**Christmas in Portugal (1)**

Portugal is located in southwestern Europe, bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, west of Spain.

Christmas in Portugal is celebrated in nearly the same way as it is in other Latin nations; decorating the home, attending religious services and setting up the Nativity scene or ***presépio***. In recent years, the Portuguese have adopted the Christmas tree, both real and artificial, as part of their annual celebration.

On Christmas Eve, the family gathers around the tree as they wait for midnight to attend a special Mass, called ***Missa do Galo*** (Rooster´s Mass). After leaving the church, they return home for a meal of boiled dry codfish with potatoes and Portuguese sprouts, in pure olive oil. Red wine accomapnies the meal. The children receive their presents in the early morning. In some areas Santa Claus delivers the gifts, while the Christ Child delivers the gifts in other areas. Beginning on Christmas Eve, the ***fogueira da consoada*** (Yule log) burns in the hearth and in the churchyards. The family preserves the ashes and charred remains of the log and sprinkle them in the fireplace during thunderstorms; it is believed no lightning bolt will strike near the Yule log's ashes.

The souls of the dead, known as ***alminhas a penar***, are welcomed on Christmas. Crumbs are scattered for them on the hearth. In ancient times, seeds were left out for the dead so they could return with fruits and grains from the other world at harvest time.

The holiday season ends on January 6 with the eating of the ***Bolo-rei*** (Kings Cake). Like all other Epiphany cakes, it has a small surprise baked into it - a bean. The person who finds the bean in his/her slice of cake must pay for the cake at the next celebration.

****

**Christmas in Portugal (2)**

In Portugal the tradition of gift-giving was defined mostly by the strong Christian religious beliefs of the people. Children await the coming of the Three Wise Men during Christmas time. On the eve of January 5th children place their shoes along windowsills and doorways and fill them with carrots and straw. They do this hoping that this will lure the wise men's horses to their houses during the night and that they will find their shoes packed with gifts and treats in the morning. The treats left is more likely to be candied fruits and sweet breads.

They have a feast known as the ***consoda*** which takes place on the morning of Christmas Day. They set extra places at the table for the souls of the dead. They give a gift of food to these souls and hope that by doing so the fortunes of the next year will be good.

The children receive the presents at midnight of 24/25 December or early in 25 th December morning, but never on 5th January. They put the shoes near the fireplace as a receptacle for the presents and not at the window.

We recognize the red suite; the children believe in Santa Claus (called "Pai Natal" - which means: Father Christmas) and the parents tell them that is the baby Jesus who helps Santa with the presents, ( not the Three wise men...).

The most part of family set up a Nativity scene (called Presépio), with Mary, Joseph, the cow and the donkey, the three wise men, and lots of other figures The figure of the Christ Child is added to the scene after the family attends Midnight Mass or after midnight....But everybody have a Christmas tree too; the typical colours are the gold, red and green.

The Christmas Feast of the Immaculate Conception and the Feast of the Holy Innocents do not involve the sharing of gifts.

The consoada is the reunion of the family, until they wait for the coming of Father Christmas at midnight and takes place on the dinner of 24 th December/Christmas Eve, not in the morning of 25. There are families who reserve an empty place for the persons who died, but it doesn't happen very often. During the consoada we dinner (boiled codfish and Portuguese sprouts (in pure olive oil) normally) and then everybody puts lots of desserts in the table and typical plates (rice pudding with cinamon, "rabandas"-seems like french toast, "filhoses"-fried desserts, "broas de mel" (pastries made with honey) “Sonhos” -pumpkin fritters ) Another very traditional desert is the "Bolo Rei" (King's cake) "which is a wreath-like very rich fruit cake laced with crystallized fruits and pine nuts." There is a little present inside the cake and a broadbean-who find the broadbean in one slice, must pay the next “King Cake”.

At midnight, there are also families who attend to the church for a special Midnight Mass, called "Missa do galo"-"Rooster’s Mass", but it happens more in the interior, who are more religious.

During the Christmas day Portuguese people visit the friends and family and have a big lunch normally with roast chicken, lamb or turkey.

****

**Christmas in Portugal (3)**

[Father Christmas](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/fatherchristmas.shtml) is believed to bring presents to children on Christmas Eve, rather than Christmas Day. The presents are left under the [Christmas tree](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/trees.shtml) or in shoes by the fireplace.

Like in [Spain](http://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/spain.shtml), the traditional Christmas meal in Portugal is eaten during the evening of Christmas Eve and consists of codfish with vegetables and boiled potatoes. This is normally followed by shellfish, wild meats or other expensive foods.

After the meal, people go to church for the 'Missa do Galo' or 'Mass of the Rooster' service. After the service people return home, and open their presents.

Every house has a rich table set in the living room full with traditional food, cakes, fried cookies, nuts and other goodies! The traditional Christmas cake is 'Bolo Rei' (which means 'King Cake') and is placed in the center of the table. People drink porto wine, traditional liquors and eat 'azevias' and 'felhozes' (Portuguese biscuits and sweets). The party lasts until the early hours of the morning!

On Christmas Day the living room table remains untouched and people still enjoy their goodies together! Families come together and have Christmas Day lunch together.

In Portuguese Happy/Merry Christmas is 'Feliz Natal or Boas Festas'. [Happy/Merry Christmas in lots more languages](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/languages.shtml).



**Christmas in Portugal (4)**

As in many other European countries, a Portugal Christmas is a time of gathering with parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins (and any other relatives in town!) for a warm family celebration.

The main holiday celebration takes place on Christmas Eve with a gathering around the Christmas tree and the Nativity scene or [Presepio](http://www.friendsofthecreche.org/historyCreche.html) to celebrate the birth of Jesus, followed by "Missa do Galo" or midnight mass services.

For Christmas Eve celebrations, salt cod is the traditional dish, usually served with boiled potatoes and cabbage. Next comes the much-awaited Christmas desserts, which vary from region to region and may include fried felhozes or fritters, rabanadas (often called Portugese "French toast") and, of course, the traditional Bolo Rei or [King Cake](http://www.epicurious.com/features/news/dailydish/010906), which can be both a Christmas and New Year's Eve tradition.

When the Bolo Rei is served, family members wait to see who gets the surprises baked within , usually a coin or toy ring - and another "unlucky" surprise, a raw bean. Whoever gets the bean must buy or make the Bolo Rei the following year!

Christmas Eve is also usually the time in Portugal when Father Christmas arrives to fill the shoes of good little children with toys and treats.

On Christmas Day, meat is most often on the menu, customarily a big stuffed turkey which is of course followed by more holiday sweets.

The festivities end on January 6, on "Dia de Reis" or King's Day, but not before a festive New Year's Eve celebration with spectacular fireworks everywhere, along with the traditional eating of 12 raisins, representing one wish for each month of the coming year.



**Christmas in Portugal (5)**

Christmas in Portugal is a season revolving around the birth of Jesus and gift giving, and tends to favor other Latin American countries. The Portuguese have two celebrations, the **Christmas Feast of the Immaculate Conception** and the **Feast of the Holy Innocents**, that involve giving gifts to family and friends.

Children wait for the Three Wise Men to bring their gifts on January 5 by leaving out their shoes along windowsills and doorways. The shoes are filled with goodies to attract the Wise Men's horses, in hopes that they will wake up in the morning to find the shoes filled with treats for them instead! Some families, though, acknowledge Santa Claus and the day he arrives.

The Nativity, called a **presepio**, is very important part of every Portuguese home. Recently, families are including Christmas trees as decoration. The families gather around the Christmas trees until its time for their “**Missa do Galo**” (a Mass held at midnight.) Afterwards, they celebrate with a Christmas dinner of codfish, potatoes and Portuguese sprouts, accompanied by red wine.

The holiday season ends on January 6 with the King's Cake, or “**Bolo-rei**,” Portugal's version of an Epiphany cake. Whoever finds the bean in their slice of cake has to pay for the cake at the next celebration.



**Christmas in Spain (1)**

**W**hile most places in Spain celebrate with the usual Christmas festivities, in Granada and Jaen there is one tradition, not at all common elsewhere. Named ***Hogueras*** (bonfires), this custom began prior to the arrival of Christianity and is the observance of the Winter Solstice. Wood fires are built and people jump over them in the belief that they will be protected against illness.

At the heart of the Spanish Christmas tradition is the elaborate ***nacimiento*** (nativity scene), sometimes called a ***belén*** (Bethlehem) or ***presipio***. You'll find them in nearly every home as well as churches and in many public places. Some are a community effort and people work on them throughout the year. They are objects of pride, often handed down from generation to generation.

As in many other European nations, Christmas markets are scattered among villages and cities with booths filled with fruits such as pomegranates of Andalusia, Valencia oranges, and Arragonese apples along with walnuts and chestnuts from Gallicia. There are also flowers, marzipan candies, baked goods, candles, decorations and hand-crafted Christmas gifts. Choirs entertain at the markets and the scents and sounds fill the air during the Advent season.

Church bells ring out on ***Noche Buena*** (the "Good Night" or Christmas Eve) calling everyone to ***Misa de Gallo*** (Mass of the Rooster). Many believe that the most beautiful of these candlelight services is held at the mountain monastery at Montserrat. The boy's choir at the monastery has been described as performing the Mass in "one pure voice." At Labastida, shepherds enter the church bearing a lamb, and a shepherdess carries a representation of the Christ Child.

After Mass, people return to their homes for a feast. In some areas it often features a main course of ***Pavo*** or turkey, usually stuffed with truffles, but along the coast you may find cod or red snapper. Following the meal, families usually gather around the Christmas tree to sing Spain's famous carols, called ***villancios*** or ***goigs.*** The celebration continues until dawn as expressed in an old Spanish proverb: **Esta noche es Noche-Buena, Y no es noche de dormir.** (This is the Good Night, therefore it is not meant for sleep.)

Christmas Day sees more festive eating, either of leftovers from the previous night's meal or another family feast. Some attend another church service.

One custom peculiar to Spain is that of "swinging." Swings are set up throughout the courtyards and young people swing to the accompaniment of songs and laughter.

Some families have adopted the American Santa Claus,or Papa Noel as he is known locally, as the gift-bringer on Christmas Eve, but most continue to wait until January 6th for the traditional visit of the Three Kings.

On the Eve of Epiphany, January 5th, children fill their shoes with grass or grain for the kings' camels and place them on the doorstep. During the night, the Three Kings, known as Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar, leave gifts in and around the shoes. January 6th, Epiphany, is heralded with parades in various cities where candy and cakes are distributed to thousands of children lining the streets.

In some towns the Magi arrive in a boat from across the sea while in others they come by helicopter. You may also see them astride horses or riding on parade floats. They visit hospitals, orphanages and homes for the elderly, as they pass through Spain on their way to Bethlehem. The Spanish children have a great fondness for the Three Kings, especially Balthazar.

****

**Christmas in Spain (2)**

In Spain, the Christmas holiday season is full of the usual Christmas festivities, but there is one tradition, not at all common elsewhere. Named "Hogueras" (bonfires), this tradition originated long before Christmas itself. It is the observance of the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year and the beginning of winter. It is characterized by people jumping over fires as a symbolic protection against illness. This fire-jumping can be seen primarily in Granada and Jaen.

The more common traditions include incredibly elaborate "Nacimiento" (nativity scenes), Christmas trees, and remarkable Christmas markets scattered among villages and cities with piles of fruits, flowers, marzipan and other sweets, candles, decorations and hand-made Christmas gifts. Often, as the Christmas Eve stars appear in the heavens, tiny oil lamps are lighted, warming village windows. The crowds at the Christmas market thin as shoppers return to prepare for the coming meal. The Christmas Eve gaiety is interrupted at midnight be the ringing of bells calling the families to "La Misa Del Gallo" (The Mass of the Rooster). Christmas dinner is never eaten until after midnight. It is a family feast, and often highlighted with "Pavo Trufado de Navidad" (Christmas turkey with truffles; truffles are a mushroom-like delicacy found underground). After the meal, family members gather around the Christmas tree and sing Christmas carols and hymns of Christendom. The rejoicing continues through the wee hours of the morning

Christmas Day is spent at church, at feasts and in more merry-making. A custom peculiar to Spain is that of "swinging." Sings are set up throughout the courtyards and young people swing to the accompaniment of songs and laughter.

It is not Santa who comes to Spain bearing gifts, but the Three Wise Men. The Spanish Christmas continues for a few weeks after Dec. 25th. On the Eve of Epiphany, January 5th, children place their shoes on the doorstep, and in the secret of the night, the Three Wise Men pass leaving gifts. January 6th, Epiphany is heralded with parades in various cities where candy and cakes are distributed to throngs of children.

The three Wise men are seen everywhere in Spain at Christmas, visiting hospitals, orphanages, etc. The men who dress up in various "Wise men" garments are from all walks of life. The legend tells of the three Wise men traveling through the country on their way to Bethlehem. To properly receive them, the children fill their shoes with straw on Epiphany Eve. For their efforts, they find their shoes filled with presents the following (Epiphany) morning. Spanish children have a great fondness for the three Wise men, especially Balthazar. 

**Christmas in Spain (3)**

It is the middle of November, and while walking through the streets of any Spanish town, chances are the scene will be quite the same as it is most everyday.  Shop windows will display the typical merchandise, and people will come and go following their regular daily routine, just as they always do.  But very soon, changes will begin to happen.  The streets will be beautifully lit, store windows will display all kinds of holiday merchandise and curious and interesting gifts, and friends and family will gather in city centers dressed in thick winter coats, hats and scarves, to combat the chilly December nights.  In Spain, there will be an extra dose of good spirit felt in the streets, and all of this can only mean one thing, that Christmas is just around the corner.

Spain’s traditions during the Christmas season revolve around many of the same activities as in the rest of the world.  Just like anywhere else, families in Spain gather together to enjoy and celebrate.  Whatever the case the goal is to enjoy a few moments and share in the spirit of giving, kindness, and goodwill.  The elements of this exchange are very similar among all cultures: food, drink, song, dance, the exchanging of gifts, and other acts of generosity.  But in Spain, Christmas is also a very unique holiday, with beautiful traditions and customs that reflect the true character of the Spanish people.

One symbol of Christmas that still maintains much importance throughout Spain is the Nativity scene.  These scenes occupy plazas in cities and small towns throughout the country, and can also be seen in the doorways and entrances of many Spanish homes, as well in storefront windows, and they can be quite elaborate.  In many small towns, during the nights just before Christmas, plazas might even have a live Nativity scene, with actors and actresses playing the parts of Mary and Joseph and the three wise men as well as live animals that are often associated with the birth of Christ, like lambs, sheep, and donkeys.

Also during the days leading up to Christmas, one might hear the voices of children singing in the streets, especially in the villages and small towns of rural Spain, where they still participate in the age old tradition called the "aguinaldo".  Even though not as popular in recent times, in years past one could hear children singing [Christmas carols](http://www.escuelai.com/spanish_magazine/christmas_carols.html) in their neighborhoods, outside the homes of their neighbors or next to a Nativity scene.  In exchange the neighbors typically give the children a piece of candy or a few coins.

**December 22, Christmas Lottery Winners are Announced**

On December 22, two important events take place.  Students are released from school for their winter vacations, and perhaps more importantly, they announce the winning number of the famous Christmas Lottery in Spain.  This lottery, by far the biggest in Spain, is a tradition practiced by many people who long to win the grand prize, which would make them instantly rich.  This tradition is deeply embedded in these holidays, dating back to 1763, when Carlos III initiated it. Since then, not one year has passed without it, and it now is the symbolic moment in which Spaniards begin to celebrate the Christmas holidays.

**December 24, Christmas Eve**

Christmas Eve in Spain, called “Nochebuena”, just like in many parts of the world, is celebrated with two very important traditions, eating an enormous and decadent meal, and going to Christmas mass.  There is a wide variety of typical foods one might find  on plates across Spain on this night.  Each region has its own distinct specialties.  Among typical dishes served on Christmas Eve and during the days that follow are roast lamb and suckling pig (typically served in the regions of Castilla León, Castilla la Mancha, and Madrid), foul like turkey or duck (commonly prepared in Andalucía), and an enormous variety of seafood, including shrimp, lobster, crab, and various types of fish like hake, trout, sea bream, sea bass, and salmon (common in many regions, but mostly on the costs).  For dessert, there is quite a spread of delicacies, among them are turrón and marzapan, desserts made of honey, egg and almonds that are Arabic in origin, as well as polvorones, a sweet bread kind of like elephant ears, and a variety of nuts and dried fruits.  To drink, one must have a glass of cava, the Spanish equivalent of champagne, although the Spanish say that cava is much better.  After the meal, many Spaniards get their second wind and go to midnight mass, known as “La misa del Gallo”, or “Rooster Mass”, named such because the Rooster  is known as the first to announce the birth of Christ.

**December 25, Christmas Day**

Christmas day is more or less a continuation of what began the day before.  People spend time with their families, they eat another large meal, although not as big as the one the day before, and in many families, children enjoy the gifts that they have received from “Papa Noel”, the Spanish equivalent of Santa Claus.  The custom of giving gifts on this date is not as popular as it is in many countries, as Spaniards traditionally wait until Three King’s Day to exchange gifts.

**December 28, Day of the Innocents**

December 28 marks a day of celebration exclusively Spanish called the Day of the Innocents.  Although the roots of this day are bloody, in modern times, the customs practiced on this day are very jovial and fun.   The anniversary of the murder of many children committed by Herod in Judea, ironically many laughs are had on this day, especially by the natives.  Many foreigners who are in Spain become very confused as absurd or incredible news appears in the papers, municipal governments stage baffling practical jokes on their citizens, and friends and acquaintances cannot be trusted for their word.

**December 31, New Year's Eve**

Of course, the celebrations that take place on New Year’s Eve, or Nochevieja, in Spain, are quite an impressive spectacle.  In all plazas of Spanish cities big and small, one can see a similar scene, and it will undoubtedly include church bells and grapes.   When the clock strikes 12, the church bells sound 12 times, and at this moment, all Spaniards eat 12 grapes, one for each toll of the bell.  According to tradition, those who eat the grapes will have 12 months of prosperity in the new year.  Families and friends stay together for this celebration which marks the end of one year and the beginning of a new one, and in the case of most Spaniards this means a lively celebration will be had until the wee hours of the morning.

**January 6, Three King's Day**

While most of the world has already begun packing up the Christmas ornaments, throwing out the tree, and finding a place for all of their gifts, Spaniards are continuing the celebration.  January 6, Three King’s Day, is the long awaited day in which the three Kings bring their gifts.  On January 5, children go to a parade where they see the three kings arrive to their city, and take the opportunity to ask them for gifts. Later, before going to bed, children leave their shoes out in a visible spot in the house or on their balcony, y go to bed hoping that when they wake up they will find gifts left by Mechior, Gaspar, and Balthasar.  For breakfast or after lunch, families often have the typical dessert of the day, the “Roscón de los Reyes”, a large ring shaped cake that is decorated with candied fruits, symbolic of the emeralds and rubies that adorned the robes of the three kings.  Somewhere inside the cake there is a surprise, and the person to find it will be crowned King or Queen of the house for the remainder of the day.



**Christmas in Spain (4)**

Most people in Spain go to Midnight Mass or 'La Misa Del Gallo' (The Mass of the Rooster). It is called this because a rooster is supposed to have crowed the night that Jesus was born.

Most families eat their main Christmas meal on Christmas Eve before the service. The traditional Spanish Christmas dinner is 'Pavo Trufado de Navidad' which is Turkey stuffed with truffles (the mushrooms not the chocolate ones!) In Galicia (a region in north-west Spain, surrounded by water) the most popular meal for Christmas Eve and for Christmas Day is seafood. This can all kinds of different seafood, from shellfish and mollusk, to lobster and small edible crabs.

After the midnight service, people walk through the streets carrying torches, playing guitars and beating on tambourines and drums. One Spanish saying is 'Esta noche es Noche-Buena, Y no Es noche de dormir' which means 'Tonight is the good night and it is not meant for sleeping!'

A few different languages are spoken in different regions in Spain. In Spanish Happy/Merry Christmas is 'Feliz Navidad'; in Catalan it's 'Bon Nadal'; and in Galician 'Bo Nadal'. [Happy/Merry Christmas in lots more languages](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/languages.shtml).

December 28th is 'Día de los santos inocentes' or 'Day of the Innocent Saints' and is very like Aprils Fools Day in the UK and USA. People try to trick each other into believing silly stories and jokes. Newspapers and TV stations also run silly stories. If you trick someone, you can call them 'Inocente, inocente' which means 'innocent, innocent'. 28th December is when people all over the world remember the babies that were killed on the orders of [King Herod when he was trying to kill the baby Jesus](http://www.whychristmas.com/story/travels.shtml).

New Year's Eve is called 'Nochevieja' or 'The Old Night' in Spain and one special tradition is that you eat 12 grapes with the 12 strokes of the clock at Midnight! Each grape represents a month of the coming year, so if you eat the twelve grapes, you are said to be lucky in the new year.

Apart from Christmas, there is another festival that is celebrated in Spain that is about the Christmas Story. It is called Epiphany or Kings' Day and is celebrated on 6th January. This is the twelfth night after Christmas. In Spanish, Epiphany is called 'Fiesta de Los tres Reyes Mages': in English this means 'The festival of the three Magic Kings'. Epiphany celebrates when the [Kings or Wise men](http://www.whychristmas.com/story/wisemen.shtml) brought gifts to the baby Jesus.

Children have some presents on Christmas Day, but most are opened at Epiphany. Some children believe that the Kings bring presents to them at Epiphany. They write letters to the Kings on [Boxing Day](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/boxingday.shtml), December 26th, asking for toys and presents. And on Epiphany Eve (January 5th) they leave shoes on windowsills or balconies or under the [Christmas Tree](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/trees.shtml) to be filled with presents. Gifts are often left by children for the Kings, a class of Cognac for each King, a satsuma and some walnuts. Sometimes a bucket of water is left for the camels that bring the Kings! If the children have been bad, the Kings might leave pieces of coal made out of sugar in the presents!

Some big towns and cities have Epiphany Parades with each King having a big float that is shaped like a camel. Sometimes there are also real camels in the parade. The Three Kings in the the Spanish Epiphany are:

* Gaspar, who has brown hair and a brown beard (or no beard!) and wears a green cloak and a gold crown with green jewels on it. He is the King of Sheba. Gaspar represents the Frankincense brought to Jesus. Frankincense is sometimes used in worship in Churches and showed that people worship Jesus.
* Melchior, who has long white hair and a white beard and wears a gold cloak. He is the King of Arabia. Melchior represents the Gold brought to Jesus. Gold is associated with Kings and Christians believe that Jesus is the King of Kings.
* Balthazar, who has black skin and a black beard (or no beard!) and wears a purple cloak. He is the King of Tarse and Egypt. Balthazar represents the gift of Myrrh that was brought to Jesus. Myrrh is a perfume that is put on dead bodies to make them smell nice and showed that Jesus would suffer and die.

A special cake called 'Roscón' is eaten at Epiphany. Roscón means 'ring shape roll'. It is very doughy and is bought from a bakery on Epiphany morning. Roscón can be filled with cream or chocolate and contain a little gift.

Thank you to María Níñez for her help in giving me information on Christmas in Spain!



**Christmas in Spain (5)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |   | Unlike many other places in Europe, Christmas lights do not go up in Spain until December. Every town and city will decorate the streets. Christmas markets also begin to appear. Christmas trees are on sale everywhere and gypsies begin to sell Christmas trees in the streets. The first major sign of Christmas is the state-run [lottery](http://www.idealspain.com/Pages/Information/lottery.htm) which is drawn on December 22nd. The 'El Gordo' (the Fat One) is one of the largest lotteries in the world and thousands of people win each year.In general, Christmas in Spain is based more on a religious theme than in many other places. Churches are packed to capacity, day and night.For most Spaniards, there are three main stages to Christmas, starting with **Christmas Eve** (Nochebuena) which is very much a family affair. The evening may start at home but often ends up with a party in a hotel, club or disco with friends and family. It is likely that every generation of the family is represented. |
|   |
|

|  |
| --- |
| The family Christmas Eve meal is one of the most important meals of the year for a Spanish family and the housewife will be busy preparing the traditional fare. Seafood is high on the list for the meal and prices tend to go through the roof at this time of year. First on the menu is likely to be plates of cold shellfish and cold cuts of meat. This may be followed by soup then baked besugo (Bream) with potatoes followed by roast lamb or suckling pig. Game is another option although turkey is becoming popular. The meal will be complemented with Cava, Spain's excellent sparkling wine. At the same time, trays of Christmas cakes and sweets will be served. The important sweets are turrón and marzipan. Turrón is a nougat made of toasted sweet almonds and has been made in Spain for over five centuries. |
|  |  | After the meal the adults will then exchange presents. The children will usually only receive a small gift. At midnight, some people will go to the Midnight Mass at the church. Others may stay at home and open a bottle of champagne to celebrate the birth of Christ. Some children go Carol singing and the youngsters may go to bed whilst the adults go out and party until dawn. Every town and most churches will have a 'belen' which is a nativity display. Some of them are very impressive and can cover massive areas. Some are animated and illuminated and draw huge crowds. |
|   |  |   |
| Christmas Day is a fiesta day so all banks and shops are closed, probably to recover from the night before. Christmas Day in Spain is one of the quietest of the year. Anyone wanting to eat out on this special day will have to book well in advance. |
| The Three Kings arrive in Malaga Port (one of the largest parades in Spain) |
|   |
| The next important day is the 6th January or **Three Kings Day** (Los Reyes). This is the day that the Three Kings arrived in Bethlehem, it is also the most important day for the children as the Three Kings in effect replace Father Christmas for Spanish children (although Santa is becoming popular). They arrive overnight on the 5th January, riding horses and leave presents for the children. Parents encourage children to write to the Three Kings with their gift requests. Every town and city in Spain will have a procession on the night of 5th January where tons of sweets will be thrown from the passing floats, much to the joy of the children (and adults). We visited Malaga this year to watch the Three Kings arrive by boat. They were then part of a procession of hundreds of decorated floats that weaved their way through the city, well into the night. Most of Malaga turned out to watch them. The whole event is covered live on the local television. The atmosphere is electric. Through all our travels of Spain, we have yet to see a fiesta with such enthusiasm. On the morning of the 6th January you can only imagine the excitement of the children as they rip open their gifts. |
|  |  | Spain has many of its own unique traditions, all of which are great fun. |

 |

 |
|  |

 |

On the 5th January (Los Reyes Day), a special cake is made and sold all over Spain. *Rosca de Reyes* (pic below), is a ring-shaped pastry (tasting similar to hot-cross-bun mixture), covered in sugar and fruit flavoured jellies. On biting, beware, the cake will contain plastic toys as presents. anyone lucky enough to find one of the hidden charms will be blessed with good luck for the new year. |
|  |
|   |
| **New Year's Eve** is big in Spain and on New Year's Eve it is the tradition to wear red underwear but they have to be bought for you by someone else. Most towns organise street parties with entertainment and firework displays that last all night. Most bars and restaurants are open for private parties only. There will be music and dancing and the wearing of the usual party outfits. At the stroke of midnight it is tradition to eat 12 grapes - one on each stroke of the clock to bring good luck for the new year. The grapes are a late variety from Vinalopó near Alicante.We have brought in the New Year in Malaga, Marbella, Fuengirola, Seville and Madrid - all have been very different. |



**Christmas in Italy (1)**

Countless foreigners travel to Italy during the Christmas season, and while they thrill to midnight mass in St. Peter's Square, they often complain that Italy is "not very Christmasy." This is certainly true if you're looking for brightly-lit fir trees, red and green window dressings or plaster reindeer. And although Epiphany, celebrated on January 6th, may actually be a more important holiday than December 25th, the Italians love this season so much that they commemorate it for an entire month, beginning on December 8th.

