**Christmas around the World**

Christmas in America is very strange when looked at from an outsider’s perspective. Every year, children go sit on the lap of a strange man and give him a list of demands. If they’re good, the man promises to break into their house and leave their ransom, take some food, then disappear on his impractical magic sled.

Adults drink odd custard-like beverages, eat cake that no one likes and have to kiss if they accidently stand too close to someone under a weed that has been hung on the ceiling. They bring a giant tree in the house to decorate, and put lights and tacky lawn ornaments up in their yards.

Everyone pretends it’s going to snow despite the fact that half of America isn’t in an appropriate climate, and all of this somehow celebrates the birth of Christ, despite the fact that Christ was probably born in the spring.

The reason for this strangeness is because the Catholics took the pagan holiday already existing at midwinter and adopted it into their religious canon of holy days. Yule was celebrated in England and other northern countries long before the Christians arrived. The clash of cultures that that ensued combined the holidays to form the odd conglomeration of traditions that is celebrated now. Yule was celebrated differently in different parts of Europe, and the Catholic Church had control of all Europe when they decided to take Yule. So the mixing of Catholic worship with local traditions has created quite a few variations on the theme of Christmas.

It is interesting to see what stays the same and what is different in each celebration of the holiday. Just based on geography, it appears that midwinter was more important to celebrate in the most northern countries, whereas southern countries like Continental Europe and South America are almost completely lacking the pagan influence on anything but the actual date of the holiday.

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**Southern Countries**

**Christmas Traditions in Spain (FA 01 1269)**

Spain celebrates Christmas from December 24th to January 6th.

The 24th is a day of feasting and preparing for the holiday. It is spent with family, eating Roscon de Reyes (colorful sweet bread), Turron (almond candy), Polverones (a fluffy cookie). The family will spend the day cooking pork with eggs, ham, and parsley rolled up inside. After feasting, everyone attends midnight mass. Few decorate, but most have a nativity scene. The size of the nativity is a symbol of wealth and devotion.

On the 25th, everyone wears new clothes and goes out to meet with friends for hot chocolate and churros.

Instead of Santa, Spanish children write letters to the Three Kings who brought gifts to the Christ child. On January 5th there is a parade where the three kings arrive, and they sit in thrones in department stores to listen to the wishes of children. The children leave food for the king’s camels and drinks for the kings before they go to bed. On January 6th, the Three Kings bring gifts to the children. They get three to five presents usually, and throw away the presents they received the year before.
**Christmas Around the World (FA 01 2006)**

**France (FA 01 2006)**

Pere Noel is a skinny old farmer with a long beard who drives a cart pulled by a stubborn donkey. He comes to reward good children and punish the bad. The children leave wooden clogs for him to fill. If they’re good, he’ll put presents in the clog, but if they’re bad, he’ll take out a long stick and beat them.

A France-centric tradition is the procession of Santons, hand carved saints either three to eight inches tall. They come from the 1700’s when Christmas was declared illegal because the king didn’t want anyone worshiping anyone but him. In defiance of the king, a small town made carvings of themselves bearing gifts and moved them closer and closer to a carving of the Christ child as it came closer to Christmas. Now people buy Santons in homage to that Christmas long ago.

**Italy (FA 01 2006)**

Italians have a huge feast on Christmas. They eat for five hours, starting with an appetizer, pasta, then meat, salad and bread, then dessert, fruit, cheese, and finally coffee. For dessert, they have two cakes, a Pandoro (powdered sugar covered sweet yeast bread) and a Panettone (a raisin filled fruit cake). Instead of a tree, each family has a manger to center their celebrations on Christ; guests kneel before it when they visit.

Like the Spanish, Italians also celebrate Three Kings Day on January 6th, even though they also celebrate Christmas day.

**Hungary (FA 01 2006)**

Christmas starts on December 5th (Mikulas Snopia) when children get candy and little presents from Saint Mikulas. Christmas itself is two days, a family day and a day for visiting friends so that no one has to choose between the two. On the family day, Hungarians eat stuffed cabbage, and if they have guests they’ll leave them to eat the feast alone.

