

Holiday Traditions



Counting Down to Christmas

Whether young or old, it can be hard to wait for Christmas. It might be why the tradition of Advent calendars has lasted so long and is so popular.

This festive practice, which builds anticipation for Christmas Day, has a rich history and deep cultural significance that spans over a century.

The origins of Advent calendars can be traced to 19th-century Germany. Advent, derived from the Latin word “adventus” meaning “coming,” is a period of preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Traditionally, Advent spans the four Sundays leading up to Christmas, a time observed with various customs and rituals in Christian communities.

The first known Advent calendar dates to the early 1800s. German Lutherans are credited with creating the earliest versions, which involved marking 24 chalk lines on a door and erasing one each day in December. Another early tradition included lighting a candle or hanging a religious picture for each day of Advent. These simple acts were intended to help children count down the days to Christmas and to foster a sense of anticipation and spiritual readiness.

The printed Advent calendar as we know it today was introduced in the early 20th century.



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Gerhard Lang, a German printer, is often hailed as the father of the modern Advent calendar. Inspired by a homemade calendar his mother made by attaching small candies to a piece of cardboard, Lang produced the first commercial Advent calendar in the early 1900s. His design featured small doors or windows that children could open each day to reveal a Bible verse, poem or picture. This innovation quickly gained popularity and became a

cherished part of Christmas traditions in many households.

Advent calendars continued to evolve throughout the 20th century. During World War II, the production of Advent calendars was temporarily halted due to rationing and paper shortages. However, the tradition quickly revived post-war and spread beyond Germany to other parts of Europe and North America. In the 1950s, the inclusion of small chocolates or toys behind each door became

common, adding an extra element of excitement for children.

Today, Advent calendars come in a wide variety of themes and styles, ranging from traditional religious calendars featuring nativity scenes to those with popular characters, luxury beauty products or gourmet treats.

Advent calendars serve as a daily reminder to reflect on the meaning of the holiday season, encouraging moments of family

togetherness and mindfulness amidst the hustle and bustle of December. For many, the ritual of opening a new door each day is a cherished childhood memory and a tradition they pass down to their own children.

Advent calendars offer a way to slow down and savor the season. They remind us to appreciate the small joys of each day, fostering a spirit of gratitude and anticipation that enriches the holiday experience.

Feast of the Seven Fishes

When Italians wanted to bring a bit of the old country to America for their holiday celebrations, they created what became the Feast of the Seven Fishes, a tradition that continues to be celebrated across the United States on Christmas Eve.

This elaborate meal — which features either seven different fish dishes or a few fish dishes prepared seven different ways, blends culinary artistry with deep-rooted cultural heritage.

The origins of the Feast of the Seven Fishes, known as *La Vigilia* in Italy, are steeped in Catholic tradition. It marks the wait for the midnight birth of Jesus, a time when observant Catholics abstain from meat in favor of fish. While the specific number seven holds various interpretations — some suggest it represents the seven sacraments, the seven days of creation, or the number's Biblical significance — there is no fixed rule. In fact, in Italy, the feast might not strictly adhere to the number seven and can vary widely by region and family.

Italian immigrants brought this tradition to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, where it evolved into a uniquely Italian-American



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celebration. For many, it's not just about the food, but about preserving cultural identity and passing down traditions through generations.

The feast typically begins in the early evening and can last for hours, filled with an array of seafood dishes that highlight the diversity and richness of Italian cuisine. Common dishes include *baccalà* (salted cod), *calamari* (squid), *scungilli* (conch), *vongole* (clams), shrimp and various types of fish such as snapper or haddock. These dishes are often prepared using traditional

recipes that have been handed down through families, maintaining a link to ancestral roots.

One of the most beloved dishes is *baccalà*, prepared in numerous ways — fried, in a salad or stewed with tomatoes and olives. *Calamari*, whether fried or stuffed, is another staple that adds to the feast's variety. Shellfish like clams and mussels, either steamed or served in a *marinara* sauce, are also common, providing a briny sweetness that complements the meal.

Eataly says in addition to fish, the feast traditionally

includes *panettone* and *pan-doro*, traditional fluffy cakes and classic holiday deserts like *torrone*, hazelnut-studded chocolates and *panforte*.

The preparation of these dishes is a communal affair, often involving multiple generations of family members. Each generation works side-by-side, sharing techniques and stories that enrich the experience. This collaborative effort strengthens familial bonds and creates lasting memories.

While the feast itself is rooted in religious observance, it has become a cultural celebration

that welcomes friends and neighbors to join in the festivities. The sharing of food is an expression of love and hospitality, hallmarks of Italian culture.