The period between mid-December and early January was one constant celebration even in pagan Rome. It began with the Saturnalia, a winter solstice festival, and ended with the Roman New Year, the Calends. After Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity, instead of ending the holiday at the New Year, the celebration extended to January 6 when the Three Kings were believed to have reached the infant Jesus, and so the Romans, too, began to exchange presents on the Epiphany.

Today in Italy, Christmas trees are decorated, but the focal point of decoration is the Nativity scene. Italians take great pride in the creation of the manger, which was a sort of clever publicity stunt thought up in 1223 by St. Francis of Assisi, who wanted to involve the peasants in celebrating the life of Jesus. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City possesses a *presepio* from Naples that contains figurines carved from wood and dressed in garments of satin, along with 30 gold-trimmed angels of the Magi, all framed by majestic columns.

Bagpipes are the most common Italian Christmas sound. The *zampognari*, the shepherds who play the bagpipes, come down from their mountain homes at Christmas time and perform in the market squares. The playing of bagpipes is popular in the regions of Calabria and Abruzzo, and in the piazzas of Rome. The melodies played are adapted from old hill tunes. Modern *zampognari* wear the traditional outfits of sheepskin vests, leather breeches, and a woolen cloak. The tradition of bagpipes goes back to ancient Roman times. Legend says that the shepherds entertained the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem. Today, the *zampognari* perform their own private pilgrimage, stopping before every shrine to the Madonna and every Nativity scene.

Children in Italy believe in a female version of Santa Claus called *La Befana*, an old woman who flies on a broom and brings presents. According to Italian legend, Three Wise Men asked *La Befana* for directions to Bethlehem. *La Befana* was asked to join them but declined three times. It took an unusually bright light and a band of angels to convince *La Befana* that she must join the Wise Men, but she was too late. She never found the Christ child and has been searching ever since. On January 6, the Feast of Epiphany, *La Befana* goes out on her broom to drop off stockings filled with treats to all the sleeping children of Italy. Just as children in America leave milk and cookies for jolly Santa Claus, *La Befana* collects messages and refreshments throughout the night.

**Christmas in Italy (2)**

**L**ocated in Southern Europe, Italy is a peninsula extending into the central Mediterranean Sea, northeast of Tunisia.

The Italian Christmas, as it is celebrated today, has two origins: the familiar Christian traditions blended with the pagan traditions of the Roman Empire. The great feast of that era was "Saturnalia," celebrated from December 17 to 24 to honor Saturn, god of the harvest. Now, these dates coincide with part of the pre-Christmas celebrations of Advent. Consequently, Christmas markets, merry-making and torch processions, honor not only the birth of Jesus, but also the birth of the "Unconquered Sun." ***Natale***, the Italian word for Christmas, is the translation for "birthday."

A delightful tradition, now finding renewal in Italy, is the ushering in of the December festivities by the ***zampognari*** or bagpipers. They descend from the mountains in the regions of Abruzzo and Calabria filling the air with anticipation for the joyous celebration to come as they play adataptations of old hill tunes such as ***Cantata dei Pastori***. In Rome they play at various sites including the Christmas market at the historic Piazza Navona, at the Spanish Steps, and at the entrance to St. Peter's Square.

These shepherd musicians claim that it was bagpipe music that soothed Mary during her labor and lulled the Christ Child to sleep in Bethlehem.

Figures of the zampognari are very popular in nativity scenes and you can find many representations of them in the crèche shops in Naples.

Christmas Eve is a time for viewing Italy's famous Nativity scenes or ***presepi***, some of great complexity and antiquity. The focal point consists of figures of the Holy Family crafted from wood, clay, polyresin, or plaster. An ox and ass are nearby because legend tells us that their breath warmed the Christ Child in the manger at Bethlehem. Individual artists create their own intricate landscapes around these figures. There may be ancient ruins, caves, grottoes, and even Mount Vesuvius in the background. Angels are suspended from wires, and occasionally, some local celebrities will be part of the scene. The most beautiful and elaborate Nativity scenes are set up in churches, especially in Naples where the tradition of carving presepi figures goes back many centuries.

Amidst the general merrymaking and religious observance of December 24th, Christmas candles are lighted and a holiday feast is prepared. In most places, Christmas Eve dinner consists largely of fish and seafood since it is still technically part of the pre-Christmas fast. In some areas, seven fish are prepared in various ways in honor of the seven sacraments while tradition in other areas calls for twelve kinds of fish or seafood for Christmas Eve dinner to honor the Apostles who were considered "Fishers of Men." Often the fish is smothered in lentils as seen here and is served with pasta, salads, fruits and breads as well as plenty of Italian wine. In Rome, the traditional dish of Christmas Eve is ***Capitone***, a large female eel, roasted, baked or fried.

On Christmas Day there is another eating bonanza. A typical meal might consist of various hors d'oeuvres (Parma ham, salami, olives, etc.), then perhaps a broth or egg soup followed by pasta such as lasagne, fettucine, and tortellini. Then there is a selection of roast and deep-fried meats, deep-fried vegetables, and various salads.

Desserts usually include ***panettone*** (fruit cake), ***torrone*** (nougat) and ***panforte*** (gingerbread) made with hazelnuts, honey and almonds.

Though many Italian families have adopted the Christmas tree (mostly in the northern regions), some still prefer the ***ceppo***, the Italian Christmas pyramid on which a manger scene may be set.

For many generations, the principal gift-bringer in some areas was a uniquely Italian folk character named ***La Befana*** who would distribute toys in honor of Epiphany, January 6th, when the season comes to its official end. In other areas (Venice and Mantova) St. Lucia distributed gifts and in some regions ***Gesu' Bambino***, or Child Jesus, brought Christmas gifts. Due to modern communications, Santa Claus has made incursions into Italy's traditions, and now he makes his rounds in various regions on Christmas Eve as ***Babbo Natale***, Father Christmas.



**Christmas in Italy (3)**

Christmas season in Italy is traditionally celebrated December 24-January 6, or Christmas Eve through Epiphany. This follows the pagan season of celebrations that started with *Saturnalia*, a winter solstice festival, and ended with the Roman New Year, the *Calends*. However there are lots of Christmas things to see during December prior to Christmas, many starting on December 8, the Feast Day of the Immaculate Conception.

**Italian Christmas Traditions** Although *Babo Natale* (Father Christmas) and giving presents on Christmas are becoming more common, the main day for gift giving is Epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas when the three Wise Men gave Baby Jesus their gifts. In Italy, presents are brought by *La Befana*, who arrives in the night to fill children's stockings

Christmas decorations and trees are becoming more popular in Italy. Lights and decorations are often seen starting around December 8, the Feast Day of the Immaculate Conception, or even the end of November. The main focus of decorations continues to be the *presepe*, Nativity scene or creche. Almost every church has a *presepe* and they are often found outdoors in a piazza or public area, too.

Traditionally, a meatless dinner is eaten on Christmas eve with the family, followed by a living nativity scene and midnight mass. Traditional bonfires are often held on Christmas Eve in the main square of town, especially in mountain areas. Dinner on Christmas day is usually meat based.

**Christmas trees, lights, Nativity Cribs, and Christmas celebrations in Italy:**

Although you'll find Christmas celebrations all over Italy, these are some of the most unusual or most popular Christmas celebrations, events, and decorations.

**Naples** is one of the best cities to visit for [Nativity cribs](http://goitaly.about.com/od/christmasinitaly/a/nativity.htm). Naples and southern Italy have other Christmas traditions, including the Christmas Eve dinner of the seven fish dishes, although it doesn't really have to be seven fishes and not everyone serves it.

Bagpipe and flute players, *zampognari* and *pifferai*, are a part of Christmas celebrations in Rome, Naples, and southern Italy. They often wear traditional colorful costumes with sheepskin vests, long white stockings, and dark cloaks. Many of them travel from the mountains of the [Abruzzo region](http://goitaly.about.com/od/abruzzo/l/bl_abruzzo-map.htm) to play outside churches and in popular city squares.

**Torino** is one of the best places for lights. Over 20 kilometers of streets and squares are illuminated by some of the best illumination artists in Europe from late November through early January.

Near the top of **Monte Ingino**, above Gubbio, Umbria, a huge Christmas tree, 800 meters tall, is made up of 450 lights. In 1991 the Guinness Book of Records named it "The World's Tallest Christmas Tree." The tree is topped by a star that can be seen for nearly 50 kilometers. The tree is lit up every year on 7 December, the evening before the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

In 2006, the island of **Murano** in Venice, known for its glassware, displayed a seven meter tall tree of glass built by glass master Simone Cenedese.

**Saint Peter's Square** in Vatican City holds a popular midnight mass attended by many people.

In **Abbadia di San Salvatore**, near Montalcino, the Fiaccole di Natale or Festival of Christmas Torches (Christmas Eve) is celebrated. Carols and torchlight processions in memory of the shepherds from the first Christmas Eve.

**Cortina d'Ampezzo** in the Alps celebrates with a skiers torchlight parade - At midnight on Christmas Eve hundreds of people ski down an Alpine peak carrying torches.

**Città di Castello**, in Umbria, celebrates Christmas Eve in on the Tiber River. Towards evening, a group of canoeists, each dressed as Father Christmas, with their canoes illuminated by lights, make their way along the river to the bridge at Porta San Florido where a crib is suspended over the water. When they get out of their canoes, they give small presents to the children gathered there.

**Lago Trasimeno**, also in Umbria, celebrates with [Soul Christmas](http://www.trasimenoblues.net/), Umbria Gospel Festival, December 8 - January 6.

****

**Christmas in Italy (4)**

One of the most important ways of celebrating Christmas in Italy is the [Nativity crib scene](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/nativity.shtml). Using a crib to help tell the Christmas story was made very popular by St. Francis of Assisi in 1223 (Assisi is in mid-Italy). The previous year he had visited Bethlehem and saw where the stable, where it was thought that Jesus was born. A lot of Italian familes have a Nativity crib in their homes.

The city of Naples in Italy is world famous for its cribs and crib making. These are known as 'Presepe Napoletano' (meaning Neapolitan Cribs). The first crib scene in Naples is thought to go back to 1025 and was in the Church of S. Maria del presepe (Saint Mary of the Crib), this was even before St. Francis of Assisi had made cribs very popular!

Having cribs in your own home became popular in the 16th century and it's still popular today (before that only churches and monasteries had cribs). Cribs are traditionally put out on the 8th December. But the figure of the baby Jesus isn't put into the crib until the evening/night of December 24th!

One special thing about Neapolitan cribs is that they have always been displayed not only characters and figures from the Christmas Story, but also 'every day' people and objects (such as houses, waterfalls, food, animals and even figures of famous people and politicians!). Naples is also the home to the largest crib scene in the world, which has over 600 objects on it!

In Naples there is a still a street of the nativity makers called the 'Via San Gregorio Armeno'. In the street you can buy wonderful hand made crib decorations and figures - and of course whole cribs!

One old Italian custom is that children go out Carol singing and playing songs on shepherds pipes, wearing shepherds sandals and hats.

On Christmas Eve, no food is eaten until after Midnight Mass. Then the main Christmas meal is eaten. The meal includes Italian Christmas Cake called 'Panettone' which is like a dry fruity sponge cake. [Here's a recipe for panettone](http://www.whychristmas.com/fun/recipe_panettone.shtml).

In Italian Happy/Merry Christmas is 'Buon Natale' and in Sicilian it's 'Bon Natali'. [Happy/Merry Christmas in lots more languages](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/languages.shtml).

Epiphany (see [Spain](http://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/spain.shtml) for more information), is also celebrated in Italy. On Epiphany night, children believe that an old lady called 'Befana' brings presents for them. The story about Befana bringing presents is very similar to the story of Babouska told in [Russia](http://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/russia.shtml). Children put stockings up by the fireplace for Befana to fill.

****

**Christmas in Italy (5)**

Christmas in Italy is primarily a season of religious observance. It lasts for three weeks, from December 6th to Christmas Eve, beginning with a novena, or nine-day period of religious devotion. The celebrations end with the feast of Epiphany on January 6th. During the novena, children go from house to house to recite Christmas poems in return for small coins with which they buy sweets.

In another Italian tradition, children write letters to their parents, extending wishes for a wonderful Christmas celebration and including promises that they will be good. On Christmas Eve, many candles are lit as the children in the family take turns telling the wonderful story of Christmas and the birth of the holy "Bambino". At this time, Italian families gather around their beloved "Presepio," a shrine to the Holy Child, and pray.

December 24th is a day of abstinence from meat, but the evening meal is usually a lavish banquet. It generally includes capitone, a dish made with fried eels. A traditional vegetable dish is cardoni, of which Jerusalem artichokes and eggs are the chief ingredients. Sweets include torrone, a nougat candy, and cannoli, or pastries filled with cream cheese. Gifts are distributed after midnight Mass. On Christmas morning, the mother in each family places the Bambino in the manger, which has remained empty until this time.



**Christmas in Greece (1)**

Greece is in southern Europe, bordering the Aegean Sea, Ionian Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea, between Albania and Turkey.

Christmas in Greece is beginning to resemble the holidays in Western Europe and North America. It was once a quiet, spiritual time with very little commercialization, but now (especially in the urban areas), it has become more frenzied and flashy.

St. Nicholas is important in Greece as the patron saint of sailors. According to Greek tradition, his clothes are drenched with brine, his beard drips with seawater, and his face is covered with perspiration because he has been working hard against the waves to reach sinking ships and rescue them from the angry sea. To members of the Eastern Orthodox Church, as are most Greek Christians, Christmas ranks second to Easter in the roster of important holidays. Yet there are a number of unique customs associated with Christmas that are uniquely Greek.

On Christmas Eve, village children travel from house to house offering good wishes and singing ***kalanda***, the equivalent of carols. Often the songs are accompanied by small metal triangles and little clay drums. The children are frequently rewarded with sweets and dried fruits. After 40 days of fasting, the Christmas feast is looked forward to with great anticipation by adults and children alike. Pigs are slaughtered and on almost every table are loaves of ***christopsomo*** ("Christ Bread"). This bread is made in large sweet loaves of various shapes and the crusts are engraved and frosted with symbols that in some way that reflects the family's profession. It is served with dried figs, nuts, and honey.

Christmas morning begins with an early Mass at the Greek Orthodox Church. After the service, Greeks feast on roast turkey stuffed with chestnuts, rice, pine nuts, and a nut cookie called ***kourambiethes. Baklava***, another sweet dessert, is made from layers of phyllo pastry, filled with almonds and cinnamon, and then soaked in lemon syrup.

In almost every home it is traditional to have a shallow wooden bowl with a piece of wire is suspended across the rim; from that hangs a sprig of basil wrapped around a wooden cross. A small amount of water is kept in the bowl to keep the basil alive and fresh. Once a day, a family member, usually the mother, dips the cross and basil into some holy water and uses it to sprinkle water in each room of the house. This ritual is believed to keep the ***Kallikantzaroi*** away from the house.

There are a number of beliefs connected with the Kallikantzaroi, which are a species of goblins or sprits who appear only during the 12-day period from Christmas to the Epiphany (January 6). These creatures are believed to emerge from the center of the earth and to slip into people's house through the chimney. More mischievous than actually evil, the Kallikantzaroi do things like extinguish fires, ride astride people's backs, braid horses' tails, and sour the milk. To further repel the undesirable sprites, the hearth is kept burning day and night throughout the twelve days.

Gifts are exchanged on St. Basil's Day (January 1). St. Basil is the Greek version of Santa Claus and some families leave a log in the fireplace for him to step on as he slips down the chimney with a bag of toys.

On this day the "renewal of waters" also takes place, a ritual in which all water jugs in the house are emptied and refilled with new "St. Basil's Water." The ceremony is often accompanied by offerings to the ***naiads***, spirits of springs and fountains.

Christmas trees which were once rare in Greece are becoming more popular. They are usually artificial and are placed in the home in mid-December, decorated with tinsel and topped off with a star. The large light tree pictured here at Syntagma Square in Athens is 125 ft. tall. It has 60,000 light bulbs on it.

Christmas celebrations end on Epiphany, January 6. On this day, the priests dip crucifixes in the sea and give them the Blessing of the Waters.



**Christmas in Greece (2)**

St. Nicholas is important in Greece as the patron saint of sailors. According to Greek tradition, his clothes are drenched with brine, his beard drips with seawater, and his face is covered with perspiration because he has been working hard against the waves to reach sinking ships and rescue them from the angry sea. Greek ships never leave port without some sort of St. Nicholas icon on board. To members of the Eastern Orthodox Church, as are most Greek Christians, Christmas ranks second to Easter in the roster of important holidays. Yet there are a number of unique customs associated with Christmas that are uniquely Greek. On Christmas Eve, village children travel from house to house offering good wishes and singing kalanda, the equivalent of carols. Often the songs are accompanied by small metal triangles and little clay drums. The children are frequently rewarded with sweets and dried fruits.

After 40 days of fasting, the Christmas feast is looked forward to with great anticipation by adults and children alike. Pigs are slaughtered and on almost every table are loaves of christopsomo ("Christ Bread"). This bread is made in large sweet loaves of various shapes and the crusts are engraved and decorated in some way that reflects the family's profession.

Christmas trees are not commonly used in Greece. In almost every home the main symbol of the season is a shallow wooden bowl with a piece of wire is suspended across the rim; from that hangs a sprig of basil wrapped around a wooden cross. A small amount of water is kept in the bowl to keep the basil alive and fresh. Once a day, a family member, usually the mother, dips the cross and basil into some holy water and uses it to sprinkle water in each room of the house. This ritual is believed to keep the Killantzaroi away from the house.

There are a number of beliefs connected with the Killantzaroi, which are a species of goblins or sprites who appear only during the 12-day period from Christmas to the Epiphany (January 6). These creatures are believed to emerge from the center of the earth and to slip into people's house through the chimney. More mischievous than actually evil, the Killantzaroi do things like extinguish fires, ride astride people's backs, braid horses' tails, and sour the milk. To further repel the undesirable sprites, the hearth is kept burning day and night throughout the twelve days.

Gifts are exchanged on St. Basil's Day (January 1). On this day the "renewal of waters" also takes place, a ritual in which all water jugs in the house are emptied and refilled with new "St. Basil's Water." The ceremony is often accompanied by offerings to the naiads, spirits of springs.



**Christmas in Greece (3)**

In Greece, Christmas, Easter and the assumption of the Virgin Mary are the most important religious celebrations in Greece. Many will agree that for the Greeks, Christmas is less significant than Easter with regard to religious celebrations. The measure of significance can be gauged by how many days during these religious festivals that the average Greek will go to church. During the Easter week this could be more then 3-4 times but between Christmas and New Year's Eve maybe once or twice, mostly for communion. However, the point of this article is not to analyse Christmas as a religious holiday but to see Christmas and New Year's Eve as a Greek holiday with its traditions.

The Greek Christmas has almost no difference from celebrations in the rest of the Christian world. Most importantly, like everywhere else, Christmas is the best holiday for the children. It means 2 weeks away from school, presents, sweets, Christmas tree and Carols (Kalanta or Kalanda) .Of course something we miss most in southern Greece is the white Christmas but the northern regions have no problem with that as many northern areas of Greece snowy winters every year. For the Greek mother or wife, Christmas is a very busy time in the kitchen. Almost one week before Christmas, in every Greek house, you can smell the cloves, cinnamon and baked almonds from the Kourambiedes and Melomakarona- the famous Greek Christmas cookies . Big trays with [Kourambies](http://www.in2greece.com/blog/2007/12/greek-christmas-cooking.html), [Melomakarona](http://www.in2greece.com/blog/2007/12/greek-christmas-cooking.html), Nuts, Oranges and Mandarins are part of the Christmas decoration of a Greek living room.
The decorated Christmas tree, artificial or natural, is in many houses many weeks before Xmas with Christmas lights, stars ,angels, and any kind of shining Christmas ornaments. Also, most Greek houses will decorate the exterior of their house with Christmas lights, deers, Carol singing Santas and the latest Xmas decorations. In Athens almost every balcony of the concrete jungle of Athens is decorated with small illuminated Christmas trees and singing Santa Clauses which are give a unique, if somewhat kitsch, atmosphere that Athens can have only during Christmas and New Year's Eve. All this can be more magical if Athens is covered with snow (something very rare and very short) .

Christmas Eve is the main day of celebration. From the crack of dawn, children all over Greece get ready for their Carols, equipped with their triangles they go all over the neighbourhoods singing the Kalanda, the Greek Christmas Carol, "Kalin Imera Arhontes an in o Orismos sas Hristou ti Theia Gennisi na Po sto Arhontiko sas" . This means "Good Morning Sovereigns if you allow me in your Mansion I will tell you about the Holy Birth of our Christ". After they finish their song people will give them some money and both sides will say the wish "Ke tou Hronou" (Next year again). It is truth that the most beautiful sound of Christmas is the sound of children singing accompanying themselves with their little triangles. On Xmas Eve many families, as in many western countries, will celebrate with friends with a big feast and, later on, will play board games.
Traditionally however, the majority will play the popular Christmas card game "Triantamia". In big towns many Greeks will spend the evening in restaurants, music clubs or hotels with live music and floor shows. On Christmas Day the Greek house will be busy with the dinner preparation. The main dish is roast turkey, stuffed with rice and chestnuts.

The holiday continues with the New Year's Eve celebrations, where the home gathering is the same as in Christmas only, this time, the main food will be mostly roast pork or lamb. On New Year's Eve the children will sing again but this time the New Year Carols "Arhiminia ki Arhihronia........Agios Vasilis erhete" (beginning of the month beginning of the year.....Saint Basil is coming). On this point I must mention that for the Greeks, Father Christmas is St. Basil of Caesarea or Agios Vasilios and not the western Santa from the North Pole. In both cases though the figures are the same: with red clothes and a long white beard and carrying presents for the children. On New Year's Eve the home entertainments concentrates mainly on card games. The reason probably for this is the so called Guri (Luck). Which means that if you win that night the new year will bring you luck. At 12 O'clock the lights will be switched off for a few seconds and every one will go out to light fireworks. If it happens that the town or the village has a port the sounds from the ships are amazing, especially in the Port of Piraeus where all the ships and ferries hoot their sirens while the whole sky of Athens is shining from multicoloured fireworks. Traditionally, as the New Year arrives the head of the house, usually the man, will step out of the door and smash a pomegranate for good luck and afterwards he will cut the "Vasilopita", the Greek New Year's cake.
In the Vasilopita cake from tradition the Greeks put a coin inside. Depending on your wealth it can be a gold sovereign or a simple coin. The one that finds it in his piece will be the new Year's lucky one.

The Christmas season ends on 6 of January with the celebration of Epiphany and the blessing of the waters. Traditionally during this day (Fota) the Christmas goblins "Kalikantzaroi" ,after having annoyed the mortals for 12 days, go back to the centre of the Earth, but that is another story we will tell in the near future on articles about Greek customs.



**Christmas in Greece (4)**

**St. Nicholas** is important in Greece as the patron saint of sailors. According to Greek tradition, his clothes are drenched with brine, his beard drips with seawater, and his face is covered with perspiration because he has been working hard against the waves to reach sinking ships and rescue them from the angry sea. Greek ships never leave port without some sort of St. Nicholas icon on board.

On Christmas Eve small boys to the beating of drums and the tinkling of triangles usually sing carols. They go from house to house and are given dried figs, almonds, walnuts and lots of sweets or sometimes small gifts.

After 40 days of fasting, the Christmas feast is looked forward to with great anticipation by adults and children alike. Pigs are slaughtered and on almost every table are loaves of **christopsomo** or "**Christ Bread**". This bread is made in large sweet loaves of various shapes and the crusts are engraved and decorated in some way that reflects the family's profession.

Christmas trees are not commonly used in Greece. In almost every home the main symbol of the season is a shallow wooden bowl with a piece of wire is suspended across the rim; from that hangs a sprig of basil wrapped around a wooden cross. A small amount of water is kept in the bowl to keep the basil alive and fresh. Once a day, a family member, usually the mother, dips the cross and basil into some holy water and uses it to sprinkle water in each room of the house. This ritual is believed to keep the **Killantzaroi** away from the house.

There is a tradition **kallikantzeri**, where the mischievous goblins appear from the earth during the 12 days of Christmas.

At Christmas very few presents are given to each other. Instead, small gifts are given to hospitals and orphanages.

Priests sometimes go from house to house sprinkling holy water around to get rid of the bad spirits who may be hiding in people's houses.

In most Greek homes an evergreen tree is decorated with tinsel and a star placed on top. Gifts are exchanged on January 1st, **St Basil's Day**.

On Christmas Eve, groups of people gather around the holiday table. Figs, dried on rooftops are served with the spicy golden **Chrisopsomo** bread.

As people are they greet one another by saying **Hronia polla** or many happy years. The table filled with food may include such dishes as **kourambiethes**, a Greek nut cookie.