**Chile (FA 01 2006)**

Families open presents at midnight and shoot off lots of fireworks.

**Mexico (FA 01 2006)**

Celebrations start on December 16th and go through January 6th. They have a lot of parties with traditional food like paches and tamales passed around. They may also buy a tiny pine tree or cactus. On January 6th, the three wise men deliver presents.

**Italian Folklore: Some Customs, Traditions, Religious Beliefs, And Superstitions (FA 01 204)**

Italians don’t have Christmas trees. They have Presepe. It’s a huge manger scene; sometimes bigger places will have life size nativities.

In some towns in the north, sheepherders come down from the mountains with musical instruments and gifts for children.
January 6th is the Epiphany, where Befana the good witch goes from house to house selling coal candy (licorice) to each family.

**Latin-American Christmas Traditions (FA 01 858)**

In preparation for Christmas, Mexican families spend a lot of time making tamales (starchy, filled bread). A huge group of family and friends will spend the 24th together, eating and playing together. Some families have Christmas Eve piñatas full of Christmas candies and toys for the children. Sometimes adults will participate with the piñata if they are feeling especially youthful.

There are small, fake trees, but they are difficult to procure, and expensive enough that many families choose to forgo the tradition. Instead, many families shoot off fireworks on Christmas Eve. Since Christmas is in the summer, their celebrations are later and more outdoors based.

Family stay up until midnight when Santa comes to give the children presents that their parents bought. They actually get to meet Santa at night, and open their few presents late in the night before they go to sleep. The 25th doesn’t really have any special meaning, as all the celebrating occurred the night before. The 25th is more of a relaxing family day.

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**Northern Countries**

**Polish Christmas Traditions (FA 01 67)**

Poland celebrates Advent, four weeks of fasting and preparations for Christmas. To start it off, they have St. Martin’s Day, a celebration of the first winter and the last meat meal before they fast. On St. Martin’s they eat goose, and if the bones are white they know the winter will be snowy. If the bones are spotty, it’ll be stormy.

St. Andrew’s Day is November 30th, and with it comes a lot of fortune telling games. The first game is called Wax Pouring, where girls pour hot wax into a bowl followed by cold water and interpret the shape it makes. A second game is merely called Candle and is comprised of walnut shell with a candle in it is suspended in a bowl of water. Girls throw papers with the name of their crush on it into the bowl, and if they get it into the flame they’ll marry that person within the year. The last fortune telling game is called Slipper. Girls measure the length of a room from wall to threshold with just their shoe. A girl will start toe-heel, then heel-toe, etcetera until she reaches the threshold. If she ends with her toe facing the threshold, she’ll get a marriage proposal within a year.

During November, all the women in a village gather together to a widow’s house and spin together. They made patterned table cloths for Christmas Eve, as well as normal household items.

Polish children get small presents on December 6th (St. Nicolas Day) left near their bed or under their pillow.

December 24th is “Wilia Supper” a time for family, but they always leave an empty seat for an unexpected guest. People at the table break holy bread together and share their wishes for the future as well as their love for their family and friends. Traditionally, on Christmas Eve the angels decorate the tree and leave presents under it. Then everyone goes to a midnight “Shepherd’s Mass” where they sing Christmas carols for 2 hours then visit all the churches in town to see their mangers.
On Christmas day, after opening presents, everyone leave their homes. There are many small puppet shows performed by school-boys for cookies and petty cash.

**Christmas Around the World (FA 01 2006)**

Finland (FA 01 2006)

On Christmas Eve, families visit graveyards to leave candles for their dead ancestors. The light from all the candles light up the graveyards and make for a beautiful display. Afterwards there is a big Christmas feast and ‘Joulupukki’ comes to give each child a present.

On Christmas day, everyone goes and sits naked in a sauna, periodically taking breaks from the 200 degree heat to roll in the snow.

