

Winter Celebrations

Dongji, South Korea

“Little new year” is a thousands-of-years-old festival on December 21, 22, or 23 celebrated with family gatherings and a big meal, including rice balls called tang yuan and a red bean porridge called patjuk. Red is considered to be a lucky color, so the dish is meant to keep bad spirits away while embracing good wishes for the coming year. Other Dongji traditions include giving calendars, as Korean kings used to do, and socks. And this is a day Koreans wish for snow: cold weather on the winter solstice is said to bring a bountiful harvest, but warm weather will not. Thought to mark the end of the harvest season, the holiday also has roots in the Chinese concept of yin and yang: After the solstice, the abundance of darkness in winter will begin to be balanced with the light of the Sun.

Dong Zhi, China

Dong Zhi means “Winter Arrives” and welcomes the return of longer days and the corresponding increase in positive energy in the year to come. It occurs only six weeks before the Chinese New Year and may have begun as a harvest festival, when farmers and fisherman took time off to celebrate with their families. Today, it isn’t an official holiday, but remains an occasion for families to join together to celebrate the year that has passed and share good wishes for the year to come. The most traditional food for this celebration in southern China is the glutinous rice balls known as tang yuan, often brightly colored and cooked in sweet or savory broth. Northern Chinese enjoy plain or meat-stuffed dumplings, a particularly warming and nourishing food for a midwinter celebration.

Kwanzaa, African American

A 7 day celebration, Dec 26 – Jan 1, honors African American culture, heritage and strengthen bonds with family and community. It is not a religious holiday, but a cultural one. Its about unity and reaffirmation. Professor Maulana Ron Karenga, a leading theorist of the black consciousness movement of the 1960’s, established it. The word Kwanzaa comes from Swahili and means “first fruits.” Seven principles address problematic areas within the community and the family — Unity, Self determination, Collective work, Cooperative economics, Purpose, Creativity, and Faith. One candle is lit each night and the family discusses the principle of the day. The emphasis is on the nonmaterial.\

Soyal, Hopi Tribe

The Hopi people of present-day northern Arizona are believed to be descendants of the mysterious Anasazi people, ancient Native Americans who flourished beginning in 200 B.C. They celebrate the winter solstice as part of their religious tradition of kachina (or katsina), which are spirits representing the natural world. In the Soyal solstice ceremony, led by a tribal chief, the Sun is welcomed back to its summer path with ritual dances. The Sun Chief announces the setting of the sun on the solstice. An all-night ceremony then begins, including kindling fires, dancing and sometimes gift-giving. Gift-giving to children, prayers for the coming year, singing, and storytelling are also part of the festivities. Prayer sticks and kachina dolls are often made in preparation for the celebration. Traditionally, the Hopi sun-watcher was not only important to the winter solstice tradition, as his observation of the sun also governed the planting of crops and the observance of Hopi ceremonies and rituals all year long. The Anasazi left no written records, but the placement of stones and structures in their ruins, such as New Mexico’s Chaco Canyon, indicate they certainly took a keen interest in the sun’s movement.

Shalako – Zuni Indians

For the Zuni, Pueblo peoples in western New Mexico, the winter solstice signifies the beginning of the year, and is marked with a ceremonial dance called Shalako. After fasting, prayer and observing the rising and setting of the sun for several days before the solstice, the Pekwin, or “Sun Priest” traditionally announces the exact moment of itiwanna, the rebirth of the sun, with a long, mournful call. With that signal, the rejoicing and dancing begin, as 12 kachina clowns in elaborate masks dance along with the Shalako themselves—12-foot-high effigies with bird heads, seen as messengers from the gods. After four days of dancing, new dancers are chosen for the following year, and the yearly cycle begins again.

Feast of Juul, Scandinavia

The Feast of Juul was a pre-Christian festival observed in Scandinavia at the time of the December solstice. Fires were lit to symbolize the heat, light and life-giving properties of the returning sun. A Yule or Juul log was brought in and burned on the hearth in honor of the Scandinavian god Thor. A piece of the log was kept as both a token of good luck and as kindling for the following year’s log. In England, Germany, France, and other European countries, the Yule log was burned until nothing, but ash remained. The ashes were then collected and either strewn on the fields as fertilizer every night until Twelfth Night or kept as a charm and or as medicine. The present-day custom of lighting a Yule log at Christmas is believed to have originated in the bonfires associated with the feast of Juul.