**Christmas in Greece (5)**

On Christmas Eve, children, especially boys, often go out Carol singing in the streets. They play drums and triangles as they sing. Sometimes the will also carry model boats decorated with nuts painted gold. Carrying a boat is a very old custom in the Greek Islands.

In Greek Happy/Merry Christmas is 'Kala Christougenna'.

If the children sing well, they might be given money or nuts, sweets and dried figs to eat.

People in Greece also celebrate Epiphany on the 6th January. Children get their presents either on the 1st January or on Epiphany, when Agios Vasilis (the Greek name for Santa) comes, often arriving on a boat.



**Christmas in France (1)**

In France, Christmas is a time for family and for generosity, marked by family reunions, gifts and candy for children, gifts for the poor, Midnight Mass, and *le Réveillon*.

The celebration of Christmas in France varies by region. Most provinces celebrate Christmas on the 25th of December, which is a bank holiday. However, in eastern and northern France, the Christmas season begins on 6 December, *la fête de Saint Nicolas*, and in some provinces *la fête des Rois*\* is one the most important holidays of the Christmas season. In Lyon, 8 December is *la Fête de lumières*, when Lyonnais pay hommage to the virgin Mary by putting candles in their windows which light up the village.

\*In most countries, Epiphany (*la fête des Rois*) is the 6th of January, whereas in some places in France it is celebrated the first Sunday after 1st January.

**French Christmas Traditions**

French children put their shoes in front of the fireplace, in the hopes that *Père Noël* (aka *Papa Noël*) will fill them with gifts. Candy, fruit, nuts, and small toys will also be hung on the tree overnight. There's also *Père Fouettard* who gives out spankings to bad children (sort of the equivalent of Santa Claus giving coal to the naughty).

In 1962, a law was passed decreeing that all letters written to Santa would responded to with a postcard. When a class writes a letter, each student gets a response.

**Le Réveillon**

Although fewer and fewer French attend *la Messe de Minuit* on Christmas Eve, it is still an important part of Christmas for many families. It is followed by a huge feast, called le *Réveillon* (from the verb *réveiller*, to wake up or revive). *Le Réveillon* is a symbolic awakening to the meaning of Christ's birth and is the culinary high point of the season, which may be enjoyed at home or in a restaurant or café that is open all night. Each region in France has its own traditional Christmas menu, with dishes like turkey, capon, goose, chicken, and *boudin blanc* (similar to white pudding).

Throughout the French Christmas season, there are special traditional desserts:

* *La bûche de Noël* (Yule log) - A log-shaped cake made of chocolate and chestnuts. Representative of the special wood log burned from Christmas Eve to New Year's Day in the Périgord, which is a holdover from a pagan Gaul celebration.
* *Le pain calendeau* (in southern France) - Christmas loaf, part of which is given to a poor person.
* *La Galette des Rois* (on Epiphany) - round cake which is cut into pieces and distributed by a child, known as *le petit roi* or *l'enfant soleil*, hiding under the table. Whoever finds *la fève* - the charm hidden inside - is King or Queen and can choose a partner.

**French Christmas Decorations**

The *sapin de Noël* is the main decoration in homes, streets, shops, offices, and factories. The *sapin de Noël* appeared in Alsace in the 14th century at a time, decorated with apples, paper flowers, and ribbons, and was introduced in France in 1837.

Another important aspect of French Christmas celebrations is the *crèche* filled with *santons*, which is displayed in churches and many homes. Living *crèches* in the form of plays and puppet shows based on the Nativity are commonly performed to teach the important ideas of Christianity and the Christmas celebration.

Mistletoe is hung above the door during the Christmas season to bring good fortune throughout the year.

After *Réveillon*, it's customary to leave a candle burning in case the Virgin Mary passes by.



**Christmas in France (2)**

Nearly every French home at Christmastime displays a Nativity scene or creche, which serves as the focus for the Christmas celebration. The creche is often peopled with little clay figures called santons or "little saints." An extensive tradition has evolved around these little figures which are made by craftsmen in the south of France throughout the year. In addition to the usual Holy Family, shepherds, and Magi, the craftsmen also produce figures in the form of local dignitaries and characters. The craftsmanship involved in creating the gaily colored santons is quite astounding and the molds have been passed from generation to generation since the seventeenth century. Throughout December the figures are sold at annual Christmas fairs in Marseille and Aix.

The Christmas tree has never been particularly popular in France, and though the use of the Yule log has faded, the French make a traditional Yule log-shaped cake called the buche de Nol, which means "Christmas Log." The cake, among other food in great abundance is served at the grand feast of the season, which is called le rveillon. Le rveillon is a very late supper held after midnight mass on Christmas Eve. The menu for the meal varies according to regional culinary tradition. In Alsace, goose is the main course, in Burgundy it is turkey with chestnuts, and the Parisians feast upon oysters and pat de foie gras.

French children receive gifts from Pere Noel who travels with his stern disciplinarian companion Pre Fouettard. Pre Fouettard reminds Pere Noel of just how each child has behaved during the past year. In some parts of France Pere Noel brings small gifts on St. Nicholas Eve (December 6) and visits again on Christmas. In other places it is le petit Jesus who brings the gifts. Generally adults wait until New Year's Day to exchange gifts.



**Christmas in France (3)**

Christmas customs, originating in the Middle East, were introduced to France by the Romans. Reims was the site of the first French Christmas celebration when, in 496, Clovis and his 3,000 warriors were baptized. Bishop Rémi had purposely chosen the day of the Nativity for this ceremony. Other important events eventually took place on Christmas day in the following years.

Charlemagne received the crown from the hands of Pope Leo III on Christmas Day in 800. In 1100, Godefroy de Bouillon's successor, his brother Baudouin, was crowned in the basilica of Saint Mary of Bethlehem. Later, King Jean-le-Bon founded the Order of the Star in honor of the manger; it remained in existence until 1352. In 1389, French crowds shouted Noël! Noël! in welcoming Queen Isabeau of Bavaria to the capital.

Thus Christmas gradually became both a religious and secular celebration which, in fact, until the end of the Middle Ages, was confused with the celebration of the new year. Today, Christmas in France is a family holiday, a religious celebration and an occasion for merrymaking. It is a time welcomed by both adults and children.

The fir tree was first presented as the holy tree of Christmas in the French city of Strasbourg in 1605. It was decorated with artificial colored roses, apples, sugar and painted hosts, and symbolized the tree in the garden of Eden.

In France, shop windows of big department stores, principally in Paris, compete with one another in fabulous displays of animated figures; a day spent visiting and comparing the exhibits is practically a must for parents.

Family celebrations begin with the decoration of the Christmas tree a few days before Christmas; candles and lights, tinsel and many colored stars are attached to it. On Christmas Eve when the children are asleep, little toys, candies and fruits are hung on the branches of the tree as a supplement to the gifts Santa Claus has left in the shoes before the fireplace.

Another custom is that of the manger, "la crèche," which originated in 12th century France in the form of liturgical drama. At first the manger itself resembled an alter and was placed either inside the church or before the portal, as it was at the Abbey of Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire. Antique mangers can be seen in churches at Chartres, Chaource, Nogent-le-Rotrou, Sainte-Marie d'Oloron and in museums at Marseilles and Orleans.

The popular manger was introduced in Avignon by the family of Saint Francis of Assisi between 1316 and 1334, but it was not until the 16th century that the making of crèches or grebbes, as they were called in old French, became a widespread custom.

Today, the family arranges a manger on a small stage in a prominent part of the house. In Provence, the children bring rocks, branches and moss to make a setting for the manger. Little terra-cotta figures, known as "santons" or little saints are grouped around the manger to represent the Holy Family, the other characters of the story of the Nativity, and the people of the village: the mayor, the priest, the policeman, the butcher, the baker, the miller, the farmer. In the stable is a reproduction of the legendary manger of Bethlehem, with the ox and the donkey placed close to Jesus, and Mary and Joseph in the foreground welcoming the visitors.

Since 1803, a special fair for the sale of the santons has been held in Marseilles during the month of December, but the true capital of the world of santons is the little town of Aubagne.

Puppet shows are also given every year for Christmas, especially in Paris and in Lyon. One of the most famous Christmas puppet plays, written by de Marynbourg, is called "Bethlehem 1933" and is a masterpiece of popular art.

At midnight everyone attends the Christmas mass. Churches and cathedrals, large and small, are magnificently lit and echo the joyful melodies of carols, bells and carillons. Many churches have a crèche or manger. Formerly, in certain regions, a real infant was placed on the hay of the manger during the mass but this custom is no longer observed.

When the family returns home after midnight mass, there is a late supper known as "le réveillon." The meal varies according to the region of France. In Alsace, for example, the traditional goose is brought in on a platter and given the place of honor on the table. Bretons serve buckwheat cakes with sour cream. Turkey and chestnuts are served in Burgundy. The favorite dishes of Paris and the Ile-de-France region are oysters, foie gras, and the traditional cake in the form of a Yule log or "bûche de Noël" which used to burn on the hearth on Christmas Eve. The wines served are generally Muscadet, Anjou, Sauterne and Champagne.

Ordinarily, young children do not attend midnight mass with their parents, but go to bed early to dream of their Christmas gifts. Before going to bed, they put their shoes by the fireside for a gift from "le père de Noël" or "le petit Jésus." Formerly, peasants' wooden shoes, called sabots, were often used at Christmas time, but today shoes of any kind are set before the fireplace or around the tree. However, the sabots are not forgotten - chocolate wooden shoes are made by pastry shops and filled with candies.

Traditional legends and beliefs associated with Christmas are numerous in France. Alsace is a region where a lot of tradition exists such as marchés de Noel, Christmas markets. This region has possibly the greatest community spirit. In some towns, shepherds offer a lamb on Christmas Eve, while in others the réveillonis held in the snow mountains or a song festival precedes the midnight mass. In the small village of Solliesville, the whole population gathers bringing bread, meat and candies as a symbol of the apostles. Then a supper is offered to the important townspeople and their guests. During the mass, the characters of the manger are portrayed by people from the village.

The magic of Christmas is the magic of the Orient. During the Middle Ages, minstrels wandered through villages and towns, telling "Marveiles qui advinrent en la Sainte Nuit," the legend of the flight into Egypt, or the legend of the sower who, when asked which way the Holy Family had gone, deceived King Herod. Legends told around the fire on Christmas Eve are nearly all forgotten; but some of them have been transformed into fairy tales or fantasies. One story is that of the dancers condemned to dance incessantly for a year because their movements had turned the priest's thoughts during the midnight mass. Another such tale is the charming story of the little homeless matchgirl who, sitting in the snow on the sidewalk, struck all her matches in order to imagine what Christmas would be like in a house; but Christmas is a time of miracles and at the striking of the last match the little girl was conveyed to Paradise by shining golden angels.



**Christmas in France (4)**

Unique and delightful Christmas traditions are followed in France. The centre of attraction in all homes is the Nativity scene or crèche that is decorated with cute little clay figures called **'Santons'** or **'Little Saints'**. These colourful little saints are a special and age old feature of Christmas in France and are prepared all round the year by skilled craftsmen in the south of France. Popular Santons include shepherds, Magi, Holy Family besides local characters and dignitaries.

In France, Christmas Tree is not so popular but it is symbolic presence can be felt in the Christmas Cake. The traditional French Christmas Cake is prepared in the shape of Yule log and is called the **buche de Nol**, meaning **"Christmas Log"**. This cake is a special feature of the **Le rveillon** - a grand feast of the season celebrated after midnight mass on Christmas Eve.

On the eve of Christmas, French children leave their shoes or wooden clogs called **sabots** by the fireplace so that their favorite Christ Child or **Pere Noel** could fill it with gifts. Children believe that Pere Noel travels with his stern disciplinarian companion Pre Fouettard, who tells Pere Noel about the behavior of each child in the past year. In some parts of France Pere Noel brings gifts for children on St. Nicholas Eve (December 6) and visits again on Christmas. In other places it is **le petit Jesus** who brings the gifts. Adults usually wait until New Year's Day to exchange gifts.



**Christmas in France (5)**

On Christmas Eve, children leave their shoes by the fireplace to be filled with gifts from **Pere Noel**. In the morning they also find that sweets, fruit, nuts and small toys have been hung on the tree. In cathedral squares, the story of Christ's birth is re-enacted by both players and puppets.

Nearly every French home at Christmastime displays a Nativity scene or **crèche**, which serves as the focus for the Christmas celebration. The crèche is often peopled with little clay figures called **santons** or "**little saints**." In addition to the usual Holy Family, shepherds, and Magi, the craftsmen also produce figures in the form of local dignitaries and characters. The craftsmanship involved in creating the gaily colored santons is quite astounding and the molds have been passed from generation to generation since the seventeenth century. Throughout December the figures are sold at annual Christmas fairs in Marseille and Aix.

The Christmas tree has never been particularly popular in France, and though the use of the Yule log has faded, the French make a traditional Yule log-shaped cake called the **buche de Nol**, which means "**Christmas Log**." The cake, among other food in great abundance is served at the grand feast of the season, which is called **le reveillon**. Le reveillon is a very late supper held after midnight mass on Christmas Eve. The menu for the meal varies according to regional culinary tradition. In Alsace, goose is the main course, in Burgundy it is turkey with chestnuts, and the Parisians feast upon oysters and pat de foie gras. Le Revellion may consist of poultry, ham, salads, cake, fruit and wine.

In Southern France, a log is burned in people's homes from Christmas Eve until New Years Day. A long time ago, part of the log was used to make the wedge for the plough as good luck for the coming harvest.

The traditional Christmas is a chocolate log.

In France families once had a Three Kings Cake with a bean hidden in it. Whoever found the bean in their slice was made King, or Queen, for the day.

In France the children go out to look for the Kings, taking gifts of hay for the camels.

Another name for this day is **Twelfth Day**. It is the last of the Twelve Days of Christmas, which used to be one long holiday. It was the last night of the **Feast of Fools** before the Lord of Misrule had to give up his crown and become themselves once again.

In France it is a time for the whole family to come together at Christmas time to holiday and worship. On the eve of Christmas beautifully lit churches and cathedrals, ring out Christmas carols with the church bells.

Once dinner is over and the family has retired to bed, they leave a fire burning and food and drink on the table in case the Virgin Mary calls in. Children leave their shoes or wooden clogs called **sabots** in the hearth for the Christ Child or **Pere Noel** to fill. In the north of France, children are given gifts on December 6, which is St. Nicholas' Day, instead of Christmas Day. The adults give each others presents on New Year's Day.

French children set out their shoes in hopes that **le petit Jesus** will fill them during the night with small gifts. 

**Christmas in Switzerland (1)**

As you search your Christmas stocking to see if Santa Claus left you a treat of some delicious chocolate from Switzerland, you may want to reflect upon some other facets of the holiday season in the tiny Alpine county.

On December 5, which is the eve of St. Nichola´s Day, the tiny village of Kussnacht, located on the shores of Lake Lucerne, glows with the light of nearly two hundred enormous, transparent bishop´s miters worn by a group of men parading through the streets. The headpieces, some of them six feet tall, have been artistically designed, cut out of cardboard, assembled, and lit by a candle from within. Dressed in white robes, the people wearing these elaborate miters accompany St. Nicholas on his way through the village. The streets resound with the clang of heavy bells worn around the necks of muscular men, horn blowing, and the rhythm of a brass band. One can only wonder how the miter-wearing men manage to keep the wax from dripping down into their hair and how they prevent the cardboard hat from going up in flames.

The wide variety of customs in neighboring Swiss villages reflects the centuries of isolation the people endured during the winter months when the heavy snowfalls eliminated travel between mountain valleys.

On December 6, the feast of St. Nicholas, school children in Glarnerland parade through the village, ringing and jingling bells of all sizes - sometimes in rhythmic unison and sometimes in wild abandon. The bells signal the villagers that a gift is expected from each household along the way. The gifts are usually some good things to eat or drink.

While this bell ringing custom is not too unusual, it doesn´t begin to compare with the children´s parade in the town of Weinfelden. On the last Thursday before Christmas, the children in the town parade through the streets with their decorated fodder beets. These fodder beets have been hollowed out and lit from within with a beeswax candle. After singing carols in the town square, the children go to their schools where they dine on wurst and bread. At the same time, adults go the local tavern or coffeehouse, and the town council holds its annual budget meeting. Presumably, the thrifty Swiss eventually scrape the candle wax from the beets so they can be added to the animal troughs.

In the village of Ziefen, several dozen young bachelors walk along a traditional route through the streets every Christmas Eve. The tallest bachelor, dons a white beard and leads the procession while carrying a sooty rag attached to the end of a long pole. Curiosity seekers leaning from their doorways and windows risk getting more than just an eyeful of the event. Quite a few onlookers end up scrubbing chimney soot from their faces. All the young bachelors wear oversized, long, dark coats and each wears a tall, black, top hat made of cardboard. Many of these hats are more then six feet high. The procession is relatively tame compared to the wild festivities it replaced from the early nineteenth century.

Meanwhile, things are relatively quiet in the village of Hallwil where seven girls, 13 or 14-years-old, act out an ancient custom. A veiled Wienechtchind (Christmas child), dressed in white, and six companions in rose-colored garments, visit village families in the evening. The Wienechtchind greets the assembled household with a silent handshake and distributes cake or cookies to the children while the other girls sing a carol. The departure of this group is also silent.

An ancient tradition in the town of Laupen, near Bern, is not only the opposite of Hallwil´s tradition - it´s totally absurd! New Year´s Eve is the time to be there if you want to see some outrageous shenanigans. The origins of the strange customs in Laupen can be traced back to the early nineteenth century.

Originally the ceremonies took place on Christmas Eve and for years the town officials tried unsuccessfully to have them outlawed. Eventually the town priest managed to have the date changed to New Year´s Eve since it involved so much noise and rowdiness.

After nightfall on December 31, the participating schoolboys, comprising three boisterous groups, meet on the hill at the local castle and proceed down to the village. In the first group are the "bell ringers", who swing or rattle large bells which can be heard for miles around. Next, the "broom men", carry long poles with bunches of juniper branches tied to the top. The third group is probably the most bizarre - the "bladder men" carry pig´s bladders filled with air. The procession stops at various locations along the route as the leader recites a rhymed farewell to the old year and wishes the crowd a happy new one. During the recitation, the broom men wave their juniper brooms over the heads of the crowd. At the end of journey, the broom men and the bladder men, all armed with inflated pig´s bladders, proceed to "beat" the onlookers, especially young ladies, until their weapons are in shreds.

One must admit that it really takes a lot of guts to stand and watch this parade. These events in Switzerland, and many more like them, provide hours of entertainment for connoisseurs of folklore, however, before anyone tries to emulate these customs, you may want to check with local authorities before you swat someone with a pig´s bladder or a sooty rag.



**Christmas in Switzerland (2)**

A tinkling of a silver bell heralds the arrival of *Christkindli* - a white clad angel, with a face veil held in place by a jeweled crown. The tree candles are lit as she enters each house and hands out presents from the basket held by her child helpers.

The week before Christmas, children dress up and visit homes with small gifts. Bell ringing has become a tradition, and each village competes with the next when calling people to midnight mass. After the service, families gather to share huge homemade doughnuts called *ringli* and hot chocolate.

In Switzerland, the **Chlausjagen Festival** or **Feast of St. Nichohlas** is celebrated at dusk on 6 December with a procession of "lifeltrager' wearing gigantic illuminated lanterns in the shape of a Bishop's mitre on their heads.

The Swiss wait for the Christ child called **Christkindli**, to arrive with gifts for all in his reindeer-drawn sleigh.

In Switzerland, during the holiday season the Star Singers or **Sternsingers** dressed as the Three Kings parade through the streets of cities and towns singing Christmas songs.

In Zurich, Santa visits in a special fairytale tram and gives the children a ride through the city, singing songs with them and sharing a basket full of sweets.



**Christmas in Switzerland (3)**

In this tiny Alpine country in the heart of Europe Christmas celebration stretches much longer. On December 5, which is the eve of St. Nichola's Day, the tiny village of Kussnacht, located on the shores of Lake Lucerne, glows with the light of nearly two hundred enormous, transparent bishop's miters worn by a group of men parading through the streets. The [headpieces](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm), some of them six feet tall, have been artistically designed, cut out of cardboard, assembled, and lit by a [candle](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm) from within. Dressed in white [robes](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm), the people wearing these elaborate miters accompany St. Nicholas on his way through the village. The streets resound with the clang of heavy bells worn around the necks of muscular men, horn blowing, and the rhythm of a [brass](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm) band. One can only wonder how the miter-wearing men manage to keep the wax from dripping down into their hair and how they prevent the cardboard [hat](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm) from going up in flames.

The wide variety of customs in neighboring Swiss villages reflects the centuries of isolation the people endured during the winter months when the heavy snowfalls eliminated [travel](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)

**[](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)**

between mountain valleys.

On December 6, the feast of St. Nicholas, school children in Glarnerland parade through the village, ringing and jingling bells of all sizes - sometimes in rhythmic unison and sometimes in wild abandon. The bells signal the villagers that a gift is expected from each [household](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm) along the way. The gifts are usually some good things to eat or drink.

While this bell ringing custom is not too unusual, it doesn't begin to compare with the children's parade in the town of Weinfelden. On the last Thursday before Christmas, the children in the town parade through the streets with their decorated fodder beets. These fodder beets have been hollowed out and lit from within with a [beeswax candle](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm). After singing carols in the town square, the children go to their [schools](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm) where they dine on wurst and [bread](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm). At the same time, adults go the local tavern or coffeehouse, and the [town council](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm) holds its annual [budget](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm) meeting. Presumably, the thrifty Swiss eventually scrape the [candle wax](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm) from the beets so they can be added to the animal troughs.

In the village of Ziefen, several dozen young bachelors walk along a traditional route through the streets every Christmas Eve. The tallest bachelor, dons a white beard and leads the procession while carrying a sooty rag attached to the end of a long pole. Curiosity seekers leaning from their doorways and windows risk getting more than just an eyeful of the event. Quite a few onlookers end up scrubbing chimney soot from their faces. All the young bachelors wear oversized, long, dark [coats](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm) and each wears a tall, black, [top hat](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm) made of cardboard. Many of these hats are more then six feet high. The procession is relatively tame compared to the wild festivities it replaced from the early nineteenth century.

Meanwhile, things are relatively quiet in the village of Hallwil where seven girls, 13 or 14-years-old, act out an ancient custom. A veiled Wienechtchind (Christmas child), dressed in white, and six companions in [rose](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm)-colored garments, visit village families in the evening. The Wienechtchind greets the assembled household with a silent handshake and distributes cake or cookies to the children while the other girls sing a carol. The departure of this group is also silent.

An ancient tradition in the town of Laupen, near [Bern](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm), is not only the opposite of Hallwil's tradition - it's totally absurd! [New Year's Eve](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm) is the time to be there if you want to see some outrageous shenanigans. The origins of the strange customs in Laupen can be traced back to the early nineteenth century.

Originally the ceremonies took place on Christmas Eve and for years the town officials tried unsuccessfully to have them outlawed. Eventually the town priest managed to have the date changed to New Year's Eve since it involved so much noise and rowdiness.

After nightfall on December 31, the participating schoolboys, comprising three boisterous groups, meet on the hill at the local castle and proceed down to the village. In the first group are the "bell ringers", who swing or rattle large bells which can be heard for miles around. Next, the "broom men", carry long poles with bunches of [juniper](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm) branches tied to the top. The third group is probably the most bizarre - the "bladder men" carry pig's bladders filled with air. The procession stops at various locations along the route as the leader recites a rhymed farewell to the old year and wishes the crowd a happy new one. During the recitation, the broom men wave their juniper brooms over the heads of the crowd. At the end of journey, the broom men and the bladder men, all armed with inflated pig's bladders, proceed to "beat" the onlookers, especially young ladies, until their weapons are in shreds.

One must admit that it really takes a lot of guts to stand and watch this parade. These events in Switzerland, and many more like them, provide hours of [entertainment](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm) for connoisseurs of folklore, however, before anyone tries to emulate these customs, you may want to check with local authorities before you [swat](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/switzerland.htm) someone with a pig's bladder or a sooty rag.



**Christmas in Switzerland (4)**

Switzerland has a special glow at Christmas, seen in its festive light displays, colorful Christmas markets, as well as in the happy faces of its children.

A unique blend of Protestant and Catholic observances, and French, German and Italian influences, Switzerland is truly a land of many wonderful and various traditions during the holiday season.

Despite the differences, all of Switzerland shares in many of the same customs at Christmas, including the lighting of the Advent wreath, carol singing, Christmas tree decorating and honoring [St. Nicholas](http://www.stnicholascenter.org/Brix?pageID=97).

While some Swiss children may know him as Samichlaus, others may better recognize him as Father Christmas, the Christkindli, Père Noël, or Gesú Bambino.

Throughout the month of December, children are also treated to a tradition unique to Switzerland - the famous marlitram or "fairytale tram" found in Zurich and other major cities which run only during the holidays. On board, children take a special ride with St. Nicholas and are entertained with candy, songs, and fairy tales told by Christmas angels. And it's children only, please. (Parents can meet their children at the last stop.)



**Christmas in Switzerland (5)**

Christmas is a great festival enjoyed throughout the world. This is time of year when people enjoy quality time with their families and friends. Families come together to have parties and feast with Christmas traditional food and music. The preparations for Christmas begin well in advance. Homes are cleaned and decorated with evergreen twigs, wreaths and garlands with festive Christmas lights. A Christmas tree is brought home and decorated with tinsel, lights and ornaments. Christmas has universal appeal. [Christmas traditions](http://www.christmasnite.com/christmas-traditions/columbian.html) differ from one nation to other. Culture plays a big role in Christmas Traditions. Swiss [Christmas traditions](http://www.christmasnite.com/christmas-traditions/latin.html) are a mixture of religious sentiments and modernity.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |

**Christmas in Switzerland** is full of festive spirit and gusto. People thoroughly enjoy the festival. Before Christmas, Swiss people traditionally celebrate the fest of St. Nicholas on the dusk of December 6. There is a huge procession of lifetrager who wear huge, lighted lanterns on their heads. The lantern is in shape of Bishop’s mitre. A lot of people gather to watch the proceedings. It is an old Swiss tradition where the kids go from one house to other with gifts and ringing of bells. On Christmas Eve, people attend Midnight mass at the church and then have traditional Christmas dinner. Ringing of Christmas bell is an important tradition followed by Swiss people in churches during the Christmas season.