Russia (FA 01 2006)

Russian children must trick Santa for their presents. He’s called Dyedushka Morose, and he comes to the town’s Christmas tree to jump around inside a circle of townsfolk. The children sing songs at him, and if he can’t guess the name of the song he’ll give them a present.

**Christmas Eve Traditions of a Slovak-American Family (FA 01 2100)**

Christmas Eve dinner is filled traditional Slovak foods, like sauerkraut or sour mushroom soup. The table is set with a clean white table cloth with straw under the table to represent the manger of the Christ child. Candles are placed in the window to welcome the holy family into the home. Like the Polish people, they set an extra place at the table for unexpected visitors that the candles invite. They get family gifts from grandparents and siblings on Christmas Eve so they won’t be so anxious to get the presents from Santa.

Before dinner, the lady of the house puts a honey cross on the brow of each member of the family to remind them of Christ and to bless them to have a sweet new year. Family members like to make fun of the people who get the honey on their face right after it has been dipped in the jar, laughing as it slowly creeps down their face.

Twelve food items are traditional to represent the twelve apostles. Before dinner, a Catholic communion wafer is split between the family and dipped in honey. They also eat raw garlic dipped in honey to keep away evil spirits and unwanted physical affection.

**Christmas Eve in Finland (FA 01 2130)**

Finnish people roast ham overnight before Christmas Eve. They all decorate a tree cut out of the snowy forest, so cold and frozen that it has to defrost a bit before they can put it in the house. All preparations must be completed before noon because there is a public proclamation of Christmas Peace and then people aren’t supposed to leave the house. No one goes visiting on Christmas; they just stay inside with family.

In the evening, everyone brings candles to the grave yards for their dead loved ones. Because it is so dark in the north, the light is a welcome reminder of the sun.

On Christmas day, everyone must partake in a sauna before the feast. They all go into the hot sauna together, and get out to roll in the snow a few times. This was the only way to bathe for a long time in
the winter, so if someone refused to go in the sauna, they don’t get to eat. The dinner is full of traditional Finnish food that is served in tin boxes. They eat things like casseroles, rutabaga, carrot, liver, Lutefisk, cold cut and salmon, hot chocolate, pinwheel tarts, gingerbread, and cake.

After the feast, Santa or ‘Joulupukki’ comes. He knocks on the door like a sensible person. He asks the children if they have been good before they get any presents. They have to be accountable for their own behavior. One girl admitted she had been naughty and Santa gave her a twig. After the presents are distributed, the children play with Santa for a while before he leaves.

Norse Legends Live On: Swedish Christmas Traditions at Present (FA 01 2348)

Christmas in Sweden is still called by its old pagan name Jul (Yule). A feast is held on Christmas Eve with all the family and friends. The focus is largely on remembering light during the long dark winter. They use candles to light the whole house so that it softly glows in the snow.

On December 13th, a Santa Lucia is chosen. While any girl can be the Santa Lucia for her own family, there is always one girl chosen on the city and national level. They wear white nightgowns and holly wreaths with candles in them on their heads, singing as they wake people up with cinnamon buns. There are two versions of the Santa Lucia legend. The Christian version is of a saint who was martyred instead of giving up her virtue. The Pagan version (just Lucia) is a goblin queen of questionable character who was doomed to roam the earth with her goblins.

During the winter, Swedes feed their Tomten to ask him to grant blessings on the house. A Tomten is basically a garden gnome, but it has become a kind of Santa Claus who leaves gifts on Christmas Eve, called “Christmas Doorknocks.” The gifts are good or bad depending on how the children treat the gnomes during the year.

Swedes also leave nice things for their goats to eat. Goats are the symbol of Thor, so upsetting him by neglecting his symbol was never a good idea. They change out the straw and clean up the goat’s stall, and also build a straw goat in the town center. This was adapted by Christianity because the Christ child was born in a stable, and goats were presumably there.