Saturnalia, Ancient Rome

In Ancient Rome the Winter Solstice festival Saturnalia began on December 17 and lasted for seven days. Saturnalian banquets were held from as far back as around 217 BCE. The festival was held to honor Saturn, god of agriculture and time as well as the father of the gods. It was characterized by the suspension of discipline and reversal of the usual order. Grudges and quarrels were forgotten while businesses, courts, and schools were closed. Wars were interrupted or postponed. Slaves got to partake in the festivities; they did not work, and some masters turned the tables and served their slaves. Masquerades often occurred during this time. It was traditional to offer gifts of imitation fruit (a symbol of fertility), dolls (symbolic of the custom of human sacrifice), and candles (reminiscent of the bonfires traditionally associated with pagan solstice celebrations). It started out as the jolliest and most popular of Roman festivals, but social norms fell away as everyone indulged in gambling, drinking, feasting and giving gifts. Saturnalia eventually degenerated into a week-long spree of debauchery and crime – giving rise to the modern use of the term saturnalia, meaning a period of unrestrained license and revelry.

Stonehenge gathering, England

The ancient circle of huge stones, Stonehenge, lines up with the movements of the Sun. Archaeological research suggests winter solstice festivals happened at Stonehenge and modern revelers have taken up the tradition, gathering at dawn the day after the longest night to witness the the Sun rising through the stones.

Winter Solstice Lantern Festival, Vancouver

To honor the many cultural traditions that celebrate the winter solstice, Vancouver's Secret Lantern Society created the city's Solstice Lantern Festival with lanterns, fire, singing, drumming, music, storytelling, and dancing. On the night of the solstice processions march throughout the city, culminating in fire performances. Attendees can also try to find their way through the Labyrinth of Light, a maze of 600 candles that invites visitors to let go of old thoughts and find new possibilities for the coming year.

Montol Festival, Cornwall, England

A reinterpretation of ancient Cornish winter traditions, the 12-year-old winter solstice festival of Montol in the town of Penzance celebrates the culture of England's westernmost peninsula. Wearing carnival-like costumes, "guisers" process with lanterns, creating a "river of fire" meant to celebrate the return of the sun. In the old custom, guisers (those wearing disguises) would roam the streets putting on skits, songs, and pranks; part of the fun was trying to guess who was who.

Shab-e Yalda, Iran (Persia)

This ancient Persian festival celebrates the beginning of longer days and the triumph of Mithra, the Sun God, over darkness. Meaning "night of birth," Shab-e Yalda is marked by family gatherings, performing charitable acts, candles (originally, fires lit all night), poetry readings (especially the work of the 14th-century Persian poet Hafiz), and a feast to get through the longest night of the year. Nuts and fruits, including watermelon and pomegranates, are traditionally eaten, the legend being that eating the fruits of summer will protect you from illness in winter. Some stay awake all night to rejoice in the moment when the sun rises, banishing evil and announcing the arrival of goodness. It marks the last day of the Persian month of Azar.

Burning the Clocks, Brighton, England

Fire, needed to light the dark days of winter, has traditionally been part of winter solstice celebrations. The modern-day Burning of Clocks festival in the seaside town of Brighton took up that notion for its yearly solstice parade, bonfire, and fire show. People wearing costumes representing clocks and the passage of time process with lanterns made of wood and paper to the beach, where the lanterns are burned in a huge bonfire, symbolizing the wishes, hopes, and fears that will be passed into the flames.

Newgrange gathering, Ireland

This 5,200-year-old passage tomb and ancient temple are aligned to the winter solstice. A small opening above the entrance fills with light on several sunrises surrounding the solstice, gradually extending throughout the chamber to illuminate it. The dramatic effect lasts for 17 minutes.

Although the reason why the tomb was created this way isn't known, it's speculated to mark the beginning of a new year and the triumph of light over darkness. Today, visitors can apply for a lottery drawing to be inside the temple at the moment of the sunrise; others will gather outside the monument.

St. Lucia Day, Scandinavia

Alongside Midsummer, the Lucia celebrations represent one of the foremost cultural traditions in Sweden, with their clear reference to life in the peasant communities of old: darkness and light, cold and warmth. Lucia is an ancient mythical figure with an abiding role as a bearer of light in the dark Swedish winters. St. Lucia was one of the earliest Christian martyrs. Earlier Norse solstice traditions, such as bonfires to scare away spirits during the longest night of the year, merge with Christian ones after many Norsemen converted to Christianity around 1000 A.D. December 13 is the day in 304 A.D. when the Romans killed Lucia for bringing food to persecuted Christians hiding in Rome. According to the old Julian Calendar, December 13 was also the shortest day of the year. In the celebration, a procession of young women in white robes, red sashes, and wreaths of candles on their heads, light the way through the darkness of winter. The candles also symbolize the candles Lucia wore on her head to light her way as she carried the forbidden food in her arms. Gingersnaps, saffron-flavored buns, and glogg are traditionally served.

