade gift is a token of love that can make someone feel appreciated. Everyone deserves to feel special on Christmas Day, and a gift you took time to make can do exactly that.

Day 2: Make Christmas popcorn and start a movie marathon with friends.

Christmas is about togetherness. By making Christmas popcorn and watching movies with friends, you can strengthen bonds, create memories, and feel more connected. Movies give you a chance to laugh together, share opinions, and enjoy the excitement of the season. Making popcorn also adds a fun twist, especially when you notice who likes which toppings. Day 2 is an activity that comes with benefits.

Day 3: Have a Christmas gift exchange with friends.

A gift exchange is a great way to make sure your friends have a wonderful Christmas. It is not only about receiving gifts; it is also about friendship and showing that you value each other. Seeing your friends' faces light up as they open something you chose for them can

be a wholesome moment you will remember.

Day 4: Create a hot cocoa bar with toppings and treats.

Create a hot cocoa bar and let everyone customize their own cup with marshmallows, whipped cream, candy canes, or other toppings. It turns something simple into a fun experience and encourages everyone to slow down, chat, and enjoy the warmth of the season together. A hot cocoa bar can make people feel welcomed, relaxed, and at home.

Day 5: Donate toys or clothes to a local charity or shelter.

Donating toys or clothes at Christmas is a simple way to share kindness and remind others they are not forgotten. For families going through hard times, a warm coat or a new toy can mean more than a gift, it can bring comfort, dignity, and hope during a season meant to be joyful. In



Making DIY ornaments and holiday crafts brings people together and makes the season feel more personal. Creating decorations by hand – whether with family, friends, or on your own – allows you to express creativity and add a unique touch to your home. These crafts also re-

ting around a table playing a game you created together feels extra special and personal, especially during a season when connection matters most.

Day 9: Go see Christmas lights and decorations around the island.

Going to see Christmas lights and decorations around the island is a wonderful way to enjoy time together. The glow of the lights makes the season feel extra special. Whether you are driving, walking, or stopping to admire the displays, it is a simple activity that can lift your mood and make you appreciate the holiday spirit around you.

Day 10: Have an ugly sweater contest with friends.

An ugly sweater contest is a fun way to celebrate Christmas without taking things too seriously. It gives everyone a chance to be silly and creative, and to laugh together, which brings people closer. Whether sweaters are homemade or store bought, the real joy comes from the shared laughter and friendly competition.

Day 11: Bake a gingerbread house.

Baking a gingerbread house is a classic holiday activity. From mixing the dough to decorating with icing and candy, the process can be just as special as the finished house. It is a chance to slow down, get a little messy, and spend time with family or friends without pressure to be perfect. Baking together captures the spirit of Christmas and can become a tradition people remember for years.

Day 12: Host a festive dinner or game night with holiday-themed games.

Hosting a festive dinner or game night is a wonderful way to celebrate Christmas because it brings people together. Sharing a meal, laughing over games, and enjoying each other's company capture the spirit of the season. Holiday-themed games add excitement and playful competition, making the night memorable. More than anything, it is about slowing down, connecting, and creating moments that remind everyone that Christmas is best enjoyed together.



the spirit of Christmas, donating is a meaningful way to turn gratitude into action.

mind us that Christmas is not about perfection or spending money, it is about time, love, and creating something from the heart.

Day 6: Make DIY ornaments or holiday crafts.

Holiday-themed crafts like making ornaments or creating holiday cards can help us remember the true meaning of Christmas.

Baking a gingerbread house is a classic holiday activity. From mixing the dough to decorating with icing and candy, the process can be just as special as the finished house.



It is a chance to slow down, get a little messy, and spend time with family or friends without pressure to be perfect. Baking together captures the spirit of Christmas and can become a tradition people remember for years.

Day 7: Host a Christmas sip-and-paint with eggnog.

Hosting a Christmas sip-and-paint is a fun way to celebrate while spending quality time with people you care about. Sipping eggnog and painting your own version of Christmas creates a relaxed environment where laughter and creativity flow. There is no pressure to be perfect; it is about enjoying the moment, sharing stories, and making memories together.

Day 8: Design a Christmas-themed board game.

