

CHRISTMAS IN NORWAY

Christmas Eve is the time when presents are exchanged. The gifts are sometimes brought by Santa Claus (called 'Julenissen' in Norway). Presents are also brought by the small gnomes called 'Nisse'. There are also hobgoblins (Nisse) decorations. Children pick up the presents from under the Christmas Tree and read the cards on the presents out loud.

As in Finland, a sheaf of wheat is often left out for the birds to eat over Christmas. Also a type of rice porridge is sometimes left for the 'Nisse' who is believed to guard the farm animals.

In some parts of Norway, children like to go carol singing. 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 neighborhood. Sometimes they carry with paper stars on them.

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

Christmas wasn't celebrated in Norway until about 1000 or 1100, when Christianity first came to the area. Before this people celebrated jul or jøl in the middle of winter. It was a celebration of the harvest gone and a way of looking forward to the spring. Lots of beer (juleøl) was brewed and drunk in honour of the old pagan scandinavian gods.

Maybe the most famous custom about Christmas in Norway is the big Christmas Tree that Norway gives to the UK 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.

A traditional Norwegian Christmas Tree decoration are small paper baskets called 'Julekurver' which made in the shape of a heart. It's said that the writer Hans Christian Andersen might have invented them in the 1860s! Instructions on how to make Julekurver are on this site: <http://www.stavanger-web.com/baskets.php>

In Norwegian Happy/Merry Christmas is 'God Jul' or 'Gledelig Jul'. Happy/Merry Christmas in lots more languages.

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. Rice Porridge is eaten on Christmas Eve either as a meal at lunchtime (served with butter, sugar and cinnamon) or as a dessert to the main evening meal (with whipped cream mixed in!). If you find an almond in your portion you're traditionally given a pink or white marzipan pig.

The main meal is normally pork or mutton ribs served with 'surkal' (white or red cabbage, finely chopped and cooked with caraway seeds and vinegar) and potatoes.

Musevisa - The Mouse Song

A very popular song at Christmas time in Norway is the Musevisa (The Mouse Song). The words were written in 1946 by Alf Prøysen. The tune is a traditional Norwegian folk tune. It tells the story of some mice getting ready for Christmas and the Mother and Father mice warning their children to stay away from mouse traps! It became popular very quickly and is now as popular as ever in Norway.

In 2008 an extra verse was thought to have been discovered (that involved a cat!). However this was a hoax by a Norwegian photographer called Ivar Kalleberg. Most people thought this was quite fun and

that Alf Prøysen would have liked the joke!

CHRISTMAS IN ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia (and especially the Ethiopian Orthodox Church) still use the old Julian calendar, so they celebrate Christmas on January 7th, not December 25th! The Christmas celebration in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is called Ganna. Most people go to Church on Christmas day.

Many people fast (don't eat anything) on Christmas Eve (January 6th). At dawn on the morning of Ganna, people get dressed in white. Most people wear a traditional garment called a shamma. It's a thin white cotton piece of cloth with brightly colored stripes across the ends. It's worn like a toga. If you live in a big town or city you might wear 'western' clothes. The early Ganna mass starts at 4.00am!

The Ethiopian capital city is Addis Ababa. It's a modern city. Most people who live outside big cities live in round house made of mud-plastered walls which have thatched cone-shaped roofs. Sometimes houses in the country are rectangular and made of stone.

The design of Ethiopian Church is similar to the houses. In the country, they are often very old and have been carved out of rock. In cities, modern churches are built in three circles, each within the others.

The choir sings from the outer circle. Everyone who goes to church for the Ganna celebrations is given a candle. The people walk around the church three times in a solemn procession, holding the candles. They then go to the second circle to stand during the service. The men and boys are separated from the women and girls. The center circle is the most important and holy place in the church and is where the priest serves the Holy Communion or mass.

It's also a tradition that one of the Wise Men who visited Jesus came from Ethiopia.

Around the time of Ganna, the men and boys play a game that is also called ganna. It's played with a curved stick and a round wooden ball, a bit like hockey.

Traditional Christmas foods in Ethiopia include 'wat' which is a thick and spicy stew that contains meat, vegetables and sometimes eggs (sounds yummy!). Wat is eaten on a 'plate of injera' - a flat bread. Pieces of the injera are used as an edible spoon to scoop up the wat.

Twelve days after Ganna, on 19th January, Ethiopians start the three day celebration of Timkat. It celebrated the baptism of Jesus. Children walk to church services in a procession. They wear the crowns and robes of the church youth groups that they belong to. Adults wear the shamma. The priests wear red and white robes and carry embroidered fringed umbrellas.

Musical instruments are played during the Timkat procession. The sistrum is a percussion instrument with tinkling metal disks a bit like a vertical tambourine. A makamiya, a long T-shaped prayer stick is used to keep the rhythm and is also used by the priests and a stick to lean on during the long Timkat church service!