Toji, Japan

The winter solstice in Japan is called Toji. It's a particularly sacred time of the year for farmers, who welcome the return of a sun that will nurture their crops after the long, cold winter. People light bonfires to encourage the sun's return; huge bonfires burn on Mount Fuji each December 22. Traditionally, a winter squash called kabocha is eaten, one of only a few crops that would have been available historically. A hot bath with yuzu citrus fruits is believed to refresh body and spirit, ward off illness, as well as soothe dry winter skin. It is said that capybaras, the world's largest friendly rodents, love yuzu baths. It's become popular for Japanese zoos to throw the yuzu into the warm waters the animals soak in on the winter solstice.

Santo Tomas Festival, Guatemala

Although the Catholic church now observes the feast of St. Thomas on July 3, in Chichicastenango (Chichi), Guatemala, the festival is still celebrated for a week leading up to the winter solstice of December 21. This is likely because it's a mix of the Catholic ceremony and native Mayan rituals timed to the solstice. Today, the feast is marked with brightly colored traditional costumes, masks, parades, fireworks, and music. Mayas honor the sun god they worshipped long before they became Christians with a dangerous ritual known as the Palo Volador, or "flying pole dance". Three men climb on top of a 50-foot pole. As one of them beats a drum and plays the flute, the other two men wind a rope attached to the pole around one foot and jump. If they land on their feet, it is believed that the sun god will be pleased and that the days will start getting longer.

Inti Raymi, Peru, Ancient Incas

In Peru, like the rest of the Southern Hemisphere, the winter solstice is celebrated in June. The Inti Raymi (Quechua for “sun festival”), taking place on the solstice, honors Inti, the Sun god. Before the Spanish conquest, the Incas fasted for three days before the solstice. Before dawn on the fourth day, they went to a ceremonial plaza and waited for the sunrise. When it appeared, they crouched down before it, offering golden cups of chicha (a sacred beer made from fermented corn). A mirror was used to focus the sun’s rays and kindle a fire. Festivities included feasts and sacrifices, of animals including llamas or possibly even children. After the conquest, the Spaniards banned the Inti Raymi holiday, but a local group of Quecia Indians in Cusco, Peru, revived the festival in the 1950s. It is now a major festival (with mock sacrifices) that begins in Cusco and proceeds to an ancient amphitheater a few miles away.

Midsummer

In northern Europe, the summer solstice is often referred to as Midsummer; Wiccans and other Neopagan groups call it Litha; and some Christian churches recognize the summer solstice as St. John’s Day to commemorate the birth of John the Baptist.

Hanukkah

The eight-day Jewish celebration known as Hanukkah (Chanukah) or Festival of Lights commemorates the the second century B.C. rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, where according to legend Jews had risen up against their Greek-Syrian oppressors in the Maccabean Revolt. It begins on the 25th of Kislev on the Hebrew calendar and usually falls in November or December. The holiday is celebrated with the lighting of the menorah, oil-based foods (latkes, sufganiyot, dairy foods foods), games (dreidel), and gifts.

Christmas

Christmas is an annual festival commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ, observed primarily on December 25 as a religious and cultural celebration among billions of people around the world. Why red and green are associated with Christmas: Ancient Celtic peoples revered red- and green-colored holly plants for being evergreen and believed holly was meant to keep Earth beautiful during the dead of winter. So when they and other cultures celebrated the winter solstice, they decorated their homes with holly to bring protection and good luck to their families in the coming year.

The Hanukkah story: The events that inspired the Hanukkah holiday took place during a particularly turbulent phase of Jewish history. Around 200 B.C., Judea, also known as the Land of Israel, came under the control of Antiochus III, the Seleucid king of Syria, who allowed the Jews who lived there to continue practicing their religion. His son, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, proved less benevolent: he outlawed the Jewish religion and ordered the Jews to worship Greek gods. In 168 B.C., his soldiers descended upon Jerusalem, massacring thousands of people and desecrating the city's holy Second Temple by erecting an altar to Zeus and sacrificing pigs within its sacred walls. A large-scale rebellion broke out, led by the Jewish priest Mattathias and his five sons, against Antiochus and the Seleucid monarchy. When Matthathias died in 166 B.C., his son Judah, known as Judah Maccabee ("the Hammer"), took the helm; within two years the Jews had successfully driven the Syrians out of Jerusalem, relying largely on guerilla warfare tactics. Judah called on his followers to cleanse the Second Temple, rebuild its altar and light its menorah, the gold candelabrum whose seven branches represented knowledge and creation and were meant to be kept burning every night. According to legend, Judah Maccabee and the other Jews who rededicated the Second Temple witnessed what they believed to be a miracle. Though there was only enough olive oil to keep the menorah's candles burning for a single day, the flames continued flickering for eight nights, giving them time to find a fresh supply.

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