In contemporary times, the Feast of the Seven Fishes continues to thrive, adapting to modern tastes while retaining its traditional core. Restaurants now offer special menus, and food enthusiasts eagerly explore new interpretations of classic dishes. Yet, at its heart, the feast remains a family-centered event, a night of joy and gratitude that honors the spirit of Christmas.

Celebrating Light and Good

Diwali, often referred to as the Festival of Lights, is one of the most significant and widely celebrated festivals in India and among Indian communities worldwide.

This festival, which usually falls between October and November, symbolizes the victory of light over darkness and good over evil. Diwali's rich traditions and deep cultural roots make it a joyous occasion filled with lights, colors and festive activities.

The word Diwali is derived from the Sanskrit term *deep-avali*, meaning "row of lamps." This name aptly captures the essence of the festival, as homes, temples and public spaces are illuminated with countless oil lamps, candles and fireworks. These lights are believed to dispel the darkness of ignorance and sorrow, bringing hope and prosperity into people's lives.

Diwali has various legends and stories associated with it, which vary across different regions of India. One of the most popular stories is from the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, which tells of Lord Rama's return to his kingdom of Ayodhya after 14 years of exile and his victory over the demon king Ravana. The people of Ayodhya lit oil lamps to welcome Rama,



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Sita and Lakshmana back home, and this tradition continues to this day.

Another significant legend revolves around Lord Krishna's victory over the demon Narakasura, symbolizing the triumph

of good over evil. In West Bengal, Diwali coincides with the worship of Goddess Kali, who represents the force of destruction that eradicates evil.

Preparations for Diwali begin early. Homes are thoroughly

cleaned and decorated with rangoli, intricate designs made from colored powders, rice and flower petals, to welcome Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. People buy new clothes, exchange gifts and

prepare special sweets and savory dishes, enhancing the festive spirit.

The festival spans five days, each with its own significance. The first day, *Dhanteras*, is dedicated to wealth and prosperity. The second day, *Naraka Chaturdashi* or *Choti Diwali*, marks the defeat of *Narakasura* by Krishna. The third day, *Diwali* itself, is the main day of the festival, when families gather to perform *Lakshmi Puja*, worshipping the goddess of wealth, and light oil lamps and fireworks.

The fourth day, *Govardhan Puja* or *Annakut*, celebrates Krishna's lifting of *Mount Govardhan* to protect villagers from torrential rains. The fifth and final day, *Bhai Dooj*, honors the bond between brothers and sisters, akin to *Raksha Bandhan*.

Diwali is also celebrated by Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists, each with their own interpretations and traditions. For Jains, Diwali marks the attainment of *moksha* (liberation) by Lord Mahavira. Sikhs commemorate the release of *Guru Hargobind* from imprisonment, while Buddhists of the *Newar* community in Nepal celebrate it as a day of important religious activities.

Beyond its religious significance, Diwali is a time for unity, joy and renewal. It brings people together, fostering a sense of community and shared happiness. The festival's universal message of light triumphing over darkness resonates deeply, making Diwali a global celebration.

Holiday Wreath Symbolism

Holiday wreaths, with their lush greenery and festive decorations, are a beloved symbol of the Christmas season.

This timeless tradition, which dates back centuries, is rich in historical and cultural significance. From their ancient origins to their modern-day interpretations, holiday wreaths represent a blend of celebration, welcome and spiritual symbolism.

ANCIENT TRADITIONS

The use of wreaths can be traced back to ancient civilizations. In classical antiquity, wreaths were often worn as crowns and garlands during various celebrations. For the ancient Greeks, laurel wreaths symbolized victory and achievement, while in Roman times, they were used to honor emperors and military commanders. The circular shape of the wreath, with no beginning or end, symbolized eternity and the cyclical nature of life.

The tradition of holiday wreaths specifically during the Christmas season has its roots in pre-Christian Europe. Pagan rituals celebrated the winter solstice with evergreens, which were seen as symbols of enduring life amidst the barren winter landscape. These early wreaths were used to ward off evil spirits and to celebrate the return of the sun after the darkest days of the year.

CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

As Christianity spread across Europe, the wreath took on new meanings and became integrated into Christian traditions. The Advent wreath, which originated in 16th-century Germany, is one of the most significant adaptations. Comprising a circular garland of evergreen branches, the Advent wreath holds four or five candles. Each candle represents one of the weeks of Advent, the period of preparation for the birth of Jesus. The lighting of these candles symbolizes the light of Christ

coming into the world.