Ethiopian men also play a sport called yeferas guks. It's played on horseback and the men throw ceremonial lances at each other (sounds rather dangerous!).

People don't give and receive present during Ganna and Timkat. Sometimes children might be given a small gift of some clothes from their family members. It's more a time for going to church, eating lots and playing games! In Ethiopia, in the Amharic language, Father Christmas or Santa Claus is called 'Yágena Abät' which means 'Christmas Father'.

CHRISTMAS IN CHINA

In China, only about one percent of people are Christians, so most people only know a few things about Christmas. Because of this, Christmas is only often celebrated in major cities. In these big cities there are Christmas Trees, lights and other decorations on the streets and in department stores. Santa Claus is called 'Shen Dan Lao Ren' and has grottos in shops like in Europe and America.

In Chinese Happy/Merry Christmas is 'Sheng Dan Kuai Le or 聖誕快樂' in Mandarin and 'Seng Dan Fai Lok or 聖誕快樂' in Cantonese. Happy/Merry Christmas in lots more languages.

In China, Santa is known as 'Sheng dan lao ren' (Traditional: 聖誕老人, Simplified: 圣诞老人; means Old Christmas Man).

One a few people have a Christmas Tree (or celebrate Christmas at all!). If people do have a tree it is normally a plastic one and might be decorated with paper chains, paper flowers, and paper lanterns (they might also call it a tree of light). The Christmas Trees that most people would see would be in shopping malls!

Christmas isn't that widely celebrated in the rural areas of China, but it's becoming more well known.

The strange thing is that most of the world's plastic Christmas Trees and Christmas decorations are made in China, but the people making them might not know what they are for!!!

A tradition that's becoming popular, on Christmas Eve, is giving apples. Many stores have apples wrapped up in colored paper for sale. People give apples on Christmas Eve because in Chinese Christmas Eve is called 'Ping An Ye' (which means quiet or silent night) and the word for apple in Chinese is 'Ping Guo' which sounds similar.

Some people go Carol singing, although not many people understand them or know about the Christmas Story. Jingle Bells is a popular Carol in China!

People who are Christians in China go to special services. Going to Midnight Mass services has become very popular.

CHRISTMAS IN PHILIPPINES

People in the Philippines like to celebrate Christmas for as long as possible! The playing of Christmas carols in shops can start in September! The formal Christmas celebrations start on 16th December when

many people go to the first of nine pre-dawn or early morning masses. The last mass is on Christmas day. The Christmas celebrations continue to the First Sunday in January when Epiphany or the Feast of the Three Kings is celebrated.

In the Philippines the early masses held before Christmas are called the 'Misa de Gallo' or 'Simbang Gabi' in Filipino.

Most Filipinos are Christians with about 80% of people being Catholics. It's the only Asian country with so many Christians. Because of this, Christmas is the most important holiday in the Philippines. December is actually one of the 'cooler' months of the year in the Philippines. The Philippines only has two real seasons, wet (June to October) and dry (April and May). December is one of the months in between the wet and dry seasons.

Christmas customs in the Philippines are a mixture of western (USA and UK) and native Filipino traditions. So people in the Philippines have Santa Claus (or 'Santa Klaus'), Christmas trees, Christmas cards and Christmas carols from western countries!

They also have their own Christmas traditions such as the 'parol' which is a bamboo pole or frame with a lighted star lantern on it. It's traditionally made from bamboo strips and colored Japanese paper or cellophane paper and represents the star that guided the Wise Men. It is the most popular Christmas decoration in the Philippines.

Christmas Eve is very important in the Philippines. Many people stay awake all night into Christmas day! During Christmas Eve evening, Christians go to church to hear the last 'simbang gabi' or the Christmas Eve mass. This is followed by a midnight feast, called Noche Buena.

The Noche Buena is a big, open house, celebration with family, friends and neighbors dropping in to wish everyone a Merry Christmas! Most households would have several dishes laid out and would normally include: lechon (roasted pig), ham, fruit salad, rice cakes (bibingka and puto bumbong are traditional Christmas foods) and other sweets, steamed rice, and many different types of drinks.

The Philippines has eight major languages, here's how to say Merry Christmas in some of them! In Tagalog, Happy/Merry Christmas is 'Maligayang Pasko'; in Ilonggo it's 'Malipayon nga Pascua'; in Sugbuhanon or Cebuano it's 'Maayong Pasko'; in Bicolano they say 'Maugmang Pasko' and in Pangalatok or Pangasinense they say 'Maabig ya pasko' or 'Magayagan inkianac'. Happy/Merry Christmas in lots more languages.

In 2013 the Philippines was hit by Typhoon Haiyan and thousands of people were made homeless, so lots of people can't celebrate Christmas like they used to. Many charities like Compassion are working in the Philippines to help people.

Source: <http://www.whychristmas.com/>