

Christmas around the World

What is Christmas?

Christmas is a religious holiday which celebrates the birth of the son of God, Jesus Christ, on the 25th December. Although it is a Christian holiday, it is actually one that derives from a lot of Pagan traditions.



The Christmas tree is a 17th century German invention that is said to have been developed from the Pagan practice of bringing greenery indoors for decoration in winter. Father Christmas is also thought to be a modern incarnation of old Pagan spirits flying through the sky in winter.

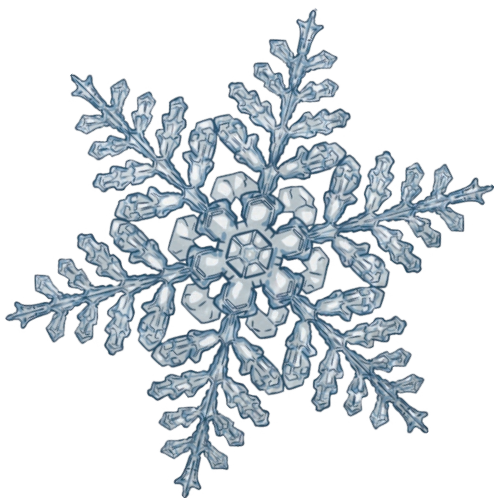
Celebrations

Christmas is celebrated by millions of people all over the world, Christian and non-Christian. It is a time of gathering with family and friends. There are some mostly universal traditions, such as decorating houses with lights, trees, candles and having a Christmas dinner. There are also some very unique traditions, specific to certain countries.

For example, some people in India like to decorate their houses and streets with colourful, folded paper stars. Traditionally, Polish people serve a total of 12 dishes, one for each disciple, at their Christmas dinner and some Spanish people leave out hay-filled boots or shoes at night so that, by the next morning, the hay would be replaced with chocolate, presents or money.



In some areas of Ireland, the people like to light candles in the windows of their homes to act as a guide for Joseph and Mary to travel to their resting place. The candles are often red and decorated with sprigs of holly.



Over in the West Indies, some people like to clean their homes thoroughly before decorating for Christmas. Some people even repaint entire rooms!

The French traditionally celebrate the feast of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children, on the 6th December. On this day, St. Nicholas will ride about town on his sleigh as the town celebrate how he rescued 3 children from being eaten by a nasty butcher!

In Russia, some believe that an old lady called Baboushka roams around giving out presents to children, to make up for the mistake of being too busy to guide the wise men to the baby Jesus Christ in biblical times.

Unusual Celebrations

Traditionally in Sweden, the eldest daughter of each family dresses up with a wreath on her head that holds lighted candles. She then serves coffee and special buns to her family.

In some areas, single women of the Czech Republic perform a ritual every Christmas to see whether they will be single for another year. They turn their backs to the door and throw a shoe over their shoulder. If the shoe lands with the heel towards the door, then it is thought that she will stay single for another year. However, if the front of the shoe faces the door, then a wedding is likely to happen for her!

For over 40 years, the town of Gavle in Sweden has celebrated Christmas by erecting a huge straw goat and the challenge is to ensure the survival of the straw goat until Christmas day. 'Vandals' will then attempt to burn the goat down every year. The goat has survived until Christmas day only 10 times in 40 years.

In Slovakian tradition, the head of the family will throw a mixture of Loksá (bread, poppy seed and water) up at the ceiling. The longer the mixture stays glued to the ceiling, the richer his crops are predicted to be.

Finally, in Japan, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) has become a nation's favourite for a Christmas dinner. It is so wildly popular that you need to make a reservation to eat there on Christmas Day.

What is the true meaning of Christmas?

Everyone will have a different answer for the question 'What is the true meaning of Christmas?'. Some people think it is a time for gifts or family, whilst others will think it's about watching Christmas films or eating lots. There are some people who think that Christmas has become too commercialised by shops. What do you think?



Questions

1. Who celebrates Christmas?

2. How have some Christian Christmas traditions developed?

3. What might be the reason behind Indians choosing paper stars to decorate their streets and homes?

4. Do you think that everybody in Russia believes the same about Baboushka? Why?

5. Why do you think some women of the Czech Republic take part in the Christmas show throwing ritual?

6. In relation to the Swedish tradition, why is 'vandals' written in inverted commas?

7. What do you think the Swedish people of Gavle do to protect the Christmas goat?

8. Write down facts which support the idea that food is an important part of the celebrations in different countries?

9. In your opinion, which Christmas ritual do you think is the most unusual? Why?

10. Having read this text, what conclusions can you draw about Christmas celebrations around the world?

11. What do you think is the true meaning of Christmas?

Answers

1. Who celebrates Christmas?

Christmas is celebrated by millions of people both Christians and non-Christians.

2. How have some Christian Christmas traditions developed?

Some Christian Christmas traditions have been developed from Pagan practices.

3. What might be the reason behind Indians choosing paper stars to decorate their streets and homes?

Answers may vary.

4. Do you think that everybody in Russia believes the same about Baboushka? Why?

Not everyone will believe in this tradition as not everyone will believe in the story of the wise men and baby Jesus.

5. Why do you think some women of the Czech Republic take part in the Christmas shoe throwing ritual?

Some women of the Czech Republic take part in the Christmas shoe throwing ritual to see if they will stay single or get married in the following year.

6. In relation to the Swedish tradition, why is 'vandals' written in inverted commas?

'Vandals' is written in inverted commas because the people who attempt to burn the goat are not really vandals but are taking part in this tradition.

7. What do you think the Swedish people of Gavle do to protect the Christmas goat?

Answers may vary.

8. Write down facts which support the idea that food is an important part of the celebrations in different countries?

Facts may include: people in Slovenia throwing food onto the ceiling / people in Japan needing to make a reservation to go and eat at KFC / The eldest daughter in a Swedish family, serving coffee and buns to the family / and people enjoying Christmas dinner.

9. In your opinion, which Christmas ritual do you think is the most unusual? Why?

Answers may vary.

10. Having read this text, what conclusions can you draw about Christmas celebrations around the world?

Children may mention the variety of Christmas traditions celebrated all over the world.

Answers may vary.

11. What do you think is the true meaning of Christmas?

Answers may vary.