Christkindli is an angel who comes in white robes on his reindeer-drawn sleigh. His face is covered with veil and has a crown on his head. He comes to every Swiss home during Christmas to give gifts to small children. He announces his arrival by ringing silver bells. Once, he enters the house, Swiss people light candles on trees and then exchange presents. Christkindli is a Swiss version of Santa Claus. Children all over the country curiously wait for him and his gifts. The Christmas day is spent singing carols and listening to Christmas music. The Star singers sing carols and folk songs in traditional attire and parade in towns and cities of Switzerland during Christmas.

In Zurich, Santa Claus comes in a decorated fairytale tram. He takes all the children for a ride of the city, sings carols and gives them sweets. On Christmas Eve after the mass, everyone has a traditional doughnut called as Ringli with hot chocolate. For the traditional Christmas dinner, Swiss people have different types of meat, bread, baked vegetables with cakes and cookies as deserts. Various cookies lie Swiss brownie, Anise cookies, Milano Cookies are prepared for Christmas in Swiss homes. Swiss people go out and enjoy the festival with dine and wine. Music and dance are two integral parts of Swiss Christmas celebration.



**Christmas in Austria (1)**

A wide variety of holiday concerts are available to tourists visiting Austria during the holiday season. This is to be expected in a land that gave rise to the musical genius of Wolfgang Mozart, Anton Bruckner, Johann Strauss Sr. and Jr. and Franz Schubert. Concert venues range from magnificent castles and fortresses to cruise boats on the Danube and a tiny chapel along the Salzach River.

The hottest ticket in Salzburg is for "Salzburger Adventsingen," a program of Advent music and folk lore which began more than a half century ago. With close to 100,000 ticket requests each year, only 30,000 will be lucky enough to gain admission. Still, there are dozens of other concerts to be heard each week during the Advent, Christmas, and New Year season.

Some of the most delightful are the candlelight concerts in the Hohensalzburg Fortress overlooking the city. If you´re lucky you may hear the unusual "Concerto for Strings and Alpenhorn" by Leopold Mozart, Wolfgang´s father. Just be sure that you are not sitting in the front row where you will find several alpenhorns extending right off the stage. Other holiday concerts are held at the Mozarteum, at the outdoor Christmas Market, and in various churches and concert halls throughout the city.

Just outside Salzburg, on December 24, a torchlight and lantern procession will move from the Franz Gruber School in Arnsdorf to the Silent Night Memorial Chapel in Oberndorf. You can join the procession and even sing the carols with people from all over the world who flock to the birthplace of the world´s best known Christmas carol, "Silent Night."

The Advent concert series in Innsbruck features groups of family singers and instrumentalists similar to the Trapp Family Singers of "Sound of Music" fame. In Austria, it´s not at all unusual to find families who play music, everything from classical to folk melodies, in their leisure hours. When they come together in concert at Innsbruck's Congress Hall, it becomes a memorable occasion.

Meanwhile in Vienna, choirs from around the world present traditional and modern Christmas songs and folk music in the ceremonial rooms of the Vienna City Hall on weekends in November and December as part of a yearly international choral festival.

The fact is, every village, every hamlet, and every city in Austria will be filled with the glorious sounds of the holiday season throughout November and December. It is truly the land of the "Sound of Music."

The approach of Christmas in Austria is a time of thoughtful preparation for celebrating the birth of Jesus. Austria is a predominantly Catholic country, and many Austrians observe Advent as a solemn season of preparation for Christmas. As the first Sunday in Advent approaches, many families make or purchase an *Adventkranz*, or Advent wreath - a wreath of fir or spruce, decorated with four candles which are lit successively on the four Sundays before December 24.

December 5, is known as Krampus Day. Krampus is an evil spirit usually clad in frightening fur. He has a long red tongue, bulging eyes and makes a loud racket with huge cowbells and rattling chains.

On Krampus Day, children and adults go together to the village to throw snowballs at this menacing figure. In Salzburg, there is a Krampus run through the streets of the city. But this is all done in fun, with much teasing and poking and laughter. Krampus' purpose is simply to remind children to be good.

St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children, is widely honored throughout the country. He is an ancestor of Santa Claus and a relative of Father Christmas, but in Austria he appears on his feast day, December 6, a holiday separate from Christmas. He traditionally wears a flowing robe and a tall bishop's miter and he carries a shepherd's staff and a thick book in which the good and bad deeds of the children are recorded.

In Austria the Christkindl is the star of the season. It is he who brings the children their presents on Christmas Eve. The Christkindl also decorates the tree, with occasional assistance from mother, father, or other adults in the family. Everywhere there are clues that the Christkindl and its angelic helpers were here such as the locked door to the living room. Austrian children do not see the decorated tree until Christmas Eve.

One of the first signs that Christmas and the Christkindl are on their way is the appearance of the Christkindlmarkt, or Christmas market. Early in December these Christmas markets open in towns and cities all over Austria, with rows of booths and stalls selling colorful ornaments and decorations, gingerbread, Advent wreaths, candles, small gifts, and even Christmas trees.

It's easy to work up an appetite at a Christkindlmarkt, especially when vendors offer pretzels, sausage, paper cones filled with roasted chestnuts, and hot spiced wine. Other booths sell Christmas candies, sweets and cookies.

Nearly every church and most families in Austria have a Krippe or crèche, with miniature figures of the newborn Christ child and his parents. A Krippe may have only a few figures, perhaps the Holy Family and a few animals. But other families display very elaborate scenes, with dozens of hand-carved shepherds, animals, and other figures. Some families keep adding new characters and scenery each year, especially if an uncle, grandfather or other family member is a talented woodcarver. Often these crèches are hundreds of years old, treasured heirlooms handed down from one generation to the next. The Krippe may be set up before Christmas Eve, especially if it is an elaborate one. But Christkindl is not placed in the manger until Christmas Eve.

The evening of the 24th, Christmas Eve, is the traditional time to exchange gifts with family and friends. Shops close by 6 p.m. as Austrian families enter the final stages of preparation for Christkindl's arrival. For the children the excitement is almost unbearable.

Finally, the children hear the tinkling bell that summons them to the Christmas room. There, for the first time that season, they witness Christkindl's handiwork. There is the tree, with dozens of real candles, sparklers, silver ornaments and candy, in all its splendor. Each year's Weihnachtsbaum seems to be the most magical ever. Often children's homemade ornaments and other hand-crafted decorations have been treasured for generations. Silver and gold garlands crisscross the tree. In a few Austrian homes the wax candles have been replaced by electric lights, but most Austrians would never dream of lighting their own trees with anything other than the traditional Christmas candles.

Everyone gathers around the Tannenbaum and sings Christmas carols with special emphasis given "Silent Night, Holy Night." In other countries, this carol may be played during the weeks before Christmas, but in Austria "Silent Night" is heard on the radio for the first time on Christmas Eve and repeated hourly. The effect is spellbinding.

As midnight approaches, the grown-ups and the older children go to the traditional *Mitternachtsmesse*, the Midnight High Mass. In many churches, trumpeters climb up the church towers and trumpet forth Christmas music to call the faithful to worship. The *Turmblasen* (brass instruments playing chorale music from the city tower or steeple of the main church) is a traditional feature of Christmas Eve. Often the service features music written by Franz Gruber, the composer of "Silent Night" who also wrote nearly 100 Masses, hymns and carols.

Christmas Day, December 25th, is one of quiet celebration and happy reunions with relatives and friends. December 26, St. Stephen's Day, is a legal holiday from work and school, a day set aside for visiting.

Many Austrian families keep their Christmas tree until Epiphany, January 6. Epiphany remembers the Three Wise Men from the East who were looking for the newly-born Christ. Boys and girls in oriental costumes, the Sternsinger, move from house to house, singing traditional songs and receiving small gifts and money.

They carry a lighted "Star of Bethlehem" lantern, which guides them along the way. On this occasion people chalk the initials of the Three Wise Men: C (Casper) + M (Melchior) + B (Balthasar) on the transoms of their doorways.

With the passing of the Epiphany, the pre-Christmas and Christmas season has run full circle.



**Christmas in Austria (2)**

The **feast of St Nicholas** marks the beginning of Christmas in Austria. The saint accompanied by the devil asks children for a list of their good and bad deeds. Good children are given sweets, toys and nuts. Gifts that are placed under the tree are opened after dinner on Christmas Eve.

Brass instruments play chorale music room church steeples, and carol singers, carrying blazing torches and a manger from house to house, gather on the church steps.

[Silent Night](http://www.santas.net/silentnight.htm) was first sung in 1818, in the village church of Oberndorf. There is a story told of how Christmas was almost spoiled for the villagers that year.

On Christmas Eve, the priest went into the church and found that the organ was not working. The leather bellows that are used to pump the air through the pipes were full of holes. Christmas without music would not do so the priest showed the organist Franz Bauer a new Christmas hymn he had written. Franz quickly composed a tune for it that could be played on a guitar. So Oberndorf had music after all.

In Austria baked carp is served for the traditional Christmas dinner.

December 6 in Austria is when **Heiliger Nikolaus** or St. Nicholas, rewards good children with sweets, nuts and apples.

On December 24, the Christ Child brings presents and the Christmas tree for the children. The children wait until they hear a bell tinkling. Then they enter a special room where the Christmas tree is waiting all decorated with candles, ornaments and candies. The whole family sings Christmas carols and wishes each other- **FROLICHE WEIHNACHTEN! FROHE WEIHNACHTEN!**

****

**Christmas in Austria (3)**

Christmas is undoubtedly the most important holiday in Austria. As in other European nations, December 6th is the day Saint Nicholas, the giver of gifts, makes his rounds. Arrayed in a glittering Bishops robe and accompanied by his devilish assistant, Knecht Rupnecht, he can occasionally be seen roaming the streets giving sweets and apples to good children while his companion playfully beckons "little sinners" to feel the string of his golden rod.

On December 24th, when the city is frantic with last minute shoppers, the countryside is a refuge for quiet traditions. Farmers chalk the initials of the Three Wise Men on the archway of the stable door; C for Caspar, M for Melchoir, and B for Balthazar, to protect the heard from sickness in the coming year. Christmas trees are lit on this day and in many villages "shelter-seekers" plod through deep snow from farm to farm re-enacting the plight of Mary and Joseph as they sought shelter on the eve of Christ's birth.

In the snow-covered Alps, families descend from their mountain homes to the valley below, illuminating the night with torches held high to light their way in the darkness. Carolers gather in church towers and village squares to guide the people to Christmas services with their melodies. All shops, theaters and concert halls close their doors for this is an evening spent with only with family.

Following church services, families return home for their more intimate celebrating. First Christmas Eve dinner is served, often with "Gebackener Karpfen" (fried carp) as the main course. Dessert may be chocolate and apricot cake called "Sachertorte" and Austrian Christmas cookies called "Weihnachtsbaeckerei" (yes, this is the actual spelling).

After the meal, the ringing of a bell signals the opening of a door long locked against the anxious eyes of the little ones. For the first time the children are permitted to witness the Christmas tree glistening with lights and colored ornaments, gold and silver garlands, candies and cookies. Beneath the tree is usually arranged an elaborate manger scene. Almost every family owns hand- carved manger figures handed down from generation to generation.

Father opens the Bible and reads of the "Kristkindl," Christ Child. Then all sing traditional Christmas carols such as "Silent Night" and "O'Tannenbaum." After this the presents are distributed and opened.

In Austria, there is no Santa Claus. Children are taught that their presents have been brought by the "Kristkindl," a golden-haired baby with wings, who symbolizes the new born Christ. The story tells how the Christ child comes down from heaven on Christmas Eve and, with his band of angels, decorates and distributes trees.

Advent wreaths are made of various types of Christmas greenery used with a combination of other decorations. The wreath is then suspended by ribbon on a decorative, colorful stand. Four candles, representing the four Sundays before Christmas, ar attached to the wreath. The first candle only is lit on the first Sunday, the second candle is lit on the second Sunday, and so on; all four candles are lit on Christmas day.



**Christmas in Austria (4)**

Austria is a fascinating country to visit at any time of the year. But the weeks from late November to the end of the year hold a special meaning and let you become familiar with some of the most beautiful aspects of the country: deeply-rooted folk traditions come alive in colorful, romantic events.

**Advent**, the period of preparation for the festival honoring the birth of Christ, begins on a Sunday four weeks before Christmas Eve. This is the day when in living rooms all over the country advent wreaths, woven from evergreen twigs and decorated with ribbons and four candles, are hung or prominently placed. On each of the four Sundays leading up to Christmas, one more candle on the wreath is lit at dinnertime, many families pray, read Christmas stories or sing carols together.

**Christmas markets** are a long-standing and typically Austrian tradition. In [**Vienna**](http://www.weihnachtsdorf.at/weihnachtsdorf/en/aakh/index.html), for instance, the market is held in the large square in front of City Hall. This market can be traced back to the year 1298. [**Innsbruck**](http://www.christkindlmarkt.cc/1-1-Home.html) opens its romantic Christmas market in the narrow medieval square at the foot of the Golden Roof. In [**Salzburg**](http://www.christkindlmarkt.co.at/index.php?id=76), the Christmas market takes over the square in front of the Cathedral with its picturesque stalls, while the tree vendors occupy Residenzplatz on the side of the huge Cathedral. However almost every small town has its own Christmas market.

**Christmas**The Christmas tree plays a very important part. Every town sets up its own huge tree on the main square and frequently there will be an extra one, adorned with bread crumbs, for the birds. In families the tree is decorated with gold and silver ornaments or stars made our of straw, sweets and candy wrapped in tinfoil, gilded nuts, etc.

On Christmas Eve shops close at the latest by 6 p.m. and there are no movie or theater performances and no concerts. Most bars, restaurants, night clubs are likewise closed and traffic is almost non-existent. Around 7 p.m. on Christmas Eve (December 24th) the tree is lit for the first time and the whole family gathers to sing Christmas carols. “Silent Night, Holy Night,” written and performed for the first time on December 24th, 1818, by Josef Mohr and Franz Gruber in the Austrian village of Oberndorf, is still the favorite Christmas carol.

Presents are placed under the tree and young children believe that they were brought to them -- as a reward for good behavior -- by the Christ Child (Christkind). Austrian Christmas tradition has it that it is the Christ Child himself (or rather, an eponymous cherubic figure known as the “Christkind”) who decorates the Christmas tree on Christmas Eve and brings the children their Christmas presents, and it is to him that their letters and wish lists are addressed in the weeks before Christmas.



**Christmas in Austria (5)**

Christmas starts in early December. The four Sundays previous to Christmas are spent with family praying and then socializing. The praying gave me chills at first because it is kind of a chant that is done over and over. The women and the men each have different part that they verbalize. I never understood (but didn't really care) exactly how it works or how they decide to stop. But the snacks at the end were good .

Because different parts of the families are always getting together, there's always lots of good food. There's no Santa Claus but they have Kristkind, the Christ Child, who brings gifts. I mentioned the [Krampos](http://www.beausmith.com/europe/20011205.php) already.

One highlight of the early holiday season was that Sep and Kurt decided to sell Christmas trees from the courtyard of the farmhouse. I designed the signs directing traffic to the "Christbaum Verkauft" and helped keep the showroom full of new trees each day. The courtyard looked beautiful each morning after a layer of fresh powder had fallen.

Christmas Eve is when the climax occurs. Sparklers are added to the tree and lit. When they die we trade gifts with each other and personally wish each person "Froye Weinachten." Then each person opens their gifts on their own and thanks the giver. A few weeks before Christmas, Stephan was given a 'survival knife' with a whistle that he blew over and over. So, a few days before Christmas I wrapped it up when he wasn't looking and put it under the tree. He was very happy to get it back.



**Christmas in Germany (1)**

According to legend, on Christmas Eve in Germany rivers turn to wine, animals speak to each other, tree blossoms bear fruit, mountains open up to reveal precious gems, and church bells can be heard ringing from the bottom of the sea. Of course, only the pure in heart can witness this Christmas magic. All others must content themselves with traditional German celebrating, of which there is plenty. As a matter of fact, there is so much celebrating that is has to begin on December 6th, St. Nicholas Day.

As in many other European countries, on the eve of Dec. 6th children place a shoe or boot by the fireplace. During the night, St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children, hops from house to house carrying a book of sins in which all of the misdeeds of the children are written. If they have been good, he fills the shoe or boot with delicious holiday edibles. If they have not been good, their shoe is filled with twigs.

December 21st, supposedly the shortest day (longest night) of the year, is dubbed St. Thomas Day. In parts of the Sauerland, whoever wakes up late or arrives late to work on that day is issued the title "Thomas Donkey." They are given a cardboard donkey and are the subject of numerous jokes throughout the day. But this gentle abuse ends deliciously with round, iced currant buns called "Thomasplitzchen."

This is all preliminary to the excitement of Christmas Eve. Prior to the evening feast, is the presentation of the tree. The Christmas tree, as we know it, originated in Germany. It has a mysterious magic for the young because they are not allowed to see it until Christmas Eve. While the children are occupied with another room (usually by Father) Mother brings out the Christmas tree and decorates it with apples, candy, nuts, cookies, cars, trains, angels, tinsel, family treasures and candles or lights. The presents are placed under the tree. Somewhere, close to the bright display are laid brilliantly decorated plates for each family member, loaded with fruits, nuts, marzipan, chocolate and biscuits. When all is ready a bell is rung as a signal for the children to enter this Christmas fantasy room. Carols are sung, sometimes sparklers are lit, the Christmas story is read and gifts are opened.

"Dickbauch" means "fat stomach" and is a name given to the Christmas Eve because of the tradition that those who do not eat well on Christmas Eve will be haunted by demons during the night. So the opportunity is given to enjoy dishes such as suckling pig, "reisbrei" (a sweet cinnamon), white sausage, macaroni salad, and many regional dishes.

Christmas Day brings with it a banquet of plump roast goose, "Christstollen" (long loaves of bread bursting with nuts, raisins, citron and dried fruit), "Lebkuchen" (spice bars), marzipan, and "Dresden Stollen" ( a moist, heavy bread filled with fruit).



**Christmas in Germany (2)**

In Germany, from early December to Christmas Eve, the winter air is filled with the aroma of baked fruit loaves; bratwurst, or sausage; roasted nuts; and lebkuchen, a spicy cookie. The German shoppers make their way between the red-roofed stalls, purchasing food, toys, Christmas decorations. The special shopping item is prune men and prune women.

These unique figures, about ten inches high, have arms and legs made of prunes threaded over wire, dried figs for bodies, and walnut heads painted with expressive faces. Advent wreaths, the first signs of Christmas in Germany, appear on the first Sunday in Advent, about four weeks before Christmas. A single red candle is placed on the wreath each Sunday, so that there are four candles on Christmas Day.

German children ask for presents by writing a letter to the Christ Child. Another tradition is to fill shoes with straw and carrots and leave them outside the front door. It is hoped that when St. Nicholas passes by, he will feed the hungry horse and refill the shoes of good children with apples and nuts. Decorations for Christmas trees include beautiful glass ornaments of many shapes and sizes, wooden angels, straw stars, and lebkuchen baked in different shapes. The German pickle ornament is considered to be a special Christmas ornament in many German households.



**Christmas in Germany (3)**

A big part of the Christmas celebrations in Germany is [Advent](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/advent.shtml). Several different types of Advent calendars are used in German homes. As well as the traditional one made of card that is used in many countries, there are ones made out of a wreath of Fir tree branches with 24 decorated boxes or bags hanging from it. Each box or bag has a little present in it. Another type is called a 'Advent Kranz' and is a ring of fir branches that has four candles on it. This is like the Advent candles that are sometimes used in Churches. One candle is lit at the beginning at each week of Advent.

[Christmas Trees](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/trees.shtml) are very important in Germany as well. They were first used in Germany in the Middle Ages. If there are young children in the house are usually secretly decorated by the Mother of the family. The Christmas tree was traditionally brought into the house on Christmas eve, and that evening the family would read the bible and sing Christmas songs such as O Tannenbaum, Ihr Kinderlein Kommet and [Stille Nacht (Slient Night)](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/carols_stories.shtml#silent).

Sometimes wooden frames, covered with coloured plastic sheets and with electric candles inside, are put in windows to make the house look pretty from the outside.

Christmas Eve is the main day when Germans exchange presents with their families.

In German Happy/Merry Christmas is 'Frohe Weihnacht'. [Happy/Merry Christmas in lots more languages](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/languages.shtml).

In some parts of Germany, children write to the 'Christkind' ('The Christ Child' in English) asking for presents. The letters to the Christkind are decorated with sugar glued to the envelope to make them sparkly and attractive to look at. Children leave the letters on the windowsill at the beginning of or during Advent.

[Father Christmas](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/fatherchristmas.shtml) (der Weihnachtsmann) brings the presents on December 24th. Like in [Holland](http://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/holland.shtml), December 6th is St. Nicholas Day and "der Nikolaus" brings some small gifts, such as sweets and chocolate, to the children. He comes in the night between the 5th and the 6th and puts the presents into the shoes of the children, who usually place them by their doors on the previous evening. In some regions of Germany, there is a character called "Knecht Ruprecht" or "Krampus" who accompanies Nikolaus (St. Nicholas) on the 6th of December. He is clothed in rugs and carries a birch. He will punish the children who were bad and will give them a birch as a present. He is usually the one who scares the little children. In other parts of Germany, St. Nicholas is followed by a small person called "Schwarz Peter" (Black Peter) who carrys a small whip. Black Peter also accompanies St. Nicholas or Sinterklass in [Holland](http://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/holland.shtml).

Some people say that Father Christmas (Weihnachtsmann) brings the presents and some say it is Christkind!

At small work and school parties, secret presents are often exchanged. A door is opened just wide enough for small presents to be thrown into the room. The presents are then passed around among the people until each person has the right present! It is thought to be bad luck to ever finds out who sent each present.

On the 31st December, there is the tradition of the Sternsinger (or star singers) who go from house to house, sing a song and collect money for charity (this is a predominantly Catholic tradition). They are four children, three who dress up like the Wisemen and one carries a star on a stick as a symbol for the Star of Bethlehem. When they're finished singing, they write a signature with chalk over the door of the house. The sign is written in a special way, so Christmas 2007 would be: 20\*C\*M\*B\*07. It is considered to be bad luck to wash the sign away - it has to fade by itself. It has usually faded by the 6th of January (Epiphany).

Carp or Goose are often served for the main Christmas meal. Stollen is a popular fruited yeast bread that is eaten at Christmas.



**Christmas in Germany (4)**

From the beginning of Advent, booths and stalls are set up on the [market-places](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/germany.htm) in all cities where you can buy everything you need for Christmas: decorations for the tree and candles, crib figures and gingerbread (which is mainly baked and consumed at Christmas), Christmas trees, and presents for Christmas Eve. Walking through such a market really is an exceptional experience. Children enjoy this most of all. The smell of fir resin and roasted almonds intermingle. Then there are all the lights from the stalls and the little stoves where sausages are fried and chestnuts roasted. Songs and the [sounds of music](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/germany.htm) fill the air. The most famous Christkindlmarkt takes place in Nuremberg and attracts lots of visitors every year.

St. Nicholas Eve. This happens on Dec, 6 an all of the children leave one [shoe](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/germany.htm) out for St. Nicholas to either leave candy if they are good or twigs if they are bad.

**The Advent Calendar**
While children in Canada have Christmas parades to assure that Santa is on the way, in Germany the magic of Christmas starts with the December arrival of the advent calendar. Advent starts on the first Sunday after November 26th. This time is devoted to preparations for Christmas. After the four Advent Sundays are over, there follow Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Advent calendars with their bright Christmas pictures hang alongside children's beds. If you look more closely, you discover small numbers in this picture. One, two, three, and so on up to 24. Wherever the numbers are, there are small paper windows. When you open these windows you find a little picture on transparent paper: a candle, a ball, a snowman-whatever children like. The children open a new window every morning, and then they know that there are still twenty three days to Christmas, twenty two, twenty one, and so on. Every day Christmas Eve, so much longed for and charged with wishes, comes a little closer.

Apart from the Advent calendar, families also have an Advent wreath. The wreath is made of bound fir twigs to which four candles are attached. One more candle is lit for each of the Advent Sundays. In large houses, shops, and in churches, these Advent wreaths hang from the ceiling, adorned with four fat red or yellow candles. This looks particularly splendid when the wreath is also decorated with red or violet ribbons. No one knows when the Advent wreath came to Germany and where it originated. It does not date back very far as a Christmas Custom but has already firmly established itself. Before the first Sunday in Advent you will see many, many Advent wreath in [flower shops](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/germany.htm) and nurseries. Pine and fir cones, little red mushrooms, or red and yellow ribbons are also attached to the green of the wreath.

**The Christmas tree**
The undisputed focal-point of the entire Christmas period, in the community and in the family, is the Christmas tree. A German Christmas without the green fir tree is simply inconceivable. The tranquil splendor of Christmas tree lights is an essential aspect of the festival for both the individual and the population as a whole. It is the symbol of Christmas for all Germans, who have to have their Christmas tree on December the 23th (not a day before!) even if they live abroad in distant countries. Trees are also found in churches and public squares. They are used in shops as decoration, and in offices to please staff and visitors. The giant trees that stand in public are especially grown for this purpose and carefully looked after in municipal wood. They are often up to 25 metres. Decorating the treeIn earlier times, candles were perhaps enough in the eyes of children and adults. Today everyone wants a well-decorated tree in their home. You can even say that there have been areas-such as Rhinish Hesse and the Spessart-where the sweets on the tree have been more important than the lights. People there spoke of a Sugar Tree rather than a Christmas tree, and this was hung with edibles and decorations. Some families with children maintain this custom up to the present day.

