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Australia

It is hard to believe that in Australia, Christmas comes in the middle of summer! Since Australia is in the southern hemisphere, it is summertime during December. In Australia, it is not unusual to have Christmas Day near 100 degrees. The warm weather allows Australians to enjoy the tradition of Carols by Candlelight. This tradition is held every year on Christmas Eve. Thousands of people gather outdoors in large cities to light candles and sing their favorite Christmas songs. Many of the words to Christmas songs have been changed from talking about snow to native Australian words.

Similar to the United States, Australians hang wreaths on their front doors and decorate their houses with Christmas trees and lights. Australians also decorate their houses with bunches of 'Christmas Bush', a native Australian tree with small green leaves and cream colored flowers. Most families try to be home together for Christmas. A traditional meal includes turkey, ham, and pork. A flaming Christmas plum pudding is often served for dessert.

Local legend says that when Santa gets to Australia, he gives the reindeer a rest and uses kangaroos instead of his reindeer. He also changes his winter clothes for clothing made for hot weather.



Christmas Bush

Brazil

Even though Brazilians are a mix of people from many parts of the world, they have many Christmas customs that originate from their Portuguese heritage. One tradition is to create a nativity scene. The nativity scenes are set up in December and displayed in churches, homes, and stores.

Christmas decorations in Brazil involve setting up Christmas trees in homes and decorating them with things such as lights and glass balls. One major Christmas celebration in Brazil is making huge Christmas "trees" of electric lights. Caroling is also a popular custom in Brazil.

Another common tradition is called Secret Friend. At the beginning of December, people write their name on a piece of paper. Everyone takes a name and does not share whose name they drew. During the month, they exchange cards and letters using a secret name. On Christmas, friends gather together to share their secret friends and give a Christmas gift.

Papai Noel (Father Noel) is the gift-bringer in Brazil. According to legend, he lives in Greenland. When he arrives in Brazil, he usually wears silk clothing suited for Brazil's warm weather.

In Brazil the celebrations go on until January 6th. That is referred to as Three Kings Day, which is supposed to be the day when three wise men visited Jesus to bring him gifts.



Brazil claims to have the largest Christmas tree in the world.

France

In France, Christmas is called Noel. This means "the good news". Nearly every French home displays a nativity scene. In the nativity scene, there are often little clay figures called little saints. Throughout December, the figures are sold at annual Christmas fairs.

Christmas trees are not popular in France. Instead, the French burn Yule Logs made out of Cherry Wood. The log is carried into the home on Christmas Eve and is sprinkled with red wine to make the log smell nice when it is burning. The log and candles are left burning all night with some food and drinks left out.



In France, Santa Claus is called Father Christmas. Sometimes he is accompanied by Le Pere Fouettard, a man dressed in black. On Christmas Eve, children leave their shoes by the fireplace to be filled with gifts from Father Christmas "Pere Noel". In the morning they also find that sweets and small toys have been hung on the tree.

The main Christmas meal, is eaten on Christmas Eve or early Christmas morning after people have returned from their midnight church service. The food often includes turkey, goose, oysters, lobster, and cheeses. For dessert, there is often a Yule log cake. However, in some parts of France, there are 13 different desserts served! All the desserts are made from different types of fruit, nuts, and pastries.



Germany

In Germany, Christmas preparations begin weeks before Christmas. In fact, people often begin before December ever begins. Evenings are set aside for baking, making gifts, and making beautiful gingerbread houses.

Homes in Germany have several Christmas trees. In fact, Germany is where the tradition of the Christmas tree began! Many people also lay out advent wreaths of holly with four red candles in the center. They light one candle each Sunday and the last one on Christmas Eve. Children count the days until Christmas using an advent calendar. They open one window each day and find a Christmas picture or candy inside.

December 6th is St. Claus Day. On December 5th children leave a shoe outside a door. If they were good, the children wake up to find small presents in the shoe, and if they were bad they would receive a rod.

Sometimes children leave letters on their windowsills for Christkindl, a winged figure dressed in white robes and a golden crown. The letters are often decorated with glue and sprinkled with sugar to make them sparkle. On Christmas Eve some people say that Father Christmas brings presents and others say it is Christkindl.



Germany is a country in Europe.