Designing a Christmas-themed board game is a creative activity that can bring people together. Coming up with festive rules, characters, and challenges lets everyone use their imagination while celebrating Christmas traditions in a playful way. Sit-

Feature

The Rise of Modern Christmas Traditions

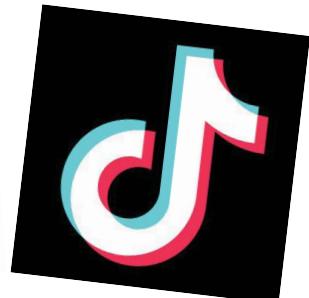
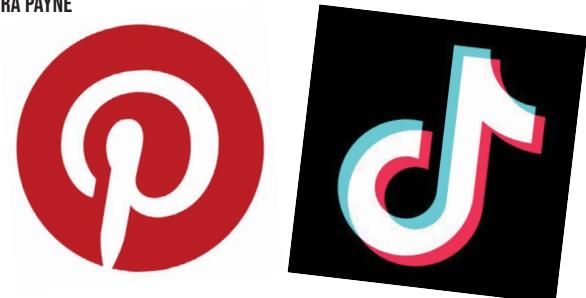
BY JAHZARA PAYNE

For generations in families, there have always been Christmas traditions that were upheld in every household – real Christmas trees in the living room, presents under the tree, stores being crowded during the holiday season, decorating the tree as family, etc. Though these traditions hold sentimental value in most people's hearts, there has been a noticeable shift taking place through the years. As we know, Generation Z – the most advanced digitally and socially conscious generation – is redesigning the idea and feeling of Christmas in the modern world.

Instead of abandoning traditions altogether, Gen Z reshapes these traditions so they can fit in with trends – sustainability, mental health, authenticity and connection – that are popular around the world and

that reflect a better value of them.

One of the most noticeable changes that can be seen are the Christmas decorations, which were dramatic and highlighted the Christmas spirit with colours of red, green, and gold, but are now toned down to an extent. Now they have minimalist trees, reusable ornaments, and thrifted decor which has become popular because of influence from apps such as Pinterest and TikTok. However, this is not one of their only influences. With the growing awareness of environmental issues, Gen Z has been pushing back against the waste culture, especially during the holiday season when it comes to gift-wrapping. This is why they opted for eco-friendly wrapping paper; and reusable packaging has become visible in many households.



When it comes to the evolution of gift-giving, instead of physical presents (which are still a part of Christmas), Gen Z embraces giving gifts for experiences: concert tickets, cooking classes, weekend trips, shared activity, you name it – basically, anything that would result in memories being made instead of giving materialistic items. This aligns with the belief that meaningful experiences outlast and can sometimes hold greater connection than objects.

Technology plays a significant role in the shaping of modern Christmas traditions. Virtual secret Santas, group calls with family and friends across the globe, and digital holiday cards have become a normalcy with Gen Z, especially since the pandemic in 2020 brought about a shift in online connection. Already mentioned, social media platforms such as TikTok, Pinterest and Instagram now act as seasonal mood boards, influencing everything from Christmas playlists to home decor themes. Virtual trends such as "winter wonderland" or "cozy Christmas" aesthetics demonstrate how this generation blends their digital culture with old traditions.

Intriguingly, this generation is known for their innovation; nostalgia is a powerful force when it comes to



their versions of Christmas. Old holiday movies, retro decoration and throwback music from the late 90s to the early 2000s are making a comeback. In an uncertain world, these elements bring comfort and familiarity, which become a way for them to reconnect to their childhood joy; while still celebrating Christmas on their own terms.

Mental wellness is also another factor in how Gen Z approaches the holidays. Unlike the previous generations, there has been a growing opinion on setting holiday boundaries. These young adults risk facing burnout, unexpected expectations and financial strain, especially in this economy. To avoid this, they have been vocal about setting such boundaries – skipping large gatherings, limiting gift exchanges, prioritizing rest over packed schedules. All this allows for their mental wellness to be at peace. The idea that Christmas has to be perfect is replaced with the belief that it should be more peaceful and emotionally fulfilling.

Even the community and inclusivity shape modern traditions. "Friendmas" – which is basically Christmas celebrated with close friends rather than with family – has become a popular trend. Gatherings like these reflect that families can be chosen. Additionally, there is greater sensitivity towards diverse cultural backgrounds and non-traditional celebrations making Christmas less rigid to others and more welcoming to them.

Gen Z approaches Christmas with the idea of redefining the meaning and not erasing the past. The lights, music, and festive spirit remain, but with mindfulness, creativity and intention. With the use of sustainability, technology, nostalgia and emotional awareness, Gen Z is creating a holiday season which feels more personal and reflects how they live life.

