

# CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS AROUND THE WORLD

## MEXICO

Mexico celebrates Christmas as a religious tradition. From December 16th - Christmas Eve, kids take part in daily posadas. Posadas means lounging. This celebrates the Christian story of Mary and Joseph looking for an inn and somewhere to stay. Each day kids walk down the streets and sing a song where the neighbors say "No room". Eventually, one house will welcome the kids where they will have food and everyone will engage in prayer. Christmas trees were not a big part of the holiday until recently. People in Mexico set up large Nativity scene, or nacimiento, in their homes instead of the Christmas trees. On Christmas Eve families get together for a meal. Main dishes include tamales, pozole, romeritos, and salad. For dessert a popular dish is bunuelo, which is fried pastries sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon or a hot sugar syrup. Many wait until midnight to open presents or go to church for mass.

## PUERTO RICO

Puerto Rico celebrates Christmas in similar way as many countries in the world. On Christmas Eve, families gather together for dinner. Dishes include arroz con gandules (rice with pigeon peas), lechón asado (roasted pork), and pasteles (tamale-like patties in green banana and meat). There are also side dishes that include potato salad, pasta salad, or morcilla (rice-stuffed blood sausages). A Christmas dessert tembleque, which is a coconut-based pudding topped with cinnamon. In Puerto Rico, people decorate their Christmas trees around Thanksgiving and keep them up through mid-January.

## VENEZUELA

Christmas festivities in Venezuela begin on December 16th and end January 6th. Church masses take place everyday until Christmas. On Christmas Eve families attend the Midnight mass known as Misa de Gallo. Venezuela does not have pine trees therefore, the Nativity Scene is more commonly displayed throughout the country. Just like majority of other Catholic countries, Christmas Eve is the day families get together for a meal. In Venezuela dishes consist of hallacas which is a mixture of beef, pork, chicken, capers, raisins, and olives that is wrapped in corn or plantain leaves, and then boiled or steamed, the pan de jamón - a puff pastry bread filled up with ham, raisins, olives and bacon, and pernil (a leg of pork). Many families paint their houses for Christmas and buy new clothing. Kids open presents left behind by San Nicolás (St. Nicholas) & Niño Jesús (Baby Jesus).

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## BRAZIL

For people in Brazil, December 24th is the biggest celebration of the Christmas holiday. They celebrate by having a huge party around 10 pm with the family where they eat many delicious foods such as peru nataliano (which is christmas turkey) or bacalhau (which is a codfish dish that is cooked with potatoes, eggs, tomatoes and eaten with rice). Some sweet desserts include panetone or chocotone, estrogonofe de uva (which is similar to dulce de leche mousse with grapes and walnuts). At midnight, gifts are exchanged and presents left by Santa clause are opened by the children. December 25th, Christmas Day, is typically not as big as Christmas Eve but families gather again and eat special food such as churrasco, which is a form of Brazilian Barbecue. Remember, if you live in the southern hemisphere like people in Brazil do, you are enjoying the season of summer, while people in northern hemisphere enjoy the winter session.

## GHANA

Christmas festivities in Ghana begin on December 20 and run thru first week of January. Christmas festivities run along the same time as the cocoa harvest, which adds in an extra celebrations. It is important to note, there are over 66 different languages and cultures in Ghana with each culture having their own Christmas traditions. On Christmas Eve you will see people singing songs, acting out the Nativity play, and participating in a ceremonial mass. On Christmas day many people attend church dressed in colorful traditional clothing. Afterwards, they enjoy a meal with their families. Dishes include stew or okra soup, porridge and meats, fufu which is a rice and a yam paste. However, people typically eat 4-5 meals a day during the Christmas festivity time.

## ETHIOPIA

Majority of Ethiopia's population is Orthodox Christian, meaning that they celebrate Christmas on January 7th and not December 25th. Ethiopians fast for 43 days before Christmas by not eating meat, fish, and dairy. On Christmas Eve, people attend a mass at church starting 6pm. On Christmas Day, people gather with their families and eat traditional food such as injera (which is a round spongy flatbread). Foods like vegetables, lentils, lamb, and chicken are eaten with the flatbread. After dinner, there is a coffee ceremony. Someone sits down and freshly roasts the coffee beans on a little small pan. The coffee is served with popcorn. People in Ethiopia usually wear white clothing for Christmas or traditional clothing called netela. Since Christmas in Ethiopia is strictly a religious holiday, people usually don't exchange gifts as they do in other countries.

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## EGYPT

In Egypt, less than 20% of the population is Christian. However, the commercial idea for Christmas such as buying gifts or Christmas trees is practiced by most people. Christmas in Egypt is celebrated on January 7th because the Christians in Egypt belong to Eastern Orthodox Church. Most of European countries that belong to western Church, which includes the Catholics and Protestants, that celebrates Christmas on December 25. In Egypt, 43 days before Christmas is the time of lent, or fasting. During the fast, people consume only vegan foods and dishes. On Christmas Day the fast is broken and people enjoy delicious meals such as fatta, which is a soup, and kahk. On Christmas Eve, January 6th, people go to church for a mass, after which they gather at homes with their families and enjoy their dinner.

## ARMENIA

Armenia was the first Christian country in the world and as such, traditions run deep in the roots on the people. However, during Cold War, the USSR controlled Armenia was not able to practice its religion. Many people "forgot" their traditions because of that, but after the fall of communism, the old traditions were renewed. Armenia celebrates Christmas on January 6th. Many people fast for a week leading up to Christmas. On Christmas Eve, families gather together and enjoy their family meal. The dinner consists of dishes such as rice, fish, nevik 'which is a green chard and chickpeas, and yogurt/wheat soup called tanabur. Desserts include dried fruits and nuts, rojik which is a whole shelled walnuts threaded on a string and covered in grape jelly, bastukh, a dessert made of grape jelly, cornstarch and flour. The dishes are meant to be easy on a stomach for those who fasted prior to Christmas.