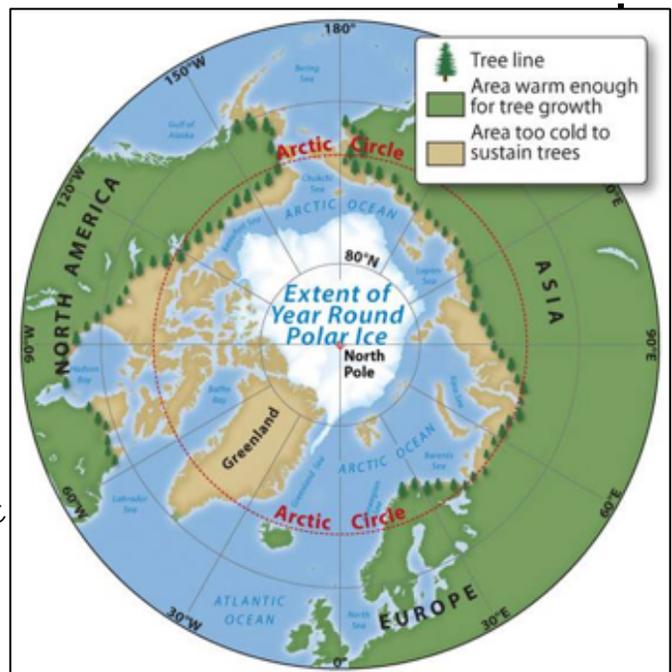
Greenland

Did you know that Greenland is connected to the North Pole? That is one of the reasons it is considered to be the home of Father Christmas. Even though it's the home of Santa Claus, there are no Christmas trees in Greenland. They have to be imported, because trees do not grow as far north as Greenland. The trees are decorated with candles and bright ornaments.

It is very dark in Greenland, so many of the Christmas decorations involve light. One popular decoration is to put an illuminated star in windows. There are stars in most homes and in all public buildings. Many towns also put a large Christmas Tree on a tall hill, so the light can be seen from far away.

During the Christmas season, families like to visit each other, eat, and exchange brightly wrapped presents. During the festivities, there are some unusual foods eaten. 'Mattak' is whale skin with a strip of blubber inside. It is supposed to taste like fresh coconut. Another Christmas food is 'kiviak'. This is the raw flesh of little auks (a type of arctic bird) which have been buried whole in sealskin for several months. The auks is considered to be a delicious treat in Greenland.

On Christmas night, the men look after the women and serve their food and coffee. After the Christmas meal, there are often games. One popular game is when an object is passed from hand to hand around a long table under the tablecloth.



Israel

Hanukkah is a Jewish winter festival that originated in Israel. It is now celebrated in homes all over the world, including Jewish families in the United States.

Hanukkah typically takes place in late November and early December and is celebrated for eight days and nights. Jewish families light candles or burn oil in a menorah for the eight days of Hanukkah, adding one candle each day. The special "helper candle" used to light the rest of the candles each night is called the Shamash. On the first night, the Shamash plus one other candle are lit. On the second night, the Shamash plus two candles are lit. This process is continued on through the eight nights.

As part of the celebration, children receive a small gift on each of the eight nights. Families also use this time to give money, gifts, and food to the needy.

During Hanukkah, children enjoy playing with a toy called a dreidel, which is similar to a top. The dreidel has four sides and four Hebrew letters, with one on each side. The letters stand for the Hebrew phrase "A great miracle happened there." The game is played with candy, and the player who has all the candy in the end is the winner.



Italy

In Italy, Christmas begins eight days prior to December 25, which is a period referred to as the Novena. During the Christmas season, some children dress as shepherds, play pipes, sing, and recite Christmas poems. After performing, they are given money to buy presents.

One of the most important ways of celebrating Christmas in Italy is through a nativity scene, which originated in Italy. Many Italian families have a nativity crib in their home.

On Christmas Eve, no food is eaten until after Midnight Mass. Then, the main Christmas meal is eaten. The meal includes Italian Christmas cake called 'Panettone' which is like a dry fruity sponge cake. In many towns a game called "Lucky Dip" is played. Everyone draws a present from the Urn of Fate, which contains one gift per person. Some of the boxes contain a small gift and other boxes are empty.

The main exchange of gifts takes place on January 6th, the feast of the Epiphany. La Befana brings gifts for good children and punishment for bad children. La Befana is depicted in various ways, such as a fairy queen, a crone, and a witch.



La Befana

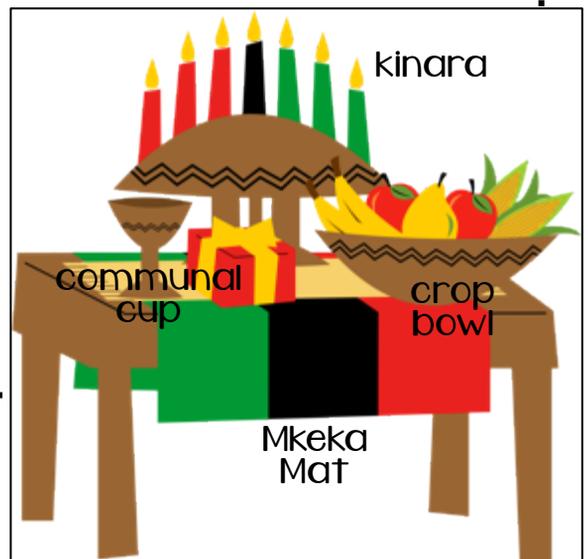
Kwanzaa

Kwanzaa is an African-American holiday celebrated mainly in the United States for the week between December 26th through January 1st. The holiday was established in 1966 to help African Americans remember and celebrate their heritage. The word "Kwanzaa" comes from the Swahili language and means "first fruits". Each of the seven days is dedicated to one of "The Seven Principles of Kwanzaa", which are:

- to maintain unity in the family and community
- to be responsible and speak for oneself
- to build and maintain a community
- to help and profit one another
- to build and develop the community for the benefit of the people
- to do everything possible to leave the community more beautiful and beneficial for future generations
- to believe in parents, teachers, and leaders.

Each day, a candle is lit to represent these principles. The candlestick is called a kimara. The kimara is placed on a straw mat, and one ear of corn is placed on the mat for each child in the family. A fruit basket, called a "mazao", is displayed, along with a special "unity" cup.

Families decorate their homes with traditional African crafts, and the colors red, green, and black. Gifts are given on the last day of Kwanzaa. Each family celebrates Kwanzaa in its own way, but celebrations often include songs and dances, African drums, storytelling, poetry reading, and a large traditional meal.



Mexico

In Mexico, nine days before Christmas, children often participate in Posada processions. The children travel from house to house asking for a shelter and are refused at each house. They do this until they finally reach a house where an altar and nativity scene have been set up. The outsides of the houses are decorated with evergreens, moss, and paper lanterns. When the children go into the house they say prayers of thanks, and then have a party with food, games, and pinatas. At the final Posada, families go to a midnight church service. After the church service, there are fireworks to celebrate the start of Christmas.

The poinsettia, which is a traditional Christmas plant, is native to Mexico. There is a legend connected with the flower. A little boy named Pablo was walking to the church in his village to visit the nativity scene, when he realized he had nothing to offer the Christ Child. He saw some green branches growing along the road and picked the branches up. Other children laughed at his gift, but when he laid them by the manger, a bright red star-shaped flower appeared on each branch.

In Mexico, children get their main presents on January 6th to celebrate Epiphany, which is known as The Day of Three Kings. It's traditional to eat a special cake called 'Rosca de Reyes' (Three Kings Cake). Children also receive special presents that were brought by Santa Claus.



Posada Procession

Sweden

In Sweden, one of the biggest Christmas celebrations is St. Lucia's Day, which is held on December 13th. It is celebrated when the oldest daughter in each family dresses in a white dress with a red sash and a crown of candles on her head and serves each family member a cup of coffee and a bun in their rooms. Villages and towns celebrate by choosing a girl to walk in a procession while carols are sung. This is also celebrated in Denmark, Norway, Finland, Bosnia, and Croatia. A popular breakfast food eaten on St. Lucia's day are 'Lussekatts', which are buns flavored with saffron and lined with raisins.

Christmas Eve is also very important in Sweden. This is when a feast called a jultbord is eaten. This lunchtime meal is a buffet with cold fish, herring, bread, and many types of cheeses. A popular dessert is a rice porridge that is eaten with raspberry jam or sprinkled with cinnamon.

Straw is used as a decoration in homes as a reminder that Jesus was born in a manger. Christmas tree decorations made of straw are very popular in Swedish homes. Sometimes families have goats made of straw in their houses to guard their Christmas trees.

Presents are normally exchanged on Christmas Eve. In Sweden, the presents are brought by Santa called 'Jultomten' or by elves called 'Tomte'.



Spain

Christmas is a major holiday in Spain. During the weeks before Christmas, families gather together to sing, play tambourines, and dance. The Christmas season officially begins December 8th with a ceremony called los Seises or the "Dance of Six." This is an elaborate dance performed by ten boys in costumes.

After Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, tiny oil lamps are lit in every house. The streets fill with dancers that participate in a special Christmas dance called the Jota. The words and music of the dance have been handed down for hundreds of years.

Children have some presents on Christmas Day, but most are opened at Epiphany. Some children believe that the Three Kings bring presents to them, so they write letters to the Kings and ask for toys and presents. The night before Epiphany, they leave shoes on windowsills or balconies, so the kings can fill them with presents. If the children have been bad, the Kings might leave pieces of coal made out of sugar in the presents. The children also leave a variety of gifts for the kings to enjoy. The kings that visit the children's homes are:



Dance of Six

- Gaspar who has brown hair, brown beard, and wears a green cloak and a gold crown with green jewels on it.
- Melchior who has long white hair, white beard, and wears a gold cloak.
- Balthazar who has black hair, black beard, and wears a purple cloak.