

Celebrating Christmas Around The World

When December rolls around, people all over the world start preparing for Christmas. You probably have special traditions that you do with your family, like hanging up stockings by the fireplace or letting your younger brother put the star on the top of the Christmas tree. But did you know that people all over the world have their own special traditions, too? Christmas looks very different according to the country you're in!

Great Britain

In Great Britain, putting up the Christmas tree is a family activity, as is opening presents. Instead of leaving cookies and milk out for Santa (or Father Christmas, as he's called there), children will leave a plate of mince pies and a bit of brandy. Letters to Father Christmas aren't sent in the mail, either. They're tossed in the fireplace, where the smoke carries the letters up to where Father Christmas is to read them. Another particularly fun tradition for families around mealtime is thin, colorful paper crowns and crackers. Now, these crackers aren't the kind you can eat; they look like tubes wrapped in festive paper. When the ends are pulled, the cracker comes apart with a "crack!", and inside are toys, candies, and jokes. The British Royal Family even has special crackers made just for them!

Germany

Since the Christmas tree originated in Germany, they remain an important part of the Christmas celebration, and are decorated with beautiful glass ornaments. Traditionally, the tree wasn't set up until Christmas Eve, when presents are exchanged. Now, this doesn't mean that Christmas preparation is ignored until then! Advent calendars are very popular in many German homes. An advent calendar, which marks the 24 days before Christmas, will usually have a special card or small gift to open each day.

France

If you were to walk into a home in France near Christmas time, you'd probably find a clay Nativity set. A Nativity set is a small group of figurines made to resemble Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and other members of the Christmas story. You'd also probably see a Yule log crackling away in the fireplace. Instead of burning regular wood, French families will burn a special Yule log, sprinkled with red wine, on Christmas Eve.

Sweden

One of the more well-known Christmas traditions in Sweden takes place on December 13th. This day is known as St. Lucia's Day, and honors a young girl who would bring food to Christians in hiding in Rome. Legend says she wore candles on her head to light the way so that she could carry food with both hands. Today, St. Lucia's Day is celebrated with songs and ginger snap biscuits. Young girls will dress up like St. Lucia, with a crown of evergreens and

candles on their head and a red sash tied around their white dress. They lead towns or small groups around singing carols and handing out the biscuits.

Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, Christmas is celebrated on January 7th, not December 25th, and instead of "Christmas", it's known as "Ganna". On the morning of Ganna, people will dress in white or in a traditional striped shamma. They go to church, have a service, and then eat traditional foods like a wonderfully thick meat-and-vegetable stew called "wat". On January 19th, Ganna is ended with a three-day celebration. During this celebration, called Timkat, people will walk to the church in a procession with lots of music to remember Jesus's baptism.

China

Very few people celebrate Christmas in China, so big celebrations are only found in the larger cities. Christmas trees are usually plastic, and will be decorated with paper decorations like chains and lanterns. On Christmas Eve, a popular tradition is to hand out apples wrapped with brightly colored paper, and sometimes, people will go caroling. One of the more popular songs there is "Jingle Bells"!

Russia

Holiday dinners in Russia are accented with a white tablecloth and some hay to help remind the family of the manger that Jesus lay in. While France and Great Britain may enjoy lots of meat with their dinner, Christmas Eve dinner is meatless in Russia, and is eaten when the first star appears in the evening sky. Once everyone has gone to bed, Father Frost (the Russian version of Santa Claus) and the Snow Maiden, Snegurochka, place presents under the tree. The tree itself is not a Christmas tree EUR" it's a New Year's tree!

Italy

In Italy, Christmas starts a whole eight days before December 25th. People will use this time to sing songs, pray, and attend church services. On the day before Christmas Eve, kids will dress up like shepherds and go door-to-door playing songs and reciting stories and poems. In return, the kids will be given a bit of money, which they can then use to buy Christmas goodies. Another fun tradition is the Urn of Fate. The Urn (more of a large bowl, really) holds all the Christmas gifts for the family. Once the family is gathered together, members will take turns selecting a gift from the Urn until all the gifts are gone, so what they get is a complete surprise!

Spain

Spain has a really fun (and dangerous!) tradition called Hogueras. On the winter solstice, which is the shortest day of the year, people will make bonfires and celebrate. The braver individuals will actually jump over the bonfire! You'll also find lots of Christmas markets in Spain. Christmas

markets sell all sorts of holiday specialties like sweets, candles, decorations, and hand-made presents. Christmas dinner is eaten promptly at midnight, and after dinner, the family will often stay up for a few more hours, singing carols and playing games.

Japan

In Japan, Christmas is celebrated with turkey dinners on Christmas Day and beautifully decorated community Christmas trees. The Japanese version of Santa Claus is called Hoteiosho, who is said to look very much like Santa Claus with one exception: he has eyes in the back of his head, to better keep watch over children and to see who is naughty or nice. There is even a special Christmas sponge cake, decorated with whipped cream and fresh strawberries, that people get to enjoy at this special time of year.

Other Countries

It might seem like we've covered a lot of countries EUR" and we have EUR" but there are many, many more countries around the world, each with their own special way of celebrating Christmas. In Sri Lanka, for example, the people celebrate the Christmas season by setting off fire crackers at sunrise on December 1st. In Mexico, from December 16th all the way up until Christmas Eve, children will go around their neighborhoods to perform a series of processions called "posadas", in which they recreate the journey of Joseph and Mary searching for a place to stay. And in India, people will decorate a banana or mango tree instead of the usual Christmas tree! There are many more fun customs to discover about other countries, and the links below will help get you started!