**Music for Christmas**
Christmas is a time for singing and music making. There is a constant mention at Christmas of the mysterious sounds of bells and other [musical instruments](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/germany.htm), present in all [households](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/germany.htm). This starts with the first Sunday in Advent and reaches its peek on Christmas Eve, the Holy Evening, when the silent night should be filled with sounds that seem to come from celestial spheres. The most famous of all German language Christmas songs , "Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht! was first heard during Christmas 1818 at the small church of St. Nicholas in Oberndorf (Austria), which is near Salzburg and the German-Austrian border. The [writer](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/germany.htm) of the text, Joseph Mohr, was assistant priest from 1817 to 1819. Franz Yaver Gruber, the composer, had been the teacher and organist at nearby Arnsdorf since 1807, and he also filled the latter function at Oberndorf, when no one was available. Just before Christmas 1818, Mohr suggested to Gruber that they should produce a new song for the festival. On the 24th of December he gave the musician his six verse text, leaving only a few hours till the moment the song was due to be presented. The organist's melody pleased the poet though, and the song was performed with great success. Today this famous song is translated into 44 other languages and is known all over the world.

**Xmas feast:**
It is said that the tradition of serving boar's head at the Christmas feast originated because the German god Frey, who was responsible for the well-being of livestock, was symbolized by the boar. Therefore boar was often sacrificed in hopes of a prosperous spring herd. Eventually, the boar's head custom as a part of German Christmas feasting became impractical. Boars were increasingly hard to find and dangerous to catch. It also took a week of cooling and preparation to make the boar presentable. In more modern times, the boar was replaced by pork, roast beef, turkey, and goose.



**Christmas in Germany (5)**

The Christmas season begins with the first advent Sunday. Traditional households have a advent wreath in the family room and the walls, doors and windows are tastefully decorated with handmade [***German Christmas crafts***](http://www.christmas-projects.com/html/german_christmas_crafts.html). The wreaths are decorated either modern, with trendy colored decorations, or in traditional colors with orange slices, cinnamon sticks, apple slices and pinecones. Each wreath holds four candles, representing each of the four advent Sundays before Christmas. With each new Sunday, another candle gets lit so that by the last Sunday before Christmas, all four candles are burning. The lighting of the advent candle is a special moment in the homes with children. The family spends a quiet moment together and sing carols and some read passages out of the bible.

On the 6th of December, the German version of Santa Claus visits the children. His name is [***Sankt Nikolaus***](http://www.christmasmagazine.com/de/spirit/weihnachtsmann.asp). On the night of the 5th of December, the kids place their cleaned shoes outside the door. The next morning, the shoes are filled with goodies.

Assisting [***Sankt Nikolaus***](http://www.christmasmagazine.com/de/spirit/weihnachtsmann.asp) is [***Knecht Ruprecht***](http://www.mike-rupprecht.de/gen/images/ruprecht.jpg). He is normally dressed in a brown robe and carrying rods in his belt to give the bad children and a basket on his back full of sacks of tangerines, peanuts, spiced cookies and chocolate to give to the good children. Theodor Storm (1817-1888) wrote a popular poem about Knecht Ruprecht which is learned still today by all of the children in school. Read the poem here >>> [***Knecht Ruprecht Poem***](http://www.deingedicht.de/Weihnachten/Gedichte/%28wg002%29Knecht%20Ruprecht.htm)

 On the 24th of December, on Christmas Eve, the father of the house solely decorates the tree in the morning and the room gets closed off so that the [***Christkind***](http://www2.nuernberg.de/internet/pr/christkind.html)(translated: Christ Child but is an angelic figurel) can bring the gifts in the afternoon while the family is at church services. The mother of the house spends the morning cooking a small dinner which is often a small meal like [***Bratwurst***](http://www.marions-kochbuch.de/rezept/0283.htm) and [***Sauerkraut***](http://www.marions-kochbuch.de/rezept/1809.htm)***.*** She is also preparing for the Christmas dinner for Christmas day in advance. The kids get to see and open their gifts after the evening meal and when it is dark outdoors. This adds to the mood. The tree gets lit for the first time with real candles or with traditional white lights. The family sings Christmas carols together and reads passages from the bible.

Christmas day is family day. The family goes to church in the morning and comes home to eat their Christmas dinner. Often friends or relatives are invited to join them.

****

**Christmas in Ireland (1)**

Traditionally the Christmas season begins on 8 December in Ireland and lasts until 6 January. Christmas is a wonderful time to be in Ireland. In Ireland there is still a deeper sense of the meaning of the season here. As you walk through the streets of cities like Cork you may hear choirs large and small singing on the sidewalks, street musicians with flutes, harps, violins or guitars playing the strains of familiar carols or favourite Christmas recordings wafting from the shops.While few private homes decorate outside beyond the festive wreath on the door, the towns, cities and shops go all out. The Christmas season doesn't really get into full swing in Ireland until December when streets are lined with lit decorations and live Christmas trees are often mounted like flag staffs from building fronts. Larger department stores and shops fill their windows with animated scenes and figures.

Gifts for friends and from family members to each other pile up under the Christmas tree in the days before Christmas and as everywhere a lot of squeezing, shaking and guessing goes on, but in the back of everyone's mind is what Santa will bring on Christmas morning. And there is no peeking or opening any gifts *until* Christmas morning!

Santa Claus is a very popular fellow in Ireland too. He and his helpers can be found arriving at many malls and department stores by helicopter or fire engine to take Christmas wish lists or for the very lucky children a trip to visit his workshop in Lapland (the North Pole) can be arranged!

In Ireland Santa works a little differently than in the states. Instead of leaving everything under the tree he leaves each child's gifts in their room, often in a pillow case at the end of the bed, though sometimes a large gift may be left unwrapped under the tree. Christmas stockings are a tradition with some families and are hung Christmas Eve for Santa to fill. He arrives quite late as Midnight Mass on Christmas eve is still a strong tradition for many families and the chimney is his main entrance into most homes.

As with holiday traditions everywhere, food plays a big part of celebration in Ireland and, just like else where, there is some variation from family to family. A fairly traditional menu for Christmas dinner includes either a Goose or Turkey with stuffing (usually a sage and onion type), ham, roasted and boiled potatoes (Irish meals often include potatoes prepared several ways), brussel sprouts, carrots, califlower, parsnips and any other family favourites, followed by Christmas cake or a Christmas pudding. A favourite treat throughout the Christmas season are small mincemeat pies (in the states because of the size they would probably be called tarts). Candy canes are not very popular in Ireland nor wide spread but tons of chocolates is a must for Christmas.

Ireland, like most countries, has a number of Christmas traditions that are all of its own. Many of these customs have their root in the time when the Gaelic culture and religion of the country were being supressed and it is perhaps because of that they have survived into modern times.

The Candle in the Window
The placing of a lighted candle in the window of a house on Christmas eve is still practised today. It has a number of purposes but primarily it was an symbol of welcome to Mary and Joseph as they travelled looking for shelter. The candle also indicated a safe place for priests to perform mass as, during Penal Times this was not allowed. A further element of the tradition is that the candle should be lit by the youngest member of the household and only be extinguished by a girl bearing the name 'Mary'.

The Laden Table
After evening meal on Christmas eve the kitchen table was again set and on it were placed a loaf of bread filled with caraway seeds and raisins, a pitcher of milk and a large lit candle. The door to the house was left unlatched so that Mary and Joseph, or any wandering traveller, could avail of the welcome.

Decorations:
The placing of a ring of Holly on doors originated in Ireland as Holly was one of the main plants that flourished at Christmas time and which gave the poor ample means with which to decorate their dwellings. All decorations are traditionally taken down on Little Christmas (January 6th.) and it is considered to be bad luck to take them down beforehand.



**Christmas in Ireland (2)**

Ireland remembers the Christian elements of the festival particularly. However, these customs are steeped in the mysteries of older times.

Between the introduction of Christianity to Ireland in the 5th century, and the infiltrations from the English in the late middle ages, there is little written about Christmas in Ireland.

In 1171, the English King, Henry II took Christmas festivities to Ireland. He essentailly went there to get the Irish chiefs to swear allegiance to the English Crown, and on finding them very agreeable, so history tells us, he had a huge hall built, in traditional Irish style, in a village near Dublin, called Hogges. There he laid on a sumptuous feast, introducing the Irish to the customs of tournaments, Christmas plays, mumming and masking etc.

Most of the references are in annals recording visits of Kings and nobles, and tell us little about the people and their customs. The 19th and early 20th century writers have done more to build a picture of Irish Christmas than anyone. Stories which invite the reader inside the homes and farmsteads of Irish families, and share with them the preparations for |Christmas, which have been a part of this hidden Ireland for centuries. A few of the more traditional customs are listed below.

### CANDLE IN THE WINDOW

Many homes in Ireland still today will show a lighted candle, or perhaps todays equivilent, and much safer, electric lights, in the window of their home on Christmas Eve. This stems from the custom that to show a light in the window lighted the way of a stranger out after dark. It goes back to most ancient times, when the laws of hospitality were stronger and not abused. To have a light in your window on Christmas Eve to welcome the stranger meant that you were welcoming the Holy Family too. To have no light meant that you shared the guilt of the Innkeeper at Bethlehem who said, "No Room"!

### WHITEWASHING THE HOUSE

In many rural areas of Ireland still today the custom of whitewashing the outhouses and stores prevails. At One time, it was the whole farm, inside and out. The women would scrub and polish everything til it shone, and the men would take a bucket of whitewash, or limewash, and purify everything in honour of the coming of the Christchild.

This custom goes back long before christianity or even celtic civilisation. It was a purifying ceremony from the most ancient of times, the ancient Mesopotamians, 4000BC would cleanse their homes, sweep the streets even, in an attempt to assist their god in his battle against the powers of chaos. And in Central European lore, it was believed that the deity, Frigg, would check all the threshholds of each house to make sure they were swept clean. The links are so tightly intertwined, it becomes difficult to seperate one belief from another, Christmas is like a Tapestry, tightly and colourfully woven. It is almost impossible to find a thread and trace it to its beginning in the picture. From this ancient custom comes the modern traditions of putting up fresh curtains, a special Christmas Bedcover, cushions and table linens etc. The whitewashing of the house.



**Christmas in Ireland (3)**

Candles, decorated with greenery, are placed in the windows of Irish homes on Christmas Eve to light the way of the Holy Family as well as any other poor travelers out on such a night. During the British occupation of all of Ireland, three candles were placed in the window at Christmas. One for the Father, one for the Son, and one for the Holy Spirit. Fellow Catholics passing by would know that the house was a Catholic home, and that all friends were welcome there to celebrate Christmas. The candles were also an invitation to priests to enter the home, say the Christmas Mass, eat dinner, and spend the night with the family.

After the evening meal, the table is set with bread and milk and the door left unlatched as a symbol of the hospitality that the family is offering to Mary and Jsoeph and the little one to come.

To the Irish, Christmas is a time for religious celebration more than revelry. A manger scene is displayed in most homes and in recent years Christmas trees have gained widespread use.

Christmas dinner in most Irish households is the most elaborate meal of the year. Preparations begin weeks in advance. Plum puddings with a liberal portion of Irish whiskey are always included in the feast. Another favorite is bread pudding, often served with butterscotch sauce.

The real star of the season is the Christmas cake which should be started in October to allow time for proper mellowing.

The Christmas shopping season in Ireland generally begins a week or two before Christmas, but some wait until Christmas Eve to do their shopping. Many Irish people purchase gifts only for members of the immediate family who are living under the same roof. The practice of giving multiple gifts for Christmas is uncommon in rural areas of Ireland. Now that times are more prosperous, there is gift buying through the Internet, too.

St. Stephen's Day is celebrated in Ireland in a different way, but is similar to Boxing Day in that it also has to do with the solicitation of money. Young men in extravagant dress, sometimes wearing masks, parade noisily through the streets in the Wren Boys' Procession. They carry long pole on top of which is attached a holly bush. The bush supposedly contains a captured wren, and for whose sake the young men beg for money.



 **Christmas in Ireland (4)**

Christmas in Ireland lasts from Christmas Eve to the feast of the Epiphany on January 6, which is referred to as **Little Christmas**. Ireland's Christmas is more religious than a time of fun.

Lighted candles are placed in windows on Christmas Eve, as a guide that Joseph and Mary might be looking for shelter. The candles are usually red in color, and decorated with sprigs of holly.

Irish women bake a **seed cake** for each person in the house. They also make three puddings, one for each day of the **Epiphany** such as **Christmas**, **New Year's Day** and the **Twelfth Night**.

After the Christmas evening meal, bread and milk are left out and the door unlatched as a symbol of hospitality.

**St Stephen's Day**, the day after Christmas, is almost as important, with football matches and meetings going on. For children, the **Wren Boys Procession** is their big event. Boys go from door to door with a fake wren on a stick, singing, with violins, accordions, harmonicas and horns to accompany them. The reason for the ceremony is to ask for money 'for the starving wren', that is, for their own pockets.

Children often put out Christmas sacks instead of stockings.

It is tradition to leave mince pies and a bottle of Guinness out as a snack for Santa.



**Christmas in Ireland (5)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Christmas* in Irish Gaelic, which is still taught in schools in Eire, the Irish Republic. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. Christmas in Ireland is a traditional holiday in both parts of the island, and very much a family and religious celebration! As in French Canada,  Roman Catholic families attend Midnight Mass together on Christmas Eve. Christmas is the important celebration, rather than the New Year, which has more emphasis in Scotland. The festivities last from Christmas Eve until January 6th, when decorations are put away.  | http://www.kidsdomain.com/images/spacer.gif |  |

**Christmas Preparations**

Most homes have fireplaces with mantelpieces and these are often decorated with holly and ornaments. It is common to hang mistletoe in a doorway (and to kiss under it!).  Many children are given [Advent Calendars](http://www.kidsdomain.com/craft/advent1.html), and each day in December they open one of the slots for a chocolate treat. It is traditional to give gifts (usually money) before the holidays to people who perform services during the year, for example to the milkman who delivers milk bottles to the door. People also clean their houses thoroughly and in the past, it was common to whitewash as well, as a means of purification.

During December, people bake Christmas cakes, puddings and mince pies. As a child I used to make shortbread, which my grandfather particularly enjoyed! Hospitality is a way of life in Ireland, and anyone who visits the house, is entertained with tea and cakes, especially during the holidays. Trees are decorated with a star or an angel on top. Children put a stocking (or a pillowcase!) at the bottom of their beds for Santa Claus. I remember waking up on Christmas morning and going through pillowcases of toys in my own or my brother's bedroom. Gifts usually include an apple, an orange or tangerine, and chocolate coins. My mother recalls receiving a piece of coal or peat (used as fuel in fireplaces) in lean years. This was not given for bad behavior but simply because there was nothing else.

**Christmas Eve to St. Stephen's Day**

In many areas, on Christmas Eve, a lit candle is placed in a window (nowadays it can be an electric light!). This goes back to traditions of hospitality in ancient times. The idea is to help light the way of the Holy Family or any other poor traveller who is out on that night. There can be a White Christmas, but snowfalls are rarely heavy. As in many countries, it is very important for family members to be together for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

People often have Christmas dinner in the afternoon, any time between 1 and 3 p.m.. As a child, I remember being served more than one 'fowl' for Christmas dinner - usually a goose and sometimes chicken, duck or pheasant as well, along with stuffing, roast potatoes and gravy. Now turkey is much more common along with a ham, and sometimes spiced beef. Dessert is Christmas pudding with rum sauce or brandy butter and cream. Sometimes a trifle is served as well! [Christmas Crackers](http://www.kidsdomain.com/craft/surprise.html) are on the table, and everyone pulls one with the person next to them. Whoever ends up with the longer end gets the contents, which include a party hat, a small toy and a riddle.

December 26th (Boxing Day in England) is celebrated as St. Stephen's Day in Eire and is a public holiday. A wren supposedly betrayed the presence of St. Stephen when he was in hiding. He was then caught and executed. Wren boys go from door to door with a wren on a stick (today the wren is not a real one), singing
a traditional song and begging for treats.  Pantomines, such as Babes in the Wood or Puss in Boots, are performed at this time also.



**Christmas in the United Kingdom (1)**

In the UK, families often celebrate Christmas together, so they can watch each other open their presents!

Most families have a [Christmas Tree](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/trees.shtml) (or maybe even two!) in their house for Christmas. The decorating of the tree is usually a family occasion, with everyone helping. Christmas Trees were first popularised the UK by Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria. Prince Albert was [German](http://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/germany.shtml), and thought that it would be good to use one of his ways of celebrating Christmas in to England.

[Holly, Ivy](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/handi.shtml) and [Mistletoe](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/mistletoe.shtml) are also sometimes used to decorate homes or other buildings.

Like a lot of countries, [Nativity Plays](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/nativity.shtml) and [Carol](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/carols.shtml) Services are also very popular at Christmas time. The Church that I go to always has a Carols by Candlelight Service where the church is only lit up by candles. It is a very special service and always makes me feel very Christmasey! Lots of other British churches also have Carols by Candlelight and [Christingle](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/christingles.shtml) services.

Children believe that [Father Christmas](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/fatherchristmas.shtml), or Santa Claus, leaves [presents](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/presents.shtml) in stockings or pillow-cases. These are normally hung up by the fire or by the children's beds on Christmas Eve. Children sometimes leave out [mince pies](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/mincepies.shtml) and brandy for Father Christmas to eat and drink when he visits them. Now, some people say that a non-alcoholic drink should be left for Santa as he has to drive!

Children write letters to Father Christmas listing their requests, but sometimes instead of putting them in the post, the letters are tossed into the fireplace. The draught carries the letters up the chimney and Father Christmas reads the smoke.

There are some customs that only take place, or were started, in the UK. [Wassailing](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/wassailing.shtml) is an old anglo-saxon custom that doesn't take place much today. [Boxing Day](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/boxingday.shtml) is a very old custom that started in the UK and is now taken as a holiday in many countries around the world.

In Scotland, some people celebrate New Year's Eve (which is called Hogmanay) more than Christmas! The word Hogmanay comes from a kind of oat cake that was traditionally given to children on New Year's Eve.

Also in Scotland, the first person to set foot in a house in a New Year is thought to have a big effect on the fortunes of the people that live there! Generally strangers are thought to bring good luck. Depending on the area, it may be better to have a dark-haired or fair-haired stranger set foot in the house. This tradition is widely known as 'first footing'. In England it is sometimes said that a stranger coming through the door carrying a lump of coal will bring good luck.

In Scots (a Scotish dialect) Happy/Merry Christmas is 'Blithe Yule'; in Gaelic it's 'Nollaig Chridheil'; and in Welsh (which is spoken in some parts of Wales it's 'Nadolig Llawen'. [Happy/Merry Christmas in lots more languages](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/languages.shtml).

In the UK, the main Christmas Meal is usually eaten at lunchtime or early afternoon on Christmas Day. It was traditionally roast goose, although it's common to have turkey now, roast vegetables and 'all the trimmings' which means stuffing and sometimes bacon and sausages. (In Scotland, some people might even have Haggis instead of turkey!) Dessert is often [Christmas Pudding](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/pudding.shtml). Mince pies and lots of chocolates are often eaten as well! The dinner table is decorated with a [cracker](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/crackers.shtml) for each person and sometimes flowers and candles.



**Christmas in the United Kingdom (2)**

**Decorations:**
- Christmas crackers
- Christmas boxes
- Toy soldiers

**Traditions:**
Christmas practices in the United Kingdom are a mix of new and old traditions. The mistletoe, which many families now hang above doorways as decoration, owes its origins to the Kissing Bough of the middle ages. The Kissing Bough was an upside-down triangle (to represent the trinity) of various evergreen branches with images of the Holy Family in the middle. Its purpose as a symbol of peace led to the practice of embracing underneath it as a sign of goodwill. Through the years the triangle has become a single sprig of mistletoe, though the spirit of love, now symbolized by a kiss, still remains.

Before they sleep on Christmas Eve, young children place empty stockings at the foot of their beds or on the fireplace. Though he shares Santa Claus' round, jolly appearance and red suit, the person who delivers presents in the United Kingdom is generally known as Father Christmas. Along with presents, family visits, and more good food, people in the United Kingdom enjoy "crackers" on Christmas Day. These crackers are tubes of paper twisted at either end. When one person pulls at each side, the cracker gently explodes to reveal a crown, riddle, and a few small toys. A traditional part of the holidays in Great Britain, crackers are a great way to bid farewell to the Christmas season with a bang.

****

**Christmas in the United Kingdom (3)**

The caroling, the gifts, the feast, and the wishing of good cheer to all - these ingredients came together to create that special Christmas atmosphere.

The custom of gift-giving on Christmas dates only to Victorian times. Before then it was more common to exchange gifts on New Year's Day or Twelfth Night. Santa Claus, though has a German origin is as popular in Britain as in America. Santa is known by British children as Father Christmas. Father Christmas, these days, is quite similar to the American Santa, but his direct ancestor is a certain pagan spirit who regularly appeared in medieval mummer's plays. The old-fashioned Father Christmas was depicted wearing long robes with sprigs of holly in his long white hair. Children write letters to Father Christmas detailing their requests, but instead of dropping them in the mailbox, the letters are tossed into the [fireplace](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/uk.htm). The draft carries the letters up the chimney, and theoretically, Father Christmas reads t he smoke. Gifts are opened Christmas afternoon.

From the English we get a story to explain the custom of hanging [stockings](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/uk.htm) from the mantelpiece. Father Christmas once dropped some gold coins while coming down the chimney. The coins would have fallen through the ash grate and been lost if they hadn't landed in a stocking that had been hung out to dry. Since that time children have continued to hang out stockings in hopes of finding them filled with gifts.

The custom of singing carols at Christmas is also of English origin. During the [middle ages](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/uk.htm), groups of singers called "waits" would travel around from house to house singing ancient carols and spreading the [holiday](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/uk.htm) spirit. The word "carol" means "song of joy." Most of the popular old carols we sing today were written in the nineteenth century.

The hanging of greens, such as holly and ivy, is a British winter tradition with origins far before the Christian era. Greenery was probably used to lift sagging winter spirits and remind the people that spring was not far away. The custom of kissing under the mistletoe is descended from ancient Druid rites. The [decorating](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/uk.htm) of Christmas trees, though primarily a German custom, has been widely popular in England since 1841 when Prince Albert had a Christmas tree set up in Windsor Castle f or his wife Queen Victoria, and their children.

The word "wassail" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon phrase waes hael, which means "good health." Originally, wassail was a beverage made of mulled ale, curdled cream, roasted apples, nuts, eggs, and spices. It was served for the purpose of enhancing the general merriment of the season. Like many of the ancient customs, "wassailing" has a legend to explain its origin. It seems that a beautiful Saxon maiden named Rowena presented Prince Vortigen with a bowl of wine while toasting him with the words "Waes hael." Over the centuries a great deal of ceremony had developed around the custom of drinking wassail. The bowl is carried into a room with great fanfare, a traditional carol about the drink is sung, and finally, the steaming hot beverage is served.

For many years in England, a roasted boar's head has been associated with Holiday feasting. The custom probably goes back to the Norse practice of sacrificing a boar at Yuletide in honor of the god Freyr. One story tells of a student at Oxford's Queen [College](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/uk.htm) who was attacked on Christmas Day by a wild boar. All he had in his hand to use as a weapon was his copy of Aristotle, so he shoved the book down the boar's throat. Wanting to retrieve his book, the student cut off the animal's head and brought it back to the college where it was served for Christmas dinner with much pomp and ceremony.

The celebration of Boxing Day, which takes place on December 26 - the feast of St. Stephen, is a part of the holiday season unique to Great Britain. Traditionally, it is on this day that the alms box at every English church is opened an d the contents are distributed to the poor. Also, this is the day that servants traditionally got the day off to celebrate with their families. It became traditional for working people to break open their tip boxes on this day. Boxing Day began in the mid -nineteenth century when the custom of tipping by rich persons to persons in service positions had apparently gotten out of hand. Children and others pretended to be in the trades and solicited tips. The custom was expanded to giving to anyone and everyone who had less money than you did, and soon the streets at Christmastime were full of aggressive soliciting of tips. To contain the nuisance "Boxing Day" was designated as the one day for giving to the less fortunate.

The Scots celebrate Christmas rather somberly and reserve their merriment for New Year's Eve which is called Hogmanay. This word may derive from a kind of oat cake that was traditionally given to children on New Year's Eve. The first person to set foot in a residence in a New Year is thought to profoundly affect the fortunes of the inhabitants. Generally strangers are thought to bring good luck. Depending on the area, it may be better to have a dark-haired or fair-haired stranger set foot in the house. This tradition is widely known as "first footing."

Caroling is particularly popular in Wales where it is called eisteddfodde and is often accompanied by a [harp](http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/worldxmas/uk.htm). In some rural areas a villager is chosen to be the Mari llwyd. This person travels around the town draped in whi te and carrying a horse's skull on a long pole. Anyone given the "bite" by the horse's jaws must pay a fine.

****

**Christmas in the United Kingdom (4)**

Christmas in the United Kingdom is traditionally a time for families getting together and relaxing. Many families attend church on Christmas Eve. There are usually two services to choose from - an early evening one which is more convenient for those with younger children, and Midnight Mass to see in Christmas day.

A traditional Christmas dinner is eaten at lunch time and generally consists of turkey, stuffing, roast potatoes, brussels sprouts and other vegetables, gravy, then Christmas pudding and brandy butter.

The Queen's Speech is broadcast on the TV at 3pm, where she gives her yearly Christmas message and sums up the events of the year.

Pantomimes are a traditional play, performed at local theatres around the country for a few weeks over the Christmas holidays. They often star TV personalities and pop stars. The plays are a mix of fairy stories and folk tales and encourage audience participation. The male roles are usually played by women and the female roles by men, which add to the fun.

Nativity Plays are generally organized at school, where young children get a chance to participate. The play recreates the scene of Jesus' birth in the stable and tells how Mary and Joseph were visited by the shepherds and the three wise men. On Christmas Eve, children leave mince pies and brandy out for Father Christmas and a carrot for his reindeer. Christmas stockings are hung above the fire place and Father Christmas comes down the chimney and fills them during the night.

****

**Christmas in the United Kingdom (5)**

**Traditional:** The sugar mice are a traditional treat. These mice came from England in a most unusual way. The woman who decorated the museum tree found herself on a talk show in London and made an appeal for donated sugar mice and to her surprise she received over 100 mice that are on the museum tree.

The Christmas tree did not come to England until 1841 when Prince Albert had a Christmas Tree brought in and decorated in Windsor Castle for his wife Queen Victoria and their children. The tradition caught on. Throughout the United Kingdom, December 26th Boxing Day or St. Stephen's day signals the beginning of the 12 days of Christmas. On December 26th the alms or poor boxes were traditionally opened and the funds were distributed to the poor. It is also the day that servants are given off to celebrate Christmas with their families. Also on this day working people would open up their tip boxes. For the next twelve days there are parties, pantomime shows (children's plays-musicals about well-know fairy tales. Audience participation is greatly encouraged) and other types of entertainment which ends on January 6th.