The evergreen branches used in holiday wreaths are particularly meaningful. Evergreens, such as pine, fir and holly, remain vibrant and green throughout the winter months, symbolizing eternal life and the triumph of life over death. Holly, with its bright red berries, is also thought to represent the blood of Christ and his sacrifice, while the prickly leaves can signify the crown of thorns worn during the crucifixion.

HOSPITALITY

In addition to their religious

connotations, holiday wreaths also serve as symbols of hospitality and welcome. Hanging a wreath on the front door is a gesture of inviting friends and family into one's home during the festive season. The circular shape is often interpreted as a symbol of unity and inclusion, reflecting the warmth and togetherness that are hallmarks of the holiday season.

Modern holiday wreaths come in a variety of styles and designs, reflecting both traditional and contemporary tastes. While some people prefer classic wreaths adorned

with ribbons, pinecones, and berries, others opt for creative interpretations using materials like ornaments, artificial snow, or themed decorations. Regardless of the design, the essence of the wreath as a symbol of celebration and continuity remains unchanged.

Crafting and displaying holiday wreaths is a cherished activity for many families. It is an opportunity to engage in a meaningful tradition, create beautiful decorations and share the joy and spirit of the season.



Mumming

Every culture has its holiday traditions, and diverse ways of celebrating Christmas help to preserve heritage and spread joy. Newfoundland practices a lively tradition that brings communities together during the Christmas season: mumming.

This practice, with roots that date back centuries, involves costumed revelers visiting homes, singing songs, dancing and engaging in playful antics. Mumming, or jannying as it is sometimes called, is more than just a festive activity; it is a celebration of community spirit and cultural heritage.

Mumming's origins can be traced back to England and Ireland. European settlers in the 16th and 17th centuries brought it to Newfoundland. The tradition flourished in the isolated, close-knit communities of Newfoundland. Despite experiencing a decline in the mid-20th century, mumming has seen a revival in recent years, with renewed interest in preserving this unique aspect of Newfoundland's cultural identity.

The essence of mumming lies in its joyful anonymity and the element of surprise. Participants, known as



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mummers or jannies, disguise themselves with elaborate costumes and masks, often made from old clothing, household items and repurposed materials. The goal is to conceal their identities completely, making it difficult for neighbors and friends to recognize them. This playful

disguise sets the stage for the evening's entertainment.

On the nights leading up to Christmas, and sometimes extending to Old Christmas Day on Jan. 6, mummers go from house to house. They knock on doors and, once invited inside, engage in lively performances of song, dance

and comedic acts. The hosts' challenge is to guess the identities of their disguised guests. Once the mummers are correctly identified, they remove their masks and are offered refreshments and treats as a reward.

The tradition is a time when neighbors come

together, breaking the monotony of winter with laughter and merriment. Mumming also serves as a reminder of the importance of community bonds and the joy that comes from shared experiences.

In recent years, the tradition has been revitalized through community events, festivals and educational programs aimed at preserving this distinctive custom. The Mummers Festival, held annually in St. John's, Newfoundland's capital, continues the tradition while promoting it to new generations. The festival features workshops on making masks and costumes, traditional music performances and a parade where participants proudly showcase their mumming attire.

While mumming is a source of great fun, it carries a deeper significance. It is a celebration of Newfoundland's resilience and creativity, reflecting the resourcefulness of its people.

By turning everyday items into whimsical disguises and transforming ordinary evenings into extraordinary festivities, mumming captures the spirit of a community that cherishes its traditions and finds joy in togetherness.

In a world that is increasingly fast-paced and technology-driven, mumming stands out as a cherished reminder of simpler times, where the true spirit of Christmas shines through in laughter, music and the joyous embrace of community.

Japanese New Year

Japanese New Year, known as Shogatsu, is one of the most important and widely celebrated holidays in Japan. Marking the beginning of the Gregorian calendar year, Shogatsu is a time for family gatherings, traditional rituals and fresh beginnings.

The celebration, steeped in cultural significance, extends over several days from Dec. 31 to Jan. 3, with various customs that reflect Japan's unique blend of Shinto, Buddhist, and secular influences. Japan Guide said most Japanese businesses close down during this period so families can spend time together.

In the final days of December, Japanese families engage in thorough house cleaning, known as *osoji*, to purify their homes and sweep away the misfortunes of the past year. This ritual symbolizes starting the new year with a clean slate. Many households also prepare traditional decorations like *kadomatsu* (pine branches) and *shimenawa* (sacred ropes) to welcome the gods of the harvest and prosperity.