## SERBIA

Serbia is part of the Orthodox Church therefore their Christmas falls on January 7th. Starting November 28th is the beginning of advent, or a time of fast, where people give up meat, dairy, and eggs. On Christmas Eve, families gather together and eat a delicious meal that still does not consist of meat or dairy. Many people in countryside start Christmas Eve by having the father of the family going into the woods and cutting down a young oak. Later the oak is burned. On Christmas Day, a special bread is made called cesnica. Every member of the family gets a piece and whoever finds a coin will have good luck for the whole year. There is also hay placed under the dinner table as a symbol for where Jesus was born.

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## AUSTRIA

Austria has many traditions associated with Christmas. Just like other Christian countries, it celebrates Advent, which is the 4 weeks leading up to Christmas. Special wreaths are made from evergreen twigs, decorated with ribbons and four candles. On each of the four Sundays in Advent, a candle is lit. Large cities, especially Vienna, have huge Christmas markets that run from end of November until mid December. Christmas officially starts around 4 pm on Christmas Eve when the tree is lit and carols such as Silent Night are sung. (The most famous Christmas carol in the world "Silent Night" was written and composed in Austria.) Children receive small gifts on December 6th by St. Nicholas and Krampus. Krampus is known as the evil "Santa" who goes to children houses that did not behave well. Kids in Austria believe that a small golden haired baby leaves presents under the Christmas tree on Christmas Day.

## POLAND

Poland is a Catholic country where most of the Christmas traditions include religious rituals. Polish people celebrate Advent, which begins 4 weeks before Christmas. On December 24th families fast the whole day until dinner. (Many families until now also decorate their Christmas tree on Christmas Eve as well). Dinner begins when the first star appears in the sky. The main tradition is to eat and share *oplatek*, or a religious wafer, with each family member and give wishes. There is one extra seating set at the table, for an unknown guest that might arrive for dinner. Dinner usually consists of 12 meals, for 12 apostles. Meals include various fish dishes, pierogis, pastries, cabbage and beans, and soups. There is no meat eaten that day. At midnight, Polish people go to church for a Christmas mass known as "pasterka". Polish people do not exchange gifts on Christmas, they usually give presents to children on December 6th which is Saint Nicholas Day.

## NETHERLANDS

In Netherlands, like many other countries in Europe, people don't exchange gifts on Christmas, but rather gift children presents on December 5th. December 6th is Saint Nicholas Day therefore the Dutch celebrate the Eve of Saint Nicholas Day. St. Nicholas was the person we know today as Santa Clause. Dutch people celebrate Christmas for two days, on December 25 and 26th where they meet with their families and eat special cultural foods such as *speculaas*, *kerstkransjes*, or *appelbeignets*.

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## FINLAND

In Finland, Santa is known as Joulupukki. Joulupukki translates to "Christmas Goat". In Finnish tradition, a goat would go around asking for presents, but never gave presents itself. Overtime, the goat became a gift giver and the tradition and name stayed. People believe Joulupukki, or Santa, lives in the northern part of Finland around the arctic circle. People all over the world write letters to Santa in Finland. On Christmas Eve families gather to celebrate and eat delicious foods. One famous dish is a rice pudding with plum sauce. Tradition holds that if you find an almond in your pudding you will have good luck for the whole year. On Christmas Eve it is tradition to go to a sauna. On Christmas Day, it became a tradition to go to cemeteries and leave lanterns on the graves.

## CHINA

In China, Christmas is usually only celebrated in the big cities, since less than 1% of its population is Christian. Christmas is a commercial holiday where you might see decorated Christmas trees and streets. Santa Claus is known as "Shengdan Laoren" and people like the postmasters might dress up as one when delivering mail. Christmas is seen more as a "Valentines Day" similar to that of Japan, where couples gift each other presents. Sending or giving apples to family members or friends became a popular tradition on Christmas Eve.

## PHILIPPINES

Filipinos celebrate Christmas with different traditions. Believe it or not, many start getting ready for Christmas already in September by decorating their homes. They create big stars called, parols, and place lights inside. The star is kept up all throughout December. Just like in many other countries, families gather together for a meal which include dishes like lechon manok, Marocon, puto bumbong and bibingka. Since people in the Philippines are mostly Catholic, they attend church masses 9 days in a row before Christmas called Simbang Gabi.

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## **SOUTH KOREA**

In South Korea, only about 30% of the population is Christian. Therefore, Christmas is not celebrated as a religious holiday but as a holiday to spend with the family. Since it is not a big holiday, many people do not travel back home and as a result, sending Christmas cards is very popular at Christmas. For a Christmas dinner it is popular to eat beef bulgogi, sweet potato noodles, kimchi, and Christmas cake. Santa is also a popular figure during Christmas time. However, unlike in the western cultures where Santa is dressed in red, in South Korea, Santa can wear green or blue. Not a big emphasis is placed on gift giving as in Europe or North America. If gifts are given it usually includes money.

## **JAPAN**

Japan does not celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday. Christmas actually became famous only a few years ago. It is interesting to note that Christmas Eve, December 24th, is known as Japanese "Valentines Day" where couples spend time together, go to a restaurant for dinner, and exchange gifts. Afterwards most couples go outside for a walk, buy a Christmas cake, kurisumasu keki, and enjoy the holiday decorations. Another interesting tradition is eating KFC. On Christmas Day, families during Christmas order KFC for dinner. The tradition is so special and high in demand that many families place orders 6 weeks in advance!