The first known Christmas card was mailed in the 1840's in England. Most of the Christmas traditions we practice today actually had their roots in nineteenth century Victorian England. Charles Dickens might be considered responsible for planting these ideals in America through his writings-especially A Christmas Carol.

In England Santa is called Father Christmas. Father Christmas is a descendant of an ancient pagan spirit (Hern) who appeared in the mummer's plays. He has long, white hair and beard and he dresses in a long green or red robe that is decorated with Holly, Ivy and Mistletoe. On his head he wears a wreath made of the same plants. Legend states that Father Christmas originally dropped coins down the chimneys and that the coins would be lost if there were no stockings hung up on the mantle or at the edge of the bed. Children send letters to Father Christmas by burning them up in the fireplace. It is thought that the requests are carried to Father Christmas in the smoke. On Christmas Eve it is traditional to leave a carrot out for the reindeer and mince pies, brandy or other warming drinks for Father Christmas. On Christmas morning, the children will open gifts from their stockings and later the presents under the tree are open.

On the Christmas dinner table are noisemakers called crackers. Tom Smith invented these traditional favors in 1850, as a way of selling more of his confections. Crackers are wrapped in fancy paper at each end there are pull-tabs. When the tabs are pulled a loud noise or crack with some sparks is produced. Inside the cracker there may be a paper hat, a toy and some candy. In most English homes when the crackers are open, you must put on the hat and enjoy the contents of the cracker.

****

**Christmas in Norway (1)**

On December 24, all work comes to a halt late in the afternoon. Everyone puts on their finest clothes to greet the season and the largest sheaf of grain is hung out for the birds to make their Christmas merry, too. Christmas Eve dinner begins with rice porridge which contains one lucky almond. A bowl is also set out for the barn elf so that he will continue to watch over the animals and not turn mischievous. A Christmas pig provides most of the meat dishes.

The worldwide popularity of Santa Claus has caused the resurrection of an ancient Norse figure called Julesvenn. In ancient times he would come during the feast of Jul to hide lucky barley stalks around the house. Now, called Julnissen, he has multiplied into a group of gnomes who come on Christmas Eve to bring gifts to good children.

A "Julebukk" made of straw is a very popular Christmas decoration. It is named for the goat that drew the cart of Thor, the god of thunder in Norse mythology.

In olden days, Norwegians kept the season bright with a huge Yule log, which extended out from the fireplace into the center of the room. As it burned, it would be pushed farther and farther into the fireplace to provide light and warmth throughout the holiday season. Today the Christmas tree, introduced from Germany in the early part of the 19th Century, has replaced the Yule log in most homes.

TRONDHEIM --- Christmas in Norway starts with the Advent season. This is the time allotted, sort of, to Christmas preparations (at least that's when most people start, despite promises to the contrary last year: Next year I WILL start earlier...) Decorations in most Norwegian homes are sparse during most of December. The following is the norm in most homes:

1. The Advent stake: A light-decoration composed of seven lights looking like candles, arranged in a fashion similar to Jewish Hanukah-lights. It is displayed in a window.

2. The Advent Star: An electric fixture as well. It is shaped like the star, and is meant to hang in the most prominent window. It represents the Star of Bethlehem. Walking through a typical rural town in Norway, you'll see a star in almost every house. It exists in many shapes and fashions, depending on which store it was bought in. Most of the time it has seven points.

3. The Advent Candles: These are four candles in a candleholder. On the First Sunday of Advent (There are four, the last one will be as late as 24th dec.) the first candle is lit, and allowed to burn a quarterway down.

On the Second Sunday of Advent, that and one more candle is lit, and allowed to burn a further quarterway down. This continues through to the Fourth Sunday of Advent when all the candles are lit, and allowed to burn out.

4. The outdoor tree: If the family has a garden or a yard with fir(s) or spruce(s) in it, they will often place lights on them. A lit tree covered with snow can be a sight to behold. The lights used for Christmas trees and the other decorations in Norway are rather larger than those in the US - they are large enough to look a bit like candles.

Close to Dec. 1st, shops start putting up their Christmas decorations. It is considered untasteful to put up Christmas-window decorations earlier than this. The streets are decorated for Christmas as well, in a style recognazible for most people, with lights, garlands, and the like. The Christmas-street, as they call it after the transformation, is opened with some ceremony, particularly in larger cities. Most communities also have a public Christmas-tree, which is lit on whichever is first of First Sunday of Advent, or Dec 1st. Sometimes the two are done simultaneously.

By the 23rd, time is getting short. This day is called Li'l Christmas Eve. The Christmas tree must be brought indoors on the morning, at the latest, to acclimatize it. Everything needed for Christmas MUST be in the house before the shops close (Closed shops on Christmas Eve seems to be making its way across Norway), and the Christmas decorations are brought out of storage. This day is also the most common day for making the porridge. The Christmas tree must be put in the holder, and fitted to both holder and to the living room. Then it must be decorated. Things are hectic, with high levels of stress, and it is one of the more dangerous days for relationships and marriages.

Now TV-traditions start kicking in. On TV, normally at around 10 p.m., they show a 10 min. program that has been broadcast every year since we've had TV in Norway. It is "The Countess and the Butler". The butler ("Same procedure as last year, Miss Sophie?") serves at the dinner party of Miss Sophie ("Same procedure as EVERY year, James!"). Invited are Sir Toby ("Cheerio, Miss Sohpie!"), Admiral von Schneider ("Schkaull!"), Mr. Pomeroy ("Happy new year, Miss Spohie!") and Mr. Winterbottom ("Well, here we are again, and here's to one of the nicest women that ever lived!"), all of them quite dead, with the butler having to stand in for them at the drinks. The menu is Mulligatawnysoup, followed by fish, fowl, and fruit. Everybody watches it.

The Christmas tree is decorated in the evening, or during the night (some families still stick to decorating the Christmas tree when the kids are asleep). During the night, parents will also fill a stocking with candy and hang it at the head of the bed, while the children are asleep.

Come christmas morning, the children will wake to find a fully prepared house. The children will be busy watching TV most of the morning, with such classics as "Tri Orisky Pro Popelku" ("Three Nuts for Cinderella" - a Czech movie version of Cinderella), and Disney's "From All of Us to All of You", but before this, NRK has its own Christmas childrens programme, live from studio, with HRH Princess Märtha Lousie as guest. There are many good Norwegian movies on as well, with the best being "Flåklypa Grand Prix", known in English as "The Pinchville Grand Prix", a puppet animation movie, and "The Journey to the Christmas Star". At 5 p.m., the boys choir Sølvguttene sings the Christmas in, as church bells all over Norway peal the Christmas in, and people gather for dinner. At midnight, NRK transfers to the Midnight Mass broadcast from St. Peter's Church in the Vatican.

Christmas morning is otherwise used to get showers and to get everything prepared for Christmas dinner. It is now allowable to read the Christmas albums as well. These are large, landscape-format comic albums issued for Christmas. Longtime favourites here include Beetle Bailey, Snuffy Smith, the Katzenjammer Kids, Bringing Up Father, and Blondie, and many others of international and Norwegian origin. The No. 1, however, is "Nr. 91 Stomperud", about one Private No. 91 Stomperud, who is the typical Norwegian serviceman doing his compulsorey primary service with the army.

The rice porridge is normally for lunch, for those families that have it. Christmas dinner differs greatly across Norway. My family has ribs, medistersausage, medister patties, Christmas sausage, sossiser (small handmade sausages), with gravy (the thin deep brown European type), potatoes, and vegetables. Some areas have poached cod. Some have pinnekjøtt (lambribs prepared in a special way), some have lutefisk, some have Smalahove.

The barn elf is called fjøsnisse, or simply nisse, and in many places functions as Julenisse (Santa Claus). Christmas presents in Norway are placed in a huge heap under the Christmas tree.

****

**Christmas in Norway (2)**

**Christmas in Norway is associated with white snow, candles, Santa Claus, decorations in red, green and gold, and the smell of homemade cookies.**

Christmas is definitely the number one family holiday in Norway. Half the 24th, the 25th, 26th and half of the 31st are national holidays in Norway. The schools have a lot longer vacation, usually lasting two weeks.

**Santa Claus in Norway**
... is called *“Julenissen”* and looks very much like the Santas found elsewhere in the world. However, there exists another character whose name ends with “nisse” in the Norwegian folklore exists - a peculiar figure named the “Fjøsnisse” (the barn “nisse”). For a long time, when most Norwegians were farmers, this “Nisse” was believed to be a secret helper in the barn. If the family on the farm was nice to him and left him a bowl of porridge every Christmas eve, he would be kind to them and help them the next year. If they didn’t, they could expect accidents, sick animals and mysterious noises.

This superstition has been mixed with the commercial Santa Claus, leaving the Norwegians with one name covering both figures and the mutations in between them - “Nissen”. Today one may often see Christmas displays where there is one head-Santa (Julenissen) surrounded by many other Santas (versions of fjøsnisser), or even entire Santa families!
However, the commercial, Coca-Cola made Santa Claus dominates the displays in the big shopping malls.

Drøbak, a city in eastern Norway claims to be Santa’s hometown. Drøbak shares this claim with Nuuk (Greenland), Reykjavik (Iceland), Mora (Sweden), and Rovaniemi (Finland). There are special Santa Claus post offices and/or Santa workshops in all of these towns. Oh, well, maybe Santa lives in the desolate arctic areas on the North pole!

**Advent:**
In December every year in Bergen, the inhabitants are invited to participate in the making of the world's biggest gingerbread city. Schools, kindergartens, anyone who wants to can make a gingerbread house and bring it to "Galleriet", a local shopping mall. All the gingerhouses, gingerboats, gingerschools, gingerpeople, and gingerconstructions are put on display in the top floor, together making up the largest gingerbread city.
Santa Claus and some of his helpers are present every day.
Visiting and admiring the city is possible from mid-December. Admission is free.

The Norwegian children have Advent calendars with 24 doors. They open one door in the calendar each day from the December 1st to 24th. The 24th, [Christmas Eve](http://library.thinkquest.org/18802/norxmas.htm#24), is the day the Norwegians open their [presents](http://library.thinkquest.org/18802/norxmas.htm#gifts) and have their big [Christmas meal](http://library.thinkquest.org/18802/norxmas.htm#meal).

Behind each door in the Advent calendar is a small chocolate, or if it’s a homemade calendar, something else, like a pencil or other type of little gift.

**December 13: “Luciadagen” - Day of St. Lucy:**
This is a Swedish tradition which the Norwegians adopted in the 1950s. The day is mostly celebrated in kindergartens and schools. The children dress up in long, white costumes and one or more girls have a “crown” on her head. This crown is traditionally decorated with candles, but since this is pretty dangerous, electric, candle-shaped lights have become normal to use instead of the real thing.

The children line up and walk in a sort of procession, girl with the crown in front. As they walk they sing the “Lucia sangen” - the song of St. Lucy. They also hand out
“lussekatter” - very yellow buns with raisins - which they have made the day before.

**Christmas preparations...**
The shops start putting up their Christmas decoration in mid November, but the big rush to buy presents doesn’t start until mid-December.

.*..At home*
As the time gets closer to Christmas Eve, many families bake Christmas cookies. The tradition is that there must be at least seven different kinds of Christmas cookies on the table on Christmas Eve.

Making marzipan or marzipan figures dipped in melted chocolate is also a popular way to prepare the holiday season.

*...In schools*
Many schools arrange Christmas workshops some days before the holidays start. This kind of activity is found in grades 1-7 almost without exception, but it can be found in grade 8-10 if the students ask specifically for it and the teachers have time for a day of making Christmas cards and decorations (presents?).

Before the school’s Christmas vacation starts, the pupils in grade 2/3 - 7 perform a play for their parents. The play is a version of the Christmas Gospel. The show also includes some Christmas carols, and usually end with everyone being served cookies.

The last or the second last day before the vacation starts, the church holds a special Christmas service for each school. The subject of the priest’s preaching is usually something more connected to the children’s everyday life and incidents at school than the religion itself. The older students have an active part in the service too, reading the Christmas gospel aloud, lightening candles, and playing musical instruments.

**December 23rd: “Lille julaften”**
**- “Little Christmas Eve”**
Most Norwegians decorate their Christmas tree in the evening of Dec. 23. The decorating of the house and the tree is done by the entire family.

There is a start in the top of the tree, and electric candles-shaped lights on the branches. Tinsel, hearts, angels, nisser and sometimes flags are a part of the tree decoration. Heart shaped christmas baskets made of colored, glossy paper is a decoration which s widely used.
If you want to learn how to make this kind of basket, click [here](http://library.thinkquest.org/18802/norbask.htm).

**December 24th: Christmas Eve**
When the children wake up (usually very early), they open the last door in their advent calendar. In many, many, many families the children then wait for the Christmas specials on TV to begin. The Christmas specials consist of a bunch of cartoons (in the traditional NRK special there is a lot of Disney’s Christmas Cards), some dramaseries for youngsters and a movie for the whole family.

Many families go to church this day at 3 o’clock. A lot of people also use this day to lay flowers on the graves of their loved ones.

*Christmas dinner:*
While the kids are busy watching television, the parents prepare the Christmas meal in peace and quiet. The Christmas dinner varies throughout the country:

The Christmas dinner is like a family reunion. The grandparents, parents, children (also if they are grown-ups) and sometimes aunts and uncles gather around the table.

In western and Northern Norway, “Pinnekjøtt” (salted and steam boiled ribs from lamb) is served with potatoes .
 In the Eastern parts of Norway pork extremely is common, while in other areas “lutefisk” (fish steeped in lye!) is the main dish. These last years more and more have started having turkey for Christmas.

*After dinner:*
Before the presents can be opened, the family walks around the Christmas tree holding hands and singing carols. Afterwards, they gather around the table where cookies and coffee have been put, and may as soon as they want to start opening their presents.

The way the gifts are distributed varies from family to family :
Many families put the presents under branches of the tree before the dinner starts. When the caroling is done, the gifts are handed out, one by one, and opened so everyone can see what was inside (Each present is marked with a little tag saying "To:", "From:" and "Merry Christmas")-

In other families, especially where there are small children, the father, grandfather or an uncle excuses himself after the meal and shortly after re-enters dressed as Santa Claus. He’ll bring a bag of gifts, deliver them, get a cookie, then leave for so to re-enter as father/grandfather/uncle (“Oh, Daddy, you just missed Santa!! You’re never here when Santa arrives...”).

**December 25th:**
Is a quiet day spent mostly with the family. Some go to church. Many go to family Christmas parties.

**December 26th:**
More Christmas parties, but now with friends. At the Christmas parties, games including singing and dancing are often played - or at least they used to be, the tradition has gradually started to disappear.

**December 31: New Year’s Eve**
At 5 o’clock the children go outside dressed in wacky costumes. They go from door to door singing carols and are rewarded with candy, cookies or oranges. In a way, it resembles a mixture of trick & treating and caroling. In some parts of Norway, the children don’t do this on New Year’s Eve but in the afternoons between the 27th and the 30th. The tradition is called to go "Nyttårsbukk".

The fireworks start some hours before midnight, around 9pm and from it just builds up. Generally everyone can set off fireworks, but in certain areas where the houses are very close or made of wood, fireworks are restricted or illegal (for obvious reasons). December is the month when most fires occur in Norway, due to fireworks and a large number of knocked-over candles.

**January 6**
The 13th day of Christmas - the day for taking down the decorations and getting rid of the tree if it hasn’t been done yet.

**“Christmas tree parties” - “Juletrefester”**
Many firms, companies, organizations and other institutions throw parties for the children of their employees (or members) in Early January. These parties are called “Christmas tree parties”, and even though it’s already past New Year, the theme of the party is always Christmas. The children are served hot-dogs and cookies, sing Christmas carols, play games, and form large circles and walk around a giant Christmas tree. Afterwards, Santa arrives with presents and candy to everyone.

****

**Christmas in Norway (3)**

Norwegian children always remember a little gnome **Nisse** at Christmastime. He guards all the farm animals, and he plays tricks on the children if they forget to place a bowl of special porridge for him.

Norway has its gift-bearing little gnome or elf. Known as **Julebukk** or "**Christmas buck**," he appears as a goat-like creature. **Julebukk** harkens back to Viking times when pagans worshipped Thor and his goat. During pagan celebrations a person dressed in a goatskin, carrying a goat head, would burst in upon the party and during the course of evening would "die" and return to life.

During the early Christian era, the goat began to take the form of the devil, and would appear during times of wild merry-making and jubilation. By the end of the Middle Ages, the game was forbidden by the Church and the state. In more recent times the goat has emerged in the tamer form of Julebukk.

A favorite holiday cookie is called a **sand kager** is made by mixing 2 cups of butter and sugar, 4 cups of flour, and 1 cup of chopped almonds. This pressed into a tin, baked until golden brown, and cut into squares.

In the dark afternoons, in the Viking tradition, children go from house to house asking for goodies.

Norwegians eat lye-treated codfish, and wash it down with boiled potatoes, rice porridge, gingerbread, and punch.

**Mari Langholm**

Norwegians are very close to the North Pole, and they strongly hope for the magic of snow for the holydays! Christmas in Norway begins with the Saint Lucia ceremony on the 13 December. At the crack of dawn, the youngest daughter from each family puts on a white robe with a sash, a crown with evergreens and tall-lighted candles, accompanied by the other children, the boys dressed as star boys in long white shirts and pointed hats. They wake their parents, and serve them coffee and Lucia buns, lussekatter. The custom goes back to a Christian virgin, Lucia, martyred for her beliefs at Syracuse in the fourth century. The Saint Lucia ceremony is fairly recent, but it represents the traditional thanksgiving for the return of the sun.

The Christmas tree, juletre, spruce or pine tree usually, are often decorated with candles, apples, red harts, cornets, straw ornaments, balls of glass and tinsels, all depending on what you like. The homes have a scent of resin, hyacinths, red tulips, spices and tangerines.

Some children, especially in the country still believe in and remember a little gnome or elf, fjøsnissen at Christmas time. He is told to guard all the farm animals, and he plays tricks if the children forget to place a bowl of special rice porridge, risengrynsgrøt, in the barn or outside for him. This is old superstition. Norwegians also love to eat this porridge on the 23 December, lillejulaften, and then it holds a magic almond inside. The one who finds it gets a prize. Some eat the rice porridge for lunch on the 24th. Perhaps in the evening they have some gløgg, it is a spicy drink (you can add some red wine if you like), with raisins and chopped almonds. Julaften, on the 24 December, a lot of people go to church service before they gather at home around the table for a nice Christmas Eve dinner. The dinner can consist of a rib with a good crackling, ribbe, (served with "cabbage à la norvégienne", surkaal, potatoes, carrots, cauliflower, sprouts, prunes and brown sauce), salted and dried ribs of mutton, pinnekjoett, (served with potatoes, carrots and mashed swedes), or lye-treated codfish, lutefisk (served with potatoes, bacon and pea stew). For dessert: rice blended with whipped cream served with a red sauce, riskrem, caramel pudding, cherry mousse, or whipped cream blended with multer (orange, wonderful berries found on the mountain - looks like rasberries).

In the evening Santa Claus, julenissen, arrives with gifts. Often it is snowing. In the days between Christmas and New Years Eve, romjulen, the children sometimes go from house to house in the afternoon asking for sweets, this tradition is called "Christmas buck", julebukk. The tradition harkens back to the Viking times when pagans worshipped Thor and his goat, but just a few children keep up the tradition today.

On Christmas Day a lot of people have a big brunch at noon or dinner in the afternoon for friends and family. It is done the Italian way and can last for several wonderful hours!

Traditional cakes and cookies made at Christmas can be julekake (with raisins), kryddekake, delfiakake, rosettbakels, fattigmann, smultringer, goro, silkekaker, pepperkaker, kokosmakroner. Different nuts, fruits, figs, dates and sweets also belong to the celebration. God Jul! (Merry Christmas!)

****

**Christmas in Norway (4)**

Norwegian children like to go carol singing and most children do! Often children will dress up as characters from the Christmas Story, such as the Shepherds and Wise Men, and go singing from house to house in their local neighbourhood. Sometimes they carry paper stars on poles with them.

One tradition in Norway is that families light a candle every night from Christmas Eve to New Year's Day.

As in [Finland](http://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/finland.shtml), a sheaf of wheat is often left out for the birds to eat over Christmas. Also a type of porridge is sometimes left for the 'Nisse' a mythical gnome who is believed to guard the farm animals.

Maybe the most famous custom about Christmas in Norway is the big [Christmas Tree](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/trees.shtml) that Norway gives to the [UK](http://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/uk.shtml) every year. The tree is given as a present to say 'thank you' for the help that the people of the UK gave to Norway during World War II. The tree stands in Trafalgar Square in the middle of London and often hundreds of people come to watch when the lights are turned on.

In Norwegian Happy/Merry Christmas is 'God Jul'. [Happy/Merry Christmas in lots more languages](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/languages.shtml).

Many different types of cakes and biscuits are eaten over the Christmas period in Norway. One of the most popular is a special bread called 'Julekake' that has raisins, candied peel and cardamom in it. [Here's a recipe for Norwegian Hole Cake](http://www.whychristmas.com/fun/recipe_holecake.shtml).

****

**Christmas in Norway (5)**

In Norway, as nowhere else, white is the color of Christmas.

It is seen in sometimes record-breaking snowfalls, but also in the Norwegian custom of pure white twinkling light displays that everywhere cheer the soul through the long nights of December.

Norwegians have celebrated "the holidays" long before it was named as such.

Pre-Christian Nordic tribes were known to have burned the [first Yule logs](http://www.noelnoelnoel.com/trad/yulelog.html), and also decorated with holly and ivy to warm them through what would have been an otherwise stark winter. Not surprisingly, Christmas in Norway today is the most popular holiday of the year. It is a wonderful mix of modern traditions and ancient superstitions that still survive, for example, in their version of a Julesnissen, or Santa Claus, a Christmas gnome.

The origins of Julesnissen are found in the unpredictable [*nisse*](http://www.aftenposten.no/english/local/article936069.ece)of ancient times, who are infamous for playing tricks on the unsuspecting. Even today, in parts of rural Norway, families may leave out a bowl of [Christmas rice porridge](http://www.cybershingle.com/recipes/pages/rice-risgrot.htm) for them on Christmas Eve just to keep on their good side.

Meanwhile, in the weeks leading up to Christmas there are countless parties to attend and at home, lots of cleaning and baking to do - especially in households that still provide the customary [julekaker](http://www.norway.org/News/archive/1996/199610cookies.htm), the seven different types of Christmas cakes or cookies.

Another popular home holiday project is the creation of the traditional [paper Christmas baskets](http://library.thinkquest.org/18802/norbask.htm) that some families carefully make by hand for Christmas tree decorations.

As Christmas finally arrives, the big event is always on Christmas Eve, when gifts are exchanged and the holiday meal is served. Depending on the region, a [Norwegian Christmas dinner](http://www.european-schoolprojects.net/festivals/Norway/christmas.htm) may feature a lutefisk, cod or halibut dish, while in other areas lamb or savory pork ribs with crispy crackling (Svineribbe) is the main attraction.

****

**Christmas in Iceland (1)**

Iceland's 'scary' troll Santas herald Christmas fear

REYKJAVIK - They don't wear red, and they're not jolly: the 13 Santas who usher in Christmas in Iceland are "descendants" of trolls and ogres who revel in terrifying young children.

Tradition holds they visit homes, in succession, on the 13 days before December 25, depositing either sweets or a toy or -- the worst case scenario for bad behavior -- a potato in shoes children have left by a window.

"The Santas are trolls and come from Icelandic folklore; it is in their nature to be evil," explained folklorist Steinunn Gudmundardottir.

Known as Yule Lads, they can strike fear in the hearts of youngsters, as witnessed when "Stekkjastaur", the first-born of these 13 troll "brothers", made an appearance at Iceland's National Museum 13 days before Christmas.

About 100 children waited anxiously as he burst into a room, sporting a traditional Icelandic wool sweater, knickerbockers and a bright red wool cap that matched his rosy nose and cheeks half-hidden by a bushy grey beard.

"I am not only the first Santa to come to town, I am also the eldest," he bellowed, stomping sternly and demanding who knew where his name came from.

A few trembling hands went up before bolder children shouted: "because you are inflexible" and "because you drink sheep's milk". Over the centuries the Yule Lads "slowly evolved into being kinder, although they occasionally tease and maybe steal," She said the change probably dates back to a 1746 law banning parents from scaring their children with the likes of evil trolls and Santas.

"The gift-giving came later, in the 20th century, and this had to do with influence from the American Santa Claus," she added.

"I remember the first time I got a potato in my shoe," says Margret Yr Ingimarsdottir, a 25-year-old student and mother.

"It now only happens on rare occasions that Gryla stuffs misbehaving children into her pot. We try to keep her in check," the first Yule Lad said.

And although the Icelandic Santas themselves are less evil than in the past, they still enjoy a good tease.

Stekkjastaur warned, at the museum, that his "brother Hurdaskellir, or Door Slammer, who is the seventh to come to town, is a bit of a bully. "All the door slamming can frighten the little children sometimes," he said.



**Names of the 13 Santas of Iceland**

Their names have varied in different locales and have changed over the centuries, but here's a roster of Iceland's Yulemen and their bad habits, in the order by which the Yulemen arrive:

1. Sheep-Cot Clod - Sneaks into the sheep cot (pen) and harasses the sheep.

2. Gully Gawk - Tries to milk cows because he loves heavy froth on milk.

3. Shorty - Hovers in the kitchen, waiting for the chance to snatch a roast.

4. Ladle Licker - So thin he resembles the utensil he loves to lick.

5. Pot Scraper - Snatches dirty pots and pans and scrapes the burned-on food by hand.

6. Bowl Licker - Like the puppy of the house, he's adept at licking bowls clean.

7. Door Slammer - Out of sight, late at night, doors go bang in the night.

8. Skyr Gobbler - Skyr is the Icelandic term for yogurt, which he has a penchant for.

9. Sausage Snatcher - Skilled at clambering into rafters, where the sausages are hung to smoke.

10. Window Peeper - A very ugly guy, who can be a fright to see peering through windows.

11. Door Sniffer - Leave the door to the kitchen ajar and he'll stick his big nose into it, looking for food to steal.

12. Meat Hook - Down your chimney comes his long pole with a hook on the end, aimed at snatching meat that may be hanging from your rafters.