On New Year's Eve, a meal called *toshikoshi soba*



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(year-crossing noodles) is traditionally eaten. The long noodles symbolize longevity and the hope for a long life. As midnight approaches, families often visit local Buddhist temples to participate in *Joya no Kane*, a ceremony where a large bell is rung 108 times. Each toll represents one of the earthly desires that, according to Buddhist belief, lead to human suffering. By hearing the bells, people symbolically purify themselves of these desires.

Japan Guide says the largest temples and shrines attract several million people each year. The day, they say, is

supposed to be filled with joy and absent of anything that could cause stress or anger. Everything should be clean and no work should be done. It is considered auspicious to see the sunrise on Jan. 1.

The first three days of January, known as *sanganichi*, are reserved for rest, reflection and celebration with family. On Jan. 1, known as *Gantan*, it is customary to visit a Shinto shrine for *hatsumode*, the first shrine visit of the year. During this visit, people pray for health, happiness and prosperity. They also purchase *omamori* (amulets) and *ema* (wooden plaques) to write

their wishes for the year ahead.

New Year's Day brings a special meal called *osechi-ryori*, which consists of beautifully arranged dishes, each with its own symbolic meaning. For example, *kuromame* (black soybeans) represent health, *kazunoko* (herring roe) symbolizes fertility, and *tazukuri* (candied sardines) signifies a bountiful harvest. These dishes are prepared in advance and packed into lacquered boxes, allowing families to enjoy the food throughout the holiday without cooking.

Another beloved tradition is the giving and receiving of

nengajo, New Year's cards, which are meticulously designed and sent to friends, family and colleagues. *Nengajo* often feature the zodiac animal of the coming year and convey wishes for happiness and good fortune.

Children receive *otoshidama*, envelopes containing money, from their elders. This practice brings joy and teaches children about the value of saving and financial responsibility. Throughout Shogatsu, various games and activities, such as *karuta* (a card game), *hanetsuki* (a badminton-like game), and flying kites, are enjoyed by families.

Honoring the Longest Night

The winter solstice, marking the shortest day and longest night of the year, has been celebrated by cultures around the world for millennia.

Occurring around Dec. 21st in the northern hemisphere, this astronomical event symbolizes the rebirth of the sun and the gradual return of longer days. The solstice has inspired a variety of festivals and traditions, each reflecting the unique customs and beliefs of different cultures.

SOYAL (HOPI)

The Hopi people of North America observe the winter solstice with Soyal, a ceremonial time for purification and renewal.

Soyal ceremonies include the creation of prayer sticks, which are used to bless the community and the environment.

The Hopi perform ritual dances and songs to call the sun back from its long winter sleep, ensuring the renewal of life and the protection of their crops. The kachina spirits, believed to bring blessings and aid, play a central role in Soyal celebrations.

SATURNALIA (ANCIENT ROME)

In ancient Rome, Saturnalia was a week-long festival honoring Saturn, the god of agriculture and time. Beginning



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on Dec. 17, Saturnalia was characterized by feasting, role reversals and merrymaking. Slaves were temporarily freed and allowed to participate in the festivities, and societal norms were relaxed.

People decorated their homes with greenery, exchanged gifts and lit candles to symbolize the quest for knowledge and truth. Saturnalia's emphasis on joy, freedom and the overturning of social norms has influenced many modern holiday traditions.

YULE (NORTHERN EUROPE)

One of the most well-known

winter solstice celebrations is Yule, originating from ancient Norse and Germanic traditions. Yule, which later merged with Christmas celebrations, was a time to honor the rebirth of the sun god and to celebrate the natural cycle of the seasons.

Yule traditions include lighting the Yule log, which symbolizes warmth and the promise of light returning. Families would gather around the hearth, burn the log and keep its remnants as a protective charm for the coming year. Feasting, singing and decorating homes with evergreen boughs were also integral parts of Yule festivities.

DONGZHI (CHINA)

In China, the winter solstice is celebrated with the Dongzhi Festival, which means "extreme of winter." Dongzhi marks the turning point when the days begin to grow longer.

Traditionally, it is a time for family reunions and the preparation of special foods. One of the most popular dishes is tangyuan, glutinous rice balls that symbolize family unity and harmony. Dongzhi is also associated with the concept of yin and yang, celebrating the balance and harmony of the cosmos as the cycle shifts towards

increased daylight and positive energy.

SHAB-E YALDA (IRAN)

In Iran, Shab-e Yalda, or Night of Birth, celebrates the triumph of light over darkness. This ancient Persian festival marks the longest night of the year with gatherings of family and friends, who stay up late to welcome the dawn.

Pomegranates and watermelons, symbolizing the cycle of life and renewal, are central to Yalda celebrations. Poetry readings, particularly of works by Persian poet Hafez, are a cherished tradition, reflecting on love, light and transformation.