As Christmas traditions evolve and years go by, one thing that remains unchanged is the desire for that Christmas feeling. Whether it is a handwritten note, a virtual call or even a shared experience, Gen Z proves that the Christmas spirit is not found under the tree, but in how people show up for each other.

Traffic on the island, specifically around Christmastime

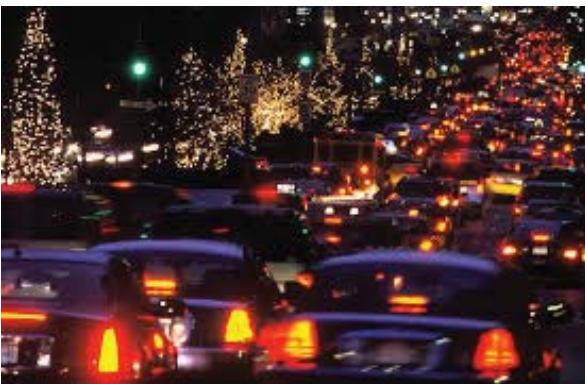
BY SANA AGNANI

Every year on Sint Maarten, Christmas comes with vibrant lights, festivities and engaging activities, but if you live here, you already know that Christmas traffic is its own season. If you've ever spent 40 minutes trapped in Simpson Bay just trying to get to Carrefour, you already know that it can feel like a full-on journey. The real question is: What can we do to fix this?

One of the main reasons traffic gets so overwhelming around this time of year is simply be-

cause the island gets busier. Between tourists renting cars, locals doing last-minute shopping, and everyone enjoying the different experiences that Sint Maarten offers, our small roads can't keep up with all of this at once. Areas like Simpson Bay, Cole Bay and the Causeway become the biggest hotspots as cars barely move, and traffic builds up.

For students, this traffic isn't just annoying; it's something we feel every single day. Getting to school takes longer, after-school activities get de-



layed, and parents get frustrated sitting in the same spot for over twenty minutes. Many teens avoid going out during December because they know it will take forever to get anywhere. Additionally, when tourists slow down suddenly to look for signs or take photos of the scenery, it adds to the traffic congestion even more. All of this shows that the Christmas traffic problem doesn't just affect

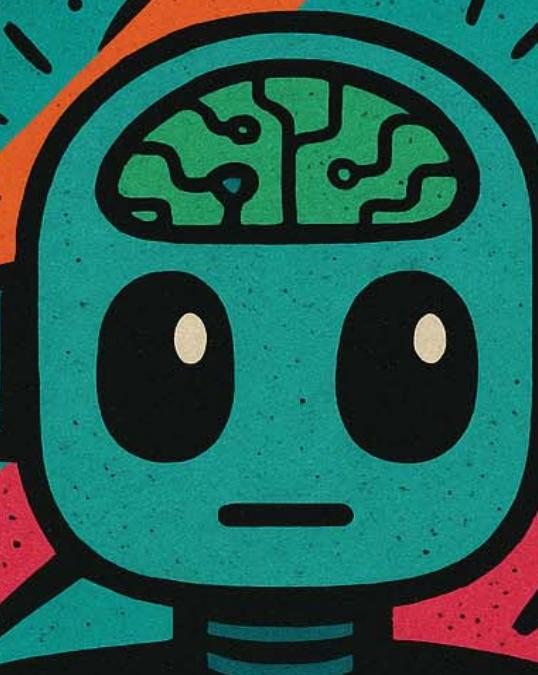
adults, it also affects students, families and anyone who just wants to enjoy the holidays without spending half of their time in a car.

To fix this, we need a mix of quick solutions and long-term changes. In the short-term, having more traffic officers during peak hours, especially on Airport Road and at the roundabouts, could help keep cars moving instead of piling up. Stores and supermarkets could also adjust their holiday hours in such a way so that not everyone rushes at the same time. Even simple things like clearer signs for tourists, or promoting and encouraging carpooling, can make a difference. In the long run, we need better road planning. A second main route that doesn't make everyone rush through Simpson Bay would have a huge impact. More sidewalks, safe bike lanes and shuttle services during the holidays could ease out the traffic.

Christmas traffic will always be a part of the island life, but it doesn't mean we can't improve it. With the right changes, we can spend more time enjoying the season, and a lot less time stuck in our cars.

Feature

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