13. Candle Beggar - Steals Christmas candles when no one is looking.

**Christmas in Iceland (2)**

The holiday season in Iceland is getting closer. The holiday season is very important to Icelanders. Short days of winter are brighter with decorative lights and the happy mood surrounding the Icelanders as Christmas approach.

Many Icelanders consider Christmas as a time of giving. We give gifts to friends, family and to people in need in Iceland and abroad. Christmas is also the time of Santa Claus.

Icelandic tales and heritage tell stories of not one but thirteen Santa's each with its own name often associated with his look or behavior. Skyrgamur is associated with the Icelandic product Skyr because he likes to eat Skyr. Stufur, or Shorty in loose translation, gets his name from being the shortest of the Icelandic Santas. If your plan is to visit Iceland 13 days or less before Christmas then you will have a good chance of meeting one of those fascinating fellows.

Christmas is also the time many Icelanders hope for snow. We dream of white Christmas because the snow gives Christmas the perfect ingredient, making the perfect match of a beautiful nature and a kind spirit.

****

**Christmas in Iceland (3)**

Spending Christmas in Iceland? Learn about Iceland's christmas traditions here. First of all, "Merry Christmas" in [Icelandic](http://goscandinavia.about.com/od/languagehelp/a/icephrases.htm) means "Gleileg jol gott og fars!"

When planning a vacation during christmas in [Iceland](http://goscandinavia.about.com/od/icelan1/), it is always helpful for visitors and travelers to get acquainted with local Icelandic Christmas traditions and different customs.

Christmas in [Iceland](http://goscandinavia.about.com/od/icelan1/) is an interesting experience as this country has many old traditions for celebrating Christmas. Expect no fewer than 13 Icelandic Santa Clauses! In [Iceland](http://goscandinavia.about.com/od/icelan1/), they are called jólasveinar ("Yuletide Lads"; singular: jólasveinn). Their parents are Grýla, a mean old woman who drags off naughty children, and Leppalúði, who is not as mean. The origin of these "Santas" is centuries old, and each has its own name, character and role.

Nowadays during Christmas in Iceland, their function is to come to town bearing gifts and candy (and a prank or two). The first jólasveinn arrives 13 days before Christmas and then the others follow, one each day. After Christmas, they leave one by one. The Icelandic Christmas season lasts 26 days.

Thorláksmessa (mass day of St Þorlákur) is celebrated on 23 December. Shops are open until 23:30 and then close for three days during Christmas in Iceland. Many attend midnight mass. The main Christmas celebration takes place on Christmas Eve, including the gift exchange.

A special Icelandic custom for children is to put a shoe in the window from December 12 until Christmas Eve. If they have been good, one of the "Santas" leaves a gift - bad children receive a potato.

On New Year's Eve many people attend community bonfires and exchange visits. At midnight there is a spectacle of fireworks when almost every home in [Iceland](http://goscandinavia.about.com/od/icelan1/) will light its own fireworks.

[Iceland](http://goscandinavia.about.com/od/icelan1/)'s holiday season ends on January 6, with a special celebration of the Twelfth Night. This is when elves and trolls come out and celebrate with the Icelanders, dancing and singing. On this day, the festivities of New Year's Eve (bonfires and firework show) are repeated in smaller extend all over Iceland.

****

**Christmas in Iceland (4)**

Christmas in Iceland is something else. This is the darkest time of the year, the time when you can frequently admire northern lights when the night sky is free of clouds.

Iceland has a Christmas tradition all of its own. Santa Claus such as most of the Western world made his first appearance in Iceland as featured in advertisements from a famous brand of soda drinks, and now the white beard and red pajama is absolutely the thing to wear in December.

Don’t be deceived, though. Underneath the familiar ho-ho-ho appearance, a prankster is lurking. Read the story as it is still told to Icelandic children.

The Icelandic tradition has it that a horrible hag called Grýla is living in the mountain. She feeds mostly on children who whine and fret, yet she will occasionally make do with the odd sheep or two. She has several sons, the Yuletide lads. Some say there are nine, other have counted thirteen.

 They are pranksters and thieves, a bad lot. During the Advent, they come down from the mountain, one a day, until Christmas Eve. Then they return one by one. Their father is a stupid troll called Leppalúði. The Yuletide lads take after both parents. One of them steals meat, another licks spoons, yet another is a peeping tom, and so on. They are not dressed in red velvet and white fur, and they are far too young to have a beard. They are uncouth and dirty, and they shame to the spirit of Christmas.

The pictures of the Icelandic Yuletide lads were taken in the Icelandic Christmas house near our home in down town Reykjavík. This is an unusual shop, selling Christmas decorations all year round.

Christmas every day of the year, how does that sound?

Which reminds me. During the dark ages, the days of old, children who did not wear something brand new on Christmas Eve were eaten by the Yuletide cat. Another thing, the cows and sheep penned in could talk like humans during Christmas Eve, and furthermore, they expressed themselves in rhymes, but the humans unlucky enough to hear them lost their minds, and no wonder.

****

**Christmas in Iceland (5)**
The Yuletide season today is very much a family affair. The family decorates the house and tree together and spends a great deal of time at home. Family gatherings are a main feature of Icelandic Yule. The season consists of:

*Jól - Yule/Christmas*
Celebrations start in Iceland at 6 p.m. on Christmas Eve, Yule Eve. This may have descended from the old days, when a new day began not at midnight but at 6pm. Thus in Iceland there are thirteen rather than twelve days in the Yuletide season. There are also many traditional stories and much seasonal folklore. The Jólasveinar or Yuletide Lads and their parents Grýla and Leppalúði are the most popular seasonal characters.
Traditional Yule food is [Hangikjöt](http://www.fortunecity.com/banners/interstitial.html?http://www.fortunecity.com/rivendell/tiamat/553/food.html), *smoked mutton*. In times past a sheep was often slaughtered before the beginning of the Yuletide season and a rich Kjötsúpa or *mutton soup* served. Another traditional delicacy, the Rjúpa or *rock ptarmigan*, started out as the poor man's dinner but is now an expensive meal. Grautur, *Porridge*, on the other hand, was in past times a delicacy in Iceland because of the scarcity of grain. Another Yuletide specialty is Laufabrauð or *leaf bread*. This is very thin sheets of dough cut into intricate patterns and fried.

Christmas gifts, Yule presents, were rare until late in the 19th century. Summer presents were much more common, though everyone in the family received a new item of clothing either before or at Yule. The new clothing was a sort of bonus for work well done. Tradition has it that those who did not receive a new garment would be captured by the Jólaköttur or *yule cat*.

*Aðfangadagur - Christmas Eve/Yule Eve*
Aðfangadagur is the day that all Icelandic children await impatiently, as after the evening meal they can open their Yule presents. [TV](http://www.fortunecity.com/rivendell/tiamat/553/) transmission stops in Iceland around 5 p.m. on Aðfangadagur and only restarts at 10 p.m. Usually the family listens to Evensong on the radio then partakes of the evening's meal. Only then are presents opened and, according to the children, the real Yule begins. It is usually the immediate family that spends Aðfangadagur together.

****

**Christmas in Poland (1)**

**T**he highlight of Christmas celebrations in Poland is Christmas Eve as the family watches for the first star of the night or ***Gwiazdka*** (little star), in remembrance of the Star of Bethlehem. The moment the star appears, everyone exchanges greetings and good wishes. Families unite for the most carefully planned meal of the year, ***Wigilia***, the Christmas supper which ends a 24-hour fast. The Wigilia derives its name from the Latin word ***vigilare*** which means to keep watch or keep vigil.

The dinner table is covered with the best white tablecloth with bits of hay underneath as a reminder that Jesus was born in a manger. Custom dictates that an even number of people must be seated around the table with one place left empty for a stranger, the spirit of a deceased member of the family or the Holy Spirit.

Traditionally, there is no meat served during Wigilia. Still, the meal is plentiful and luxurious. It begins when the head of the household breaks the ***Oplatek***, a wafer of unleavened dough stamped with scenes of the nativity, and shares is with the family (and sometimes, the family's livestock in the barn).

An uneven number of dishes is served (the quantity depending on the wealth of the household). An even number would eliminate any hope of an increase in wealth, children or anything desirable.

Though the dishes vary between regions, certain items are found almost everywhere. Favorites include mushroom and beet soups, prune dumplings, dumplings with sauerkraut, varieties of fish, and noodles with poppy seed. Desserts vary regionally, but usually include poppy seed cake, strudel, and ***kutya***, a dish made with grain, nuts, or raisins and honey. Often there is a compote of twelve fruits in honor of the Apostles.

After supper, family and guests stay at the table until, at a signal from the host, they all rise in unison and leave. This is the result of an old superstition that the first to rise will die before the next Christmas Eve.

After the Wigilia, presents are opened having been brought by the Star Man, or the Little Star or, in some areas, Santa Claus.

The remainder of the evening is given to stories and ***koledy*** (carols) around the Christmas tree. The tree is decorated with beautiful blown glass ornaments, a result of the recent revival of the glassblowing trade in Poland. There are also ornaments made from eggshells, colored paper, wafers and straw.

In the rural areas carollers go door to door, one carrying a star, one dressed as King Herod, and others as angels and shepherds. Midnight finds many families attending ***Pasterka***, the Shepherd's Mass.

In the days leading up to Christmas ***Szopka*** creche competitions are held in Krakow's Market Square. The elaborate and colorful Szopka are constructed to resemble the local architecture and they take hundreds of hours and great patience to complete. It's considered a great honor to be selected for the first prize.

After the competition they can be seen on display in the cathedrals and churches throughout the area.

****

**Christmas in Poland (2)**

Despite being for so long under communist law, Poland has always maintained its Christmas intact. Traditional Christmas Eve Suppers, The uniquely Polish Krakow Crib competition, and a host of wonderful Christmas songs and carols have stayed alive in the tormented country with so many pressures on its borders. The following accounts cover the chief elements of the Polish Christmas which have changed little over the ensuing decades. And the Legend of the Krakow Crib.

There are few countries so rich in National customs as Poland. They are clung to in the peasants cottages, carried out in the homes of the rich, kept up fondly by the exiles far away from home. Most beautiful among them is the festival of Christmas Eve. On that night a feast is held which is not only a sacred family gathering, but has its own sweet and solemn religious meaning.

Deep snow lies on the ground. The cold is intense, dry and frosty. There is the gay sound of tinkling bells as the guests, muffled in furs, drive up in sledges, little bells ringing on the horses heads. All is ready for the supper; but it must not begin till the first star appears in the sky, which in Poland would be about 6 o'clock. Therefore this Christmas supper, besides the name by which it is generally known, 'Wiligia', the Vigil - is known also as the Star supper. The children are watching eagerly for the star to rise. When at last it twinkles in the sky, the signal is given, and all go in to supper.

The dining room is lit with unusual brilliance. In memory of our Saviour's birth in a manger, straw or hay is laid upon the table under a white cloth. Before the company seat themselves, the father, or head of the family, takes a plate containing a wafer. It has been specially prepared and blessed by the parish priest and has some sacred sign stamped upon it - IHS or a picture of the Nativity, with perhaps a border of flowers. The father makes a little speech bidding those present to be at peace with God. He then breaks the wafer with the mother, and then with everyone present. The absent ones are not forgotten. Where we send Christmas cards, Poles send these blessed wafers first tearing off a small corner to show those who are to receive them, that the donor has broken it with them as a token of affection. How many Polish families have been parted from each other by exile! We can guess at the tender pleasure they feel when across the sea comes these little white wafers to remind them of the old times when they too sat round the straw covered table; to prove to them that though their place is now empty, they are there in the spirit and remembered with love.

After the wafer is broken, during which ceremony everyone wishes each other a happy Christmas and the beautiful polish carols are sung, the supper is eaten. It is the first meal of the day, as Christmas Eve is a strict fast in Poland. There are generally about eleven courses, but they may not include any meat. Almond soup, consisting of almonds, raisins, rice and milk, must always be served; and beetroot soup is also often on the table. Then come different kinds of fish - baked pike, for instance, or carp; vegetable dishes, very curious to our notions, such as small bags of pastry, filled with sauerkraut and swimming in butter, and cabbage leaves wrapped around fried or boiled millet.

The sweets include Polish poppyseed cakes, greatly beloved by the Polish children. They are a compound of white poppyseeds and jam in alternate layers. These are followed by elaborate ginger cakes and all kinds of pastry. The dessert is such as we have in England in midwinter - apples, oranges, nuts and dried fruits. Hungarian wine and the famous old Polish national drink of Mead are served with the solid foods.

Towards the end of the supper, it is obvious that something special is going to happen. The children are all led away from the dining room into another apartment. In comes a personage dressed as Father Christmas, but who in Poland is called the 'Starman'. (He is traditionally accompanied by the Starboys, who carry a lighted star lantern and sing carols.) Very often he is the parish priest in disguise. He examines the children in their catechism, and reproves those who answer wrong, and sometimes, in extreme cases, arranged beforehand with the parents, has recourse to a little birch!

Presently at the sign from the mother, the Starman tells the children that he has brought them rewards for their good conduct, from his own country, Starland, and his helpers have been arranging them in the dining room. He leads the eager children back to the dining room, where a transformation scene has taken place. Fancy lanterns and lights of all descriptions illuminate the room. Beautifully decked Christmas trees adorn the corners; and we can guess the rest of the scene, because children are the same all over the world.

After supper all the family, with the servants, gather around the fireplace. They sing the Christmas hymns. Then up come young boys from the village, carrying a great paper star lantern, singing carols. They are given presents, and the children safely packed off to bed, the elders spend the evening chatting till midnight. Then they drive in sledges through the deep snow to the midnight mass.

The village church, lights streaming from its windows onto the frozen white ground outside, is crowded with the peasants in their heavy sheepskins, and topboots; with their sonorous voices chanting the Christmas hymns. They too have broken the Christmas wafer. What Pole has not? Even the cattle are not left out. The wafer is crumbled into their food in memory of Christ being laid in a manger.

Christmas Day itself is kept like an ordinary Sunday. But there are several more little traditions connected with Christmastide. During the days around Christmas, beginning with Christmas Eve, Starboys carolling the Christmas songs go from house to house carrying the Szopka a miniature shed with puppets that act wonderfully well the sacred story of Christmas. Two days after Christmas, on St. John the Evangelists Day, the congregation goes up to the altar rails. The priest comes to each one and gives them the sacred chalice to drink from. This is in memory of St. John's martyrdom in boiling oil.

Then come Twelfth Night, the Epiphany. The people take with them to church small jewellery boxes, containing a gold ring, some incense, and amber in memory of the gifts of the Magi, and chalk. These objects are blessed; and when the owners return home, they draw with the chalk on every door in the house the initials K.M.B. with a cross after each. These letters stand for the names of the Three Kings, which according to tradition were Kaspar, Melchior and Balthasar; and they remain on the doors all year.

As we have seen, Christmas Carols are a great feature of a Polish Christmas. They have been handed down for centuries, and are extremely beautiful. (The Polish National Hymn is a Carol entitled 'God is Born'.) A Pole who escaped from Siberia has told a touching story about these Christmas Carols. He languishing in his dungeon. All alone as he was he had lost count of time. Suddenly one night he heard among the clanking fetters a burst of the well known Polish Carol rising from the cell next to his. Then for the first time he knew that Poles were near him and it was Christmas Eve.

**THE POLISH SZOPKA**

The Polish Crib is varied, in the mountains they carved relief pictures, with the shepherds dressed in traditional garb for example. But in Krakow, they have a special tradition. It is a Nativity scene set inside the doors of a model of the Wawel Cathedral. Every year there is a competition to find the best model. People come from all over Poland, not just Krakow. The cribs can be six inches high, or six feet. Some have mechanisms, or lights. There are two elements which are the same they all are covered in coloured foils, and they all have the same architectural structure of the Cathedral.

This competition began in 1937. It was intended to bring back to life a tradition which had died shortly after the first world war, that of the Crib Theatre. To the Square in Krakow's centre come the artists carrying their Szopka. It is a magnificent sight. The winners are kept in the Museum of Ethnography, the rest are sold in a gloriously colourful marketplace, overlooked by the statue of Poland's famous author, Adam Mickiewicz. The best ones snapped up as quickly as they are put down. The event is covered by world reporters and has become probably the most famous Christmas tradition of modern Poland.

Abrozy Grabowski, eminent Polish historian, recorded in 1831 one of the most complete descriptions of the origin of the Szopka. From him we learn just what it was that the Poles of Krakow wished to preserve with the start of the competition in 1937. he wrote:

"A Szopka is a small itinerant theatre, made up of coloured paper, which boys are taking round households to the amusement of children each evening, starting with Christmas Eve and till Candlemas Day, that is to say, throughout January. The actors in the crib are dolls (puppets), which one of the boys, kneeling behind the crib, sets in motion, carrying on the suitable dialogue and singing various concepts. The main parts are: King Herod with the Jew beside him, a Cracovian and his bride, a mountaineer and his woman, a Cossack, peasants and their steward, a Jew and Jewish woman who, all in pairs, leave the crib and dance and sing in front of it. A soldier also comes out and disperses the dancing dolls.

This portable puppet theatre, was common throughout Poland in earlier times, and in common with similar practice in Hungary, was accompanied by Starboys who sang carols. It was in 1808 that the Krakow Szopka in the style of a Church rather than a Theatre, which may have been an earlier style or even a different style which was around at the same time, was eloquently recorded. In the diary of Kazimierz Girtler is written:

"It was for the first time too that I could see a crib, only it was not the kind of civilised crib which imitates the theatre but an old time dressed up stable, with the Holy Child, Holy Virgin, St Joseph, kings and shepherds as well as an Ox and a Donkey. On either side of the stable there are two towers as if the said stable was put up in a chapel. Candlelit windows of the towers cast a glamour around. The drama consisted in the arrival of the three kings, followed by the shepherds and then the action developed helped along by the dextrous hands of a boy, who sitting behind the crib, directed the movements of these puppets on sticks. Whereas a chorus sang carol songs from canticles instead of speeches and conversation from the figures on the stage."

****

**Christmas in Poland (3)**

In Poland, [Advent](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/advent.shtml) is the beginning of Christmas Time. It's a time when people try to be peaceful and remember the [real reason for Christmas](http://www.whychristmas.com/story/). People try not to have excess of anything. Some people give up their favourite foods or drinks and parties and discos are not widely held. Some people also go to Church quite frequently. There is the tradition of the 'roraty', special masses (or communion services) held at dawn and dedicated to [Mary for receiving the good news from the angel Gabriel](http://www.whychristmas.com/story/angel.shtml).

During Advent, people also prepare their houses for Christmas. There's lots of cleaning and people wash their windows and clean their carpets very thoroughly. Everything must be clean for Christmas day!

A special stew called 'Bigos' is made. It's cooked over a period of two or more, the longer the better! It's made of sauerkraut, cabbage and meat. Each family has their own recipe.

In Poland, Christmas Eve is a very important and busy day. There are many things to do preparing food, the [Christmas Tree](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/trees.shtml) is decorated with tinsels, lights and glass balls. Gold, silver gold and white chains resembling long, silver and glittering hair is also hung on the tree and a star is placed on the top.

[Nativity Crib](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/nativity.shtml)s are also common decorations and Children take part in Nativity plays at schools and in Churches.

People in Poland also like kissing under the [mistletoe](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/mistletoe.shtml)!

After that the house is cleaned again and everyone also gets cleaned up and puts on their festive clothes. People are normally very hungry on Christmas Eve, as it is traditional that no food is eaten until the first star is seen in the sky! So children look at the night sky to spot the first star!

At the beginning of the meal, a large wafer biscuit called an 'Oplatek', which has a picture of Mary, Joseph and Jesus on it, is passed around the table and everyone breaks a piece off and eats it. Sometimes a small piece may be given to any farm animals or pets that the family may have. A place is often left empty at the meal table, for the Christ Child, as in the [Czech Republic](http://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/czechrep.shtml).

Sometimes straw is put on the floor of the room, or under the table cloth, to remind people that Jesus was born in a stable or cow shed.

The meal consists 12 dishes of mostly fish as meat was forbidden, mushrooms, puddings and cake. Common dished include pierogi, bigos and karp (carp). Later children check the presents under the tree and and give them out.

After the meal, the candles on the [Christmas Tree](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/trees.shtml) are lit and people eat, talk and sing carols. Children sometimes dress up as characters from the Christmas story and go carol singing.

Christmas Eve is finished by going to Church for a Midnight Mass service.

The days after Christmas are often spent with family and friends.

In Polish Happy/Merry Christmas is 'Wesołych Świąt'. [Happy/Merry Christmas in lots more languages](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/languages.shtml).

Polish Children also often get dressed up and go carol singing on Epiphany, January 6th

****

**Christmas in Poland (4)**

Traditionally, Advent is an important season in the Polish year, with special church services, known as **Roraty**, being held every morning at 6am. The four Sundays of Advent are said to represent the 4,000 years of waiting for Christ.

During Advent and, in some homes, on Christmas Eve, bees wax or plain wax is poured on water, and fortunes are told from the shapes which emerge.

Special tasks carried out during Advent are the baking of the Christmas **piernik** or honey cake, and the making of Christmas decorations. **Pierniki** are made in a great variety of shapes, including hearts, animals and St Nicholas figures. Traditional decorations include the **pajaki**, which are handmade mobiles, stars and decorated egg shells. Pajaki are traditional decorations, rather lots of bomb lets, colorful paper chains and lots of electric lights.

Beautifully lit Christmas trees are placed in all public arenas, outside churches and in homes. Traditionally the trees are decorated with shiny apples, gift walnuts, beautifully wrapped chocolate shapes and many homemade decorations and candles. On the top of the tree is a star or a glittering top piece. In many homes, sparklers are hung on the branches of the trees giving it a magical air. Sometimes the trees are left standing until February 2nd, the feast day of St Mary of the Candle of Lightning.

During Advent, the **Gwiadorze** or star carriers or carol singers, used to begin wandering through the towns and villages and this would continue until Epiphany. Some of the **Gwiadorze** sang carols, others recited verses or put on **Szopke** or puppet show, or **herody** or nativity scenes. The last two customs are developments from traditional manger scenes or **Jaselka** or crib.

Christmas Eve, **Wigilia**, is an important part of the Polish Christmas, in fact, the most important rituals are celebrated on this day.

A traditional food found in Poland is **Oplatek** which is a piece of bread pressed with a holy picture on the surface. Oplatek is more symbolic than real food. We celebrate with at least 12 different vegetarian dishes like: mushroom soup, carp, cabbage with pea, stuffed dumplings, and shells macaroni with poppy "makielki". In some homes - some hay is put under the tablecloth (it is connected with Christ's manger).

People once carried these **oplatek** from house to house and wish their neighbors a Merry Christmas. Nowadays, the bread is mostly shared with members of the family and immediate neighbors. As each person shares the bread, they would have to do two things: forgive any hurts that have occurred over the past year and to wish the person all the happiness in the coming year.

****

**Christmas in Poland (5)**

Poland has many celebrations, and each of them with different customs. Many of these customs go back a thousand years. Through the years the Polish holidays have mixed with the Roman Catholic holidays. The Roman Catholic holidays are not really Polish because the Poles are Catholic. The Poles have modernized some of the ways of celebrating their holidays. Christmas and Easter are the two most important holidays in Poland. They could actually be called the two most important holiday seasons in Poland, because their celebrations last 2 or 3 months.

Christmas In Poland starts on November 12th and lasts until January 6 or February 2nd in some places. Throughout Advent, the season leading up to Christmas, the Poles celebrate many special saints' days. On November 12th, St. Martin's Day, is traditionally a day when Poles feast on roast goose. The Poles, have parties, with dancing on November 25th, St. Catherine's Day, and November 30th, St. Andrew's Day. On St. Andrew's Eve, Poles hold fortune-telling. At midnight, people pour hot wax into a pot of cool water, and as the wax starts to cool, shadows are cast on the wall. The shadows are said to tell the people to expect in the new year. Their dreams that night are supposed to predict the future as well.

Traditionally on December 6th, St. Nicholas day, St. Nicholas usually dressed as a bishop, comes in his sleigh with gifts for the children. Good children would get religious pictures, honey cakes, or other presents. As for the bad children, they would get coal. However, there are few bad children in Poland on St. Nicholas Day. Today St. Nicholas comes dressed more like the American Santa Claus, and not always in a sleigh. Polish children will also get Advent calendars. Each day the boys, and girls would open a door of the calendar. Behind the doors are pieces of candy, or a picture.

There is also plenty of story-telling, baking, and caroling to do. Puppet theaters telling the story are very common in Poland. *Pierniki* , a type of honey cake, is baked in early December, and since they get better with age, are not eaten until Christmas Eve, December 24th. Pierniki come in many shapes: animals, saints, and nativity scenes are among the many. As Christmas gets close groups of people go house to house singing Christmas songs.

Another Christmas tradition, among Poles, is breaking the*oplatek* . The oplatek is thin wafer with a Christmas scene on top of it. Poles break off a piece of the oplatek, and share it with family and friends. They may, also send a piece to friends who live far away.

On Christmas Eve, dinner is called the *wigilia* . There must be an odd number of foods in the wigilia, and is bad luck not to taste everyone of them. After the wigilia, people sing Christmas songs, and open gifts from Santa, or in some places the Starman. On Christmas night, dinner may include ham, sausage, or*bigos* , a soup made from sauerkraut, and sausage. Other soups, vegetables, and many small cakes are also served. Another tradition is making ornaments to hang on the Christmas tree.

On December 26th, St. Stephen's Day, the Polish are still celebrating Christmas. The time between St. Stephen's day and New Year's are a time to have parties, visit friends, and visit relatives. There is certainly plenty to do for Poles in the season of Advent. A customary Polish Christmas lasts until January 6th, the 12th night, or even until February 2nd,*Candlemas* .

****

**Christmas in Hungary (1)**

**The holiday season starts with Advent in Hungary, too. Advent wreaths can be seen in stores, schools, offices, and in almost every home. This time of year is the preparation for Christmas. Candles are decorated with red and gold ribbons symbolizing life and brightness. Most children get Advent calendars with a small gift or candie for every day before Christmas. Lights and decoration however stay inside the houses - streets and houses are not as spectacular there as they are in the US. Also, we never decorate a tree before the Holy night. Christmas trees can be seen during advent only in stores symbolizing holiday shopping.
We decorate trees on the holy night in immediate families. Christmas is a private, family holiday in Hungary, we don't go to parties. Most families decorate the tree together, but some families keep the older tradition that tree should be a surprise for chidren who even believe it was bought by angels. When I was a child I so truly believed it that I SAW angels flying around with small trees in their hands. Children enter the room only when the small tree bells ring and music arises. Gifts lay around the tree with small labels saying the name of someone in the family. Family-members sing Christmas songs together, then open their gifts and spend the night together. The menu for Christmas night is usually fish or cabbage with the special poppy-bread called "beigli." Christmas is a 2-day holiday here, we are proud that it was 2-day holiday even during communism. This was actually the only thing we could gain from our lost 1956 war. In the 2 days of Christmas big families meet, often travelling to another town, or maybe very close friends visit each other. But these days are private days of our rush lives. We stop for 2 days and turn to people we love the most. Christmas is the holiday of love and heart.**

****

**Christmas in Hungary (2)**

A month before Christmas shopkeepers decorate the front doors of their shops in Hungary. In the bustling cities the streets are embellished with holiday decorations, while, on the street corners, you can buy hot fried or roasted chestnuts.

Hungarians celebrate *Luca Napja* or Luca's Day on the 13th of December. According to tradition, village people make a chair of seven different kinds of wood. This is part of an old superstition that claims you can stand on this chair at the Christmas Eve Mass and see all who are witches in the room.

Several weeks before Christmas wheat is soaked in a cup so that it will germinate in time for the Christmas celebrations. People usually use it to decorate the salad for their holiday dinner.

The Christmas dinner usually features fish, especially fried fish and a special Hungarian fish soup. For dessert there is always a wide variety of holiday cookies. One of these is *Beiglie*, a soft rolled cookie that contains walnuts and poppyseeds.



**Christmas in Hungary (3)**

In Hungary, Christmas Eve is very important and is called 'Szent-este' which means Holy Evening. People spend the evening with their family and decorate the [Christmas Tree](http://whychristmas.com/customs/trees.shtml). Sometimes only the adults decorate the tree (without the children there), so when children come in and see the tree, it's a great surprise and they are told that angels brought the tree for them.

The main Christmas meal, which is also eaten on Christmas eve, consists of fish and cabbage and a special kind of poppy bread/cake called 'Beigli'.

The Midnight Mass service is very popular in Hungary. Most people go to Church after their Christmas meal.

On Christmas Day people visit their close family.

[St Nicholas](http://whychristmas.com/customs/fatherchristmas.shtml) also visits Hungary on the 6th December. In Hungary he is known as 'Mikulas'. Children leave out shoes or boots on a windowsill to be filled with goodies!

****

**Christmas in Hungary (4)**

**In Hungary there is no Santa Claus at Christmas. St. Nicholas Day -- December 6th -- is a minor secular holiday, when children put their polished shoes in the window. If they were good, St. Nicholas will fill their shoes with candy by morning, but will leave a bundle of dry twigs in the shoes of bad children, as a warning. He makes his rounds on a horse drawn sleigh, his lean frame bent under the weight of his sack.**

**Christmas is the magic season. By Christmas Eve, the children's excitement is at a fevered pitch. Food preparation began a week ago, but tonight the Baby Jesus will bring a tree and gifts to all. Banished from home, children and their sleds congregate on every slope at near by parks, chattering excitedly in anticipation of the big night. Returning home they find that the living room door is locked and the dinner table is set. Traditional Fish Soup is usually followed by Fried Fish and the meal concludes with the festive Walnut and Poppy Seed Horseshoe, colloquially referred to as Beigli, for dessert. No one notices that the father slipped away near the end of the dinner. The doors of the living room open and there stands "The Tree". Blinking candles are reflected in the wide-open eyes of the children. Shining glass-balls, foil wrapped candies, meringue wreaths and tinsel cover the evergreen in breathtaking loveliness. Carols are sung joyously and the presents are opened.**

**Christmas dinner is a family meal centered on Roast Goose with Red Cabbage, Tortes and Cookies. Boxing Day, the weary cook serves Stuffed Cabbage prepared the week before. Throughout the season there is much visiting, Horseshoe, Cookies, Tortes and coffee or brandy are offered to the guests.**

****

**Christmas in Hungary (5)**

The holiday season starts with Advent in Hungary, too. Advent wreaths can be seen in stores, schools, offices, and in almost every home. This time of year is the preparation for Christmas. Candles are decorated with red and gold ribbons symbolizing life and brightness. Most children get Advent calendars with a small gift or candie for every day before Christmas. Lights and decoration however stay inside the houses - streets and houses are not as spectacular there as they are in the US. Also, we never decorate a tree before the Holy night. Christmas trees can be seen during advent only in stores symbolizing holiday shopping.

We decorate trees on the holy night in immediate families. Christmas is a private, family holiday in Hungary, we don't go to parties. Most families decorate the tree together, but some families keep the older tradition that tree should be a surprise for chidren who even believe it was bought by angels. When I was a child I so truly believed it that I SAW angels flying around with small trees in their hands. Children enter the room only when the small tree bells ring and music arises. Gifts lay around the tree with small labels saying the name of someone in the family. Family-members sing Christmas songs together, then open their gifts and spend the night together. The menu for Christmas night is usually fish or cabbage with the special poppy-bread called "beigli." Christmas is a 2-day holiday here, we are proud that it was 2-day holiday even during communism. This was actually the only thing we could gain from our lost 1956 war. In the 2 days of Christmas big families meet, often travelling to another town, or maybe very close friends visit each other. But these days are private days of our rush lives. We stop for 2 days and turn to people we love the most. Christmas is the holiday of love and heart.



**Christmas in Romania (1)**

Romania is located in Southeastern Europe, bordering the Black Sea, between Bulgaria and Ukraine.

The tradition in Romania is for children to travel from house to house on Christmas night singing carols and reciting poetry. Ancient legends are told and retold. According to custom, the leader carries a large wooden star called a ***Steaua***, which is covered with shiny paper and decorated with bells and colored ribbon. A picture of the Holy Family is pasted in the star's center, and the entire creation is attached to a long pole. A lighted candle is placed inside to give the effect of a heavenly lantern.

A special cake, the delicious ***Turta***, is made for ***Nosterea Domnului Isus***, or Christmas Eve. It is composed of thin layers of rolled dough which represents the swaddling clothes of the Christ Child.



**Christmas in Romania (2)**

Carols form an important part of the Romanian folklore. Romanian carols are not simple songs (a sort of invocation in verse sung by children and lads, on the evening of Winters Holidays) with religions origin, but wide windows through which we are allowed once in a year to go by the immaculate snow-towards the evergreen Heaven and to eye-touch God at least for an instant , in order to give us the power to surpass the life's obstacles. Carols put people in the mood for a perfect communion with the simple and healing greatness of Jesus' Birth. The carol singers walk in the streets of the villages and towns holding in their hands a star made of board and paper with biblical scenes painted in water colors and they sing:

"Do you receive the pretty star,
Pretty and so very bright?
It Haseko we did in the sky
Just like God thought it would be right,
Stand it could be seen on high,
Just like we did in the sky"

On the first Christmas day, children walk in the streets of snow covered towns and villages, when holding in their hands a star made of board and paper with a biblical scenes painted in water colors or an icon showing Virgin Mary and baby Jesus, they sing somewhat of a question:

"Do you receive the pretty star,
Pretty and so bright?
It has appeared on the earth
Just like God through it would be right
And it could be seen on high,
Just like we did, in the sky.

Five days before Christmas with a very sharp knife the pig is cut.

This custom is called "Ignatius" from Saint Ignatius (celebrated on December the 20th). Straws are put in his snout and then it is covered with burning straws and then is it singed. The pig is nicely washed and covered with a piece of cloth for ten minutes. The housewife comes and incense the pig and then the husband comes and makes the sign of the cross on the pig's head saying to the family gathered around: "Let's eat the pig!" After the pig is cut there is a feast called the pig's funeral feast or alms. At the feast the whole family friends and neighbors take part. All eat the rid or the skin of the bacon and they also eat small pieces of fried pork they drink wine or plum brandy.



**Christmas in Romania (3)**

Christmas is popularly known as 'Craciun' in Romania. The festival was once observed in the country with much fanfare. But after the surrender of Romania to the USSR during World War II, the country was declared a communist republic in 1947 and its citizens were forced to abandon many of their Christmas traditions. However, the festival has again begun to be observed in the country, since the country regained its independence in 1989. Following the overthrow of the communist regime with army-supported countrywide revolts and the subsequent break of Romania from the Soviet bloc, the country has slowly gone back to many of the earlier ways and traditions. Once again is the Christmas season being observed with joyous celebrations by the citizens of Romania. Young adults are now experiencing the Yuletide traditions they previously heard their parents and grandparents discuss.

Christmas in Romania falls on December 25 and is generally considered one of the most important religious holiday. A very important Christmas custom practiced in Romanian villages is 'Ignatius', the sacrifice of a pig in every house in the honor of Saint Ignatius. A pig is specially chosen for this purpose and fed to make it grow fat, often around 300 pounds. Five days before Christmas, on 20th of December, a very sharp knife is used to cut the throat of the pig. Thissacrificial ceremony is performed in the back yard of houses. Thereafter, the matriarch puts the straws in the pig's snout, covers it with burning straws and singes it. Then, the patriarch makes a sign of the cross on the pig's head and announces to the family - "Let's eat the pig!". Then, a small portion of the pig's meat is immediately fried and a feast is held. All the extended members of the family, friends and neighbors are invited to the feast and the meat is then shared with them, along with bacon and plum brandy. This feast is known as the pig's funeral feast. The 'Ignatius' ceremony is looked down as a barbaric custom in countries like U.S., but Romanians insist that it is performed to ensure that the soul of the pig receives ample gratitude for the nourishment that it provides to all in the family.

But the real celebrations begin with the decoration of the Christmas tree on "Ajunul Craciunului" (Christmas Eve). Fir trees happen to be the main Christmas trees here. Gift exchanges take place in Romania in the evening of Christmas Eve, contrary to the American way of opening gifts on Christmas morning. Romanian children believe that 'Mos Craciun' (the Romanian equivalent of Santa Claus) is the one who delivers them their presents. Unlike in the U.S., the Romanian children do not leave milk and cookies out for 'Mos Craciun'. Economic conditions are harsh in the country and the gifts vary too. While urban children receive expensive gifts and money, those in the villages have to settle with sweets, fruit, nuts, and pastries as Christmas gifts. A common and popular gift is knot-shaped bread, which, in Romania, symbolizes an abundant harvest.

The singing of carols is a very important part of Romanian Christmas festivities. Throughout the Christmas season, little Romanian children (especially those in the villages) visit every house in the locality singing carols such as Steaua ('The Star'), Trei Pastori ('The Three Shepherds') and Mos Craciun ('Santa Claus') and reciting poems and legends tied to the festival. On the first day of Christmas, many carolers walk through the streets of the towns and villages, holding a star made of cardboard and paper on which are depicted various scenes from the Bible. The leader of the group carries a large wooden star called "Steaua", which is wrapped up with metal foil and adorned with bells and coloured ribbons. An image of the Nativity is pasted on the center of the star, and the entire handcraft is attached to the end of a broom or stout pole. The singing is taken up first by young children, then the adolescents and lastly the adults, who join in often after midnight). In return for such performances, carolers recieve apples, nuts, traditional cakes ('cozonaci') and sometimes even money from each house. Romanian folklores abound with Christmas carols which lend a religious mood to the festival. Churches specially organize concerts to celebrate the occassion.

In Romanian familes, all the women cook for three days leading up to 'Craciun'. Christmas dinner in Romania is a rich, multi-course meal. On the top of the menu comes various kinds of pork sausages, along with plum brandy and home made pickles. 'Sarmale' , an indispensable item for the festive dinner, comes next. This dish consists of pickled cabbage leaves stuffed with a combination of pork and beef, along with rice, pepper, thyme and other spices. Other dishes to follow are roasted pork and turkey with red wine. The wine is consumed to celebrate the birth of Jesus. The last item is 'cozonaci', a cake filled with nuts and raisins. All the members of the extended family enjoy the feast together.



**Christmas in Romania (4)**

While much of the civilized world celebrate ancient Christmas traditions, it wasn't always so in Romania, a country once shackled to the now-defunct Soviet Union. Prior to the country's break from the communist-led Soviet bloc, Romanian residents were forced to abandon - or at least submerge - many of their Christmas traditions.

It has been 15 years since Romania regained its independence, and its citizens are once again filling the Christmas season with joyous celebrations. Young adults are now experiencing the Yuletide traditions they previously heard their parents and grandparents discuss. Christmas - called 'Craciun' in Romania - is once again alive and well.

Unlike many Americans, Romanians do not open gifts on Christmas morning. Instead, gift exchanges take place on Christmas Eve. Therefore, Romanian children do not leave milk and cookies out for Santa Claus - 'Mos Craciun' - to consume on the night of December 24. And while children in the U.S. typically ask for video games and electronics, those in Romania live with a harsher economic reality.

Romania is a tale of two classes. The urban population is typically much more affluent than the rural population. In the cities, some children will receive expensive gifts and money. In the villages, however, kids often receive sweets, fruit, nuts, and pastries as Christmas gifts. A common and popular gift is knot-shaped bread, which, in Romania, symbolizes an abundant harvest.

The sacrifice of a family's pig is customary in rural villages. Often grown to around 300 pounds, the pig's throat is cut in the back yard and the pork's hair is burned. After this, a small portion of meat is immediately fried. That meat is then shared with friends and neighbors, along with plum brandy. This ceremony may seem barbaric in the U.S., but it is performed to ensure the soul of the pig - which will provide the family with nourishment - receives ample gratitude.

All the women in a family cook for three days leading up to Craciun. On Christmas Eve fir trees are decorated. Groups go door-to-door singing carols and churches present concerts. Carolers are abundant. School children make large stars out of glossy paper and light them from within. They carry the illuminated star with them from house to house, singing carols such as Steaua ('The Star'), Trei Pastori ('The Three Shepherds') and Mos Craciun ('Santa Claus'). Young children begin the singing, then the caroling is taken over by adolescents and then, finally (often after midnight), the adults join in. At each house, carolers are given apples, nuts, traditional cakes ('cozonaci') and sometimes even money as a reward for their efforts.

Christmas dinner is a rich, multi-course meal. Several types of pork sausages are tabled, and plum brandy, along with home made pickles, are requisite. 'Sarmale' then follows. This dish consists of pickled cabbage leaves stuffed with a combination of pork and beef, along with rice, pepper, thyme and other spices. It is boiled slowly for hours and is paired with polenta. That dish is followed by roasted pork and turkey with red wine. The wine is consumed to celebrate the birth of Jesus. The meal ends with cozonaci, which is a cake with nuts and raisins. The entire extended family - children, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins - gather around the table to enjoy the feast together.

Though Romanian Craciun differs from a traditional American Christmas, it's easy to see the similarities as well: it's a magical time filled with celebrations, family and generosity.

****

**Christmas in Romania (5)**

The Christmas celebration lasts 3 days (December 25th-27th), however, in a broader sense it lasts a total of 19 days (December 20th-January 7th). The customs, magical practices and rituals whereby the world is symbolically recreated, mainly through Santa’s annual’s death and rebirth, can be broken down into two symmetrical periods. These are separated by a moment of “cutting through time”, from which the counting of days begins; thus, the ensuing first period is a rather ill-fated one, spanning between the Ignat (the pig’s ritual sacrifice) and the midnight before Christmas or the New Year, followed by a beneficial period spanning between the midnight before Christmas or New Year and Saint John’s Day. The former period is abundant with customs remembering the deceased to which Dionysiac cult elements are added, whereas the latter includes temporal rebirth practices, typical for the new year’s creative beginning.
The ritual sequences commencing the celebration of Christmas begin on December 20th, also known as the “Ignat’s day”, a day when a pig is sacrificed so that ritual food can be prepared for the Christmas feast out of its meat. Next comes Christmas Eve when the carolling begins, children being the first to perform this ritual, clustered in groups that will open with the carol “Oh, What Wondrous Tidings” (“O, ce veste minunata”), “Three Wise Men coming from the East” ( “Trei Crai de la rasarit”), usually known as the ‘star songs’.

On Christmas day, children and grown-ups alike wander around, singing carols. They may come from all over the country, for instance from central and southern Transylvania, Crisana and sometimes from Banat. Traditionally, they perform their carols wearing masks. The mask stands for a god in his zoomorphic instantiation, impersonated by the group leader, who wears the mask while performing the carol. Turca (the stag, BORITA) is born at the same time when the mask is made, and it revels and makes merry with the group of carollers acting as its divine company, dying violently, club-beaten, shot or drowned, so that it may be reborn in the New Year. Quite often, the group’s leader has fun scaring women and children with the mask; at the same time he may ask for his due, the money’s worth he thinks he should receive for the ritual he performed, being offered the most honoured guest’s seat at the group’s ceremonial table. Tradition has it that the heavens open on Christmas night, so that the spirits of the deceased may spend time with their beloved ones who are still on earth. Several biblical characters, such as St. Nicholas, St. Demetrius and St. George can be seen sitting at the princely feast.
During Christmas, a series of ritual deeds are performed, meant to purify the space through lighting a fire and putting on the lights; in the olden days, the Christmas log was sacrificed, whereby a fir-tree trunk was cut and burnt in the hearth on the night of December 24th; the ritual symbolises the Divinity’s death and rebirth, impersonating the year to come. This yearly sacrifice is part of an ancient burial ritual which has been replaced by the adorned fir-tree, laden with many gifts brought to children by Santa Claus. This custom became pervasive in the countryside, coming from the urban area, at the beginning of the 19th century, being also attested by the Romans, Serbo-Croatians and the Latvians. Thus, the Christmas tree we know today and the native custom of the blazing of the fir tree overlapped.
On St. Stephen’s Day, practically the first important sequence, that of temporal degradation, closes up with the burial ritual of Christmas, through a death and rebirth parody, organised by groups of young men, following the scenario of a genuine burial. Gathered at the “Folk dance house”, the young men pick up the one who will impersonate Christmas. He is seated on a wooden ladder, being covered, so that he may not be recognised. When the parodied burial ritual ends in humorous verses chanted on the melody of the funeral service, ”the dead” is thrown away, from the ladder onto the ice. That very moment, the reborn Christmas (The New Year) accompanied by young men and merry folk dance melodies, comes to the house where the dance is performed and the Christmas charity dinner is offered.
During the Christmas period until St. Basil’s Day (January 1st ) in Maramures, the magical practice is known as “the tying up of the beast in the forest”, which consists of laying a loaf of ritual bread, named High Steward, on the table, which is then tied with an iron chain. After 8 days, on New Year’s Day, the loaf of bread is cut into slices eaten by children and animals, and the chain is put in front of the stable, so that the cattle may step over it.

****

**Christmas in Czech Republic (1)**

In the Czech Republic, the Christmas tree is lit on Christmas Eve following a big meal. Holiday food includes fish soup, salads, vegetables, potatoes, eggs, and carp. This is topped off with a special Christmas cake laden with currents and almonds. According to tradition, there must be an even number of people seated at the table. There is an old superstition that if anyone leaves the table early, he will die the following year. As a result, everything is prepared and placed on the table before anyone is seated so that there is no need to get up before the meal is finished. Another superstition says that the flame of the candles on the dinner table should not be allowed to go out --- another sign of death.

After dinner, a bell will ring as a signal that the Christ Child has visited the home and has placed gifts under the tree. Some homes use strings of lights as part of their Christmas tree decorations while others use traditional candles placed in clip-on holders at the tips of the tree's branches. The ornaments are often the hand-blown glass creations of Czech artisans.

Later in the evening, the family heads for their parish church to attend Midnight Mass. The music will usually include the traditional "Czech Christmas Mass" (1796) composed by Jan Jakub Ryba, and perhaps some traditional Czech carols such as "Nesem vám Noviny" (Come All Ye Shepherds) and the world's best-loved carol, known in English-speaking countries as "Silent Night."

An ancient tradition shared by The Czech Republic and Poland involves cutting a branch from a cherry tree and putting it in water, indoors, to bloom. If the bloom opens in time for Christmas it's considered good luck, and also a sign that the winter may be short. The hope of early spring helps keep spirits up during the long dark winter.

****

**Christmas in Czech Republic (2)**

Celebrations for Christmas begin with the visit of St. Nicholas on December 6th and end with the visit of the Three Kings.

In Czech Republic, St. Nicholas is called **Svaty Mikalas** and is believed to climb to earth down from heaven on a golden rope along with his companions: an angel and a whip-carrying devil.

In Czech Republic, a girl can tell her future, it is said that according to tradition, by putting a cherry twig in water on December 4th. If the twig blossoms before Christmas Eve, the girl will marry sometime during the year.

The famous King Wenceslas of the Christmas Carol was a real King in this country. His goodness and his beliefs in Christianity infuriated his mother, and his brother murdered him on the Church steps. Before he died he asked for God's mercy for his brother's evil act. He became the patron saint of Czech Republic.

Christmas is a quiet and peaceful religious time here. They fast for one day, and have baked carp for Christmas dinner. St Nicholas visits, and brings good children gifts, and for those children who are bad, the devil is said to come with switches.

At midnight, most families go to Holy Mass or ***Pasterka*** as it is known. On Christmas Day, the churches are filled with evergreens and Christmas Trees. Celebrations go on for three days.

Czechs eat a soup made of cod roe and tempt each other with tales of a mythical golden pig.

****

**Christmas in Czech Republic (3)**

Step1

Kick off the holiday season on December 1, with the arrival of Advent. Keep an Advent calendar to count off the days until Christmas arrives.

Step2

Celebrate St. Mikulash (St. Nicholas) Day on December 6. Remember that the evening before, St. Mikulash will come to your home with Angel and Devil, his messengers. Angel leaves candy for well-behaved children, while Devil leaves coal and potatoes for children who have been bad.

Step3

Go to some public Christmas festivals if you live in a large city. Be sure to buy delicious baked chestnuts to eat.

Step4

Collect unique Christmas ornaments for your [tree](http://www.ehow.com/how_11728_celebrate-czech-christmas.html?ref=fuel&utm_source=yahoo&utm_medium=ssp&utm_campaign=yssp_art), such as glass balls, gingerbread cookies in the shape of carp, colorful cones and straw figures.

Step5

Prepare a large feast on Christmas Eve, and invite friends and relatives. Serve breaded, fried carp for the main course, and present a platter of strudl or vanocka, traditional Czech pastries, for dessert.

Step6

After dinner, cut an apple horizontally to tell your fortune. If the core looks like a star, that means the coming year will be filled with happy events. A cross-shaped core means your luck will be poor.

Step7

Remember that Jezisek (baby Jesus) or Santa Claus will come to your home to pay a visit. Ring the Christmas bell after dinner to announce that he has already come and gone, then watch the children open their presents under the tree.

****

**Christmas in Czech Republic (4)**

During the evening of the 6th December, children watch the sky for any sign of [St. Nicholas](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/fatherchristmas.shtml). They believe that he comes down from the sky with a bag of presents for good children and a bag of sticks for bad children. When children think they can hear him coming, they rush to the dinner table and say their prayers, hoping that they will get good presents.

In Czech Happy/Merry Christmas is 'Prejeme Vam Vesele Vanoce'. [Happy/Merry Christmas in lots more languages](http://www.whychristmas.com/customs/languages.shtml).

In the Czech Republic, children often get some small presents on St. Nicholas' day, similar to the stockings that children receive in the U.K. on Christmas day. The main presents are often opened on Christmas eve, in the evening!

At Christmas in the Czech Republic, even the animals are given a share of the Christmas food. This includes pets and any farm animals that families may have.

A place is left empty at the Christmas Day meal in case the Christ Child should come to the meal. A traditional Christmas meal in the Czech Republic is carp.

****

**Christmas in Czech Republic (5)**

**Traditional Christmas Greeting:** "Prejeme Vam Vesele Vanoce a stastny Novy Rok" and "Vesele Vanoce" in Bohemian
**Location:** Eastern Europe
**Tree Type:** Traditional

**Decorations:** The Christmas tree is not a longstanding tradition in most Western European countries, many of them including the Czech Republic have adopted it in the recent past. As fruit is considered luxurious during the cold Czech winter, the apples and pears that ornament the tree of the Czech Republic are special gifts that identify the Christmas season as a special time. Also found on Christmas trees are homemade angel, wreath, bell, heart and snowflake ornaments that are considered heirlooms in many families. Cornhusks, pinecones, and glass ornaments imported from the Czech Republic have also become Christmas traditions in some parts of the country. While they aren't found on the tree in the Museum, gingerbread, sweets, walnuts, and candles are also traditional ornaments in the Czech Republic.

**Traditions:** The Czech Christmas season begins with Advent four weeks before the 25th. St. Nicholas, who visits each village on the 6th accompanied by an angel and devil to symbolize the opposition between good and evil, provides another sign of Christmas' approach. The Christmas season is traditionally a time for fortune telling in the Czech Republic. On December 4th, St. Barbara's Day, people cut branches from cherry or morrello trees. They are placed in a warm corner in the hopes that they will bloom by Christmas Eve, a sign that the family will enjoy good fortune in the coming year.

The shapes seen inside apple cores or those created by pouring hot lead into water were also thought to prophesize the major events of the next year. The three days from the 24th to the 26th are a time of family closeness and religious reflection for many Christians in the Czech Republic. Those without close family members are often invited to join their neighbors in their celebrations, provided that no table has an odd number seated around it, as odd numbers on Christmas Eve are thought to bring bad luck.

Nativity scenes in all sizes from miniature to larger than life are set up in churches and in homes. In contrast to the more somber celebrations of Christmas, New Year's Eve festivities are extremely animated. Some people throw rowdy parties and others some have more sedate gatherings in restaurants, but almost everyone spends the evening of Silvester, December 31st, with friends celebrating the close of the holiday season.

****

Top of Form

Bottom of Form