

April 1st

BULGARIA

All Fools' Day

Self irony tints Bulgarian sense of humour. “There is no better cure against the crisis than laughter,” prominent Bulgarian writer, humorist and philosopher, Professor Ivan Slavov, says and adds “The economic situation is so complex that women start marrying for love”. Bulgarian humorist writer Chudomir used to say “Our emptiest day is the one we haven’t smiled at all”.

Bulgarians love telling jokes on different occasions. They have Balkan humour and keep the spirit of the past and Bulgaria’s way of life alive. Bulgarians’ sense of humour is self-ironical. Its richness is measured not only by anecdotes, but also by sayings, songs, stories, fairy-tales, poems and parodies of well-known public figures. We touch on this topic because of April’s Fools’ Day.

“Bulgarians’ sense of humour has to do with our history and geographical location. When Bulgarians face hard times they resort to humour for their survival.

Bulgarian humour is colourful and peculiar; it is Balkan-style and many Europeans cannot understand it. The country’s geographical crossroad position makes Bulgarians multi-faceted, diverse and above all spontaneous. What do they laugh at? They make fun of others not realizing that the others are actually them. What is the recipe to survive in times of crisis? Bulgarian humorists are unanimous on this:

”The world has survived because it has laughed.”



April 1st - 4th

EASTER

Easter is one of the most widely observed spring holidays. Even to this day, many of the pagan beliefs and rites have been retained, showing how strongly-rooted Bulgarian cultural traditions are. Easter Day was preceded by a whole week known as **Strastna sedmitza** (Passion Week), of which the most important days were Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday.



Easter Wednesday was the day on which preparations for the holiday begin. On this day women are not supposed to do sewing or weaving.

The next day, Maundy Thursday, was dedicated to dying and boiling Easter eggs. The main dye was red, which was obtained by soaking and boiling herbs such as oregano. Other plants were used to obtain a variety of different colours. The housewife used to take the first dyed egg and rub the faces of the children and girls of the house, blessing them at the same time, since the first Easter egg was believed to possess magic power. Afterwards it would be placed among the bride's gifts or underneath an icon. This was believed to protect the health and prosperity of the household.

On Good Friday, the girls and the newly-married women would decorate the eggs with zoomorphic, floral or geometrical figures.

On Friday or Saturday the Easter loaves were baked. They could be round, elongated or in various shapes.

On Easter Sunday everyone went to church for the Easter service. Then they would visit relatives or friends, while newly-married couples would go and visit their witnesses.

A widespread custom was to have 'egg-fights', in which the person whose egg didn't crack would be healthy throughout the year.

Easter day would be celebrated with a large feast, with singing and dancing, which would carry on for three days.

Easter is still one of the most widely-celebrated holidays, when people dye Easter eggs and bake special ritual loaves and generally keep the ancient tradition alive.



April 1st - 4th

CZECH REPUBLIC

Easter



Today, Easter mainly celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but much earlier before coming of Christianity, people used to celebrate the upcoming spring and the awakening of nature. Much of the old customs survived until today, they were partly mixed with Christian traditions, but the most important is, that they are still practiced, especially in the country. So how exactly is traditional Czech Easter celebrated?

The most significant are painted eggs, the custom, which is not popular only in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, but also in the other countries, they are were popular as symbol of new life especially in Slavic Countries (beside Czech Republic it includes Poland, Ukraine and so on). The most popular color used for eggs always was red, symbolizing the energy of life. There are many techniques for decorating the eggs and they differ from each region, in the Czech Republic, pretty famous are those from Moravian Hana region.

The eggs can be either boiled or emptied before being decorated, thus they can be exhibited somewhere as an Easter decoration (hang between windows, put in the small basket on the holiday table and so on) and even stored for the next year. If they are boiled, they are mostly used as a gift for Easter carolers.

There is one specific Easter custom, which often seems cruel for foreign visitors when they see it for the first time. In the Czech Republic, on Easter Monday morning boys and men can legally spank Czech girls and women and they are even rewarded for it by the beaten ones! Boys need to make special Easter stick, made of wicker (willow wattle), decorated with ribbons of different colors, such stick is then called “pomlázka” in Czech.

According to etymology, “pomlázka” is something which makes the beaten one young, according to the tradition, it should bring them good health and they should stay young. That is why girls reward those who beat them. Mostly they give them painted eggs, but sometimes it also can be chocolate eggs or another sweets, and very often, when the Easter carolers are old enough, they give them some alcohol, the best is if it is home made one. Sometimes girls try to escape the guys, but mostly just not because they would not like to be beaten with “pomlázka”, but because they do not want the guys to get the reward that easily. This custom is, regardless how cruel or strange it may seem to you, still very popular in the Czech Republic (as well in Slovakia). Today, it is not even necessary to make an own “pomlázka” as they sell it almost around every corner before Easter. And this custom is not kept only in the country, but also in towns, Prague including, so on Monday morning, if you watch carefully, you can see carolers in the city.



April 1st - 4th

GREECE

Easter

The first ceremony takes place on Good Friday where the “Epitafios”, an imitation of the Christ’s funeral bier, is beautifully decorated with many flowers by the women of the parish. The “Epitafios” is then paraded through the streets of the villages or the neighbours of the cities. In some regions of Greece such as Crete, this ceremony is accompanied by the burning of effigies of Judas Iscariot. A great celebration also takes places the Saturday after, for the Christ’s triumphant return. At the stroke of midnight, all the lights of the churches are extinguished to symbolize the darkness which

envelops the Christ as He passes through the underworld. Then a priest appears at twelve o'clock, holding aloft a lighted taper and chanting "Avtó to Fós..." (This is the Light...) and shares the Holy flame on the candles of near worshippers. Then, the worshippers share at their turn the Holy Light with their close neighbours until the entire church and the courtyard full of people are illuminated by the Holy Light. It is a beautiful spectacle.



Worshippers then bring the burning candles home and make with the black smoke of the candle the sign of a cross above their home's door. This custom is supposed to bring good fortune upon the house. After midnight, families and friends meet to eat the "Mayeretsa", a soup made from lamb tripe, rice, dill and lemon. The rest of the lamb will be manually roasted Sunday morning for the lunch, accompanied by wines and dances.

The solemnity of Holy Week in the Greek Orthodox Church ends with the commencement of Easter celebrations, where it glorifies the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Greek religion, every Sunday is dedicated to the Resurrection of the Lord, but one hundred days also are dedicated to Easter, 50 before its actual preparation, and another 50 after it in commemorating the glorification of the Lord. Easter is therefore considered, the "Feast of Feasts".

The 50 days before Easter, known as a part of the period of 'Triodion', are the period for strengthening faith in the Lord. This is a period of repentance, which changes people from indifference to full devotion and prayer, which is considered the soul of faith, which governs relationships with fellowman. With this special preparation, Greeks enter the sanctuary of Holy Week, not as spectators, but as actual participants in the commemoration and enactment of events leading up to the death and resurrection of Christ.

In Greek Orthodoxy, people believe Christians must always be well-trained to fight against those who try to corrupt God's spirit. The Christian must keep his own spiritual kingdom intact and his freedom of religion and uprightness vivid in order to be a part of the Kingdom of God, where the compassion's of the Lord and Resurrection will be experienced. In this belief, there is no other place where the Kingdom of God can be expanded except the heart of man; and there is no other gate whereby we can enter the Kingdom but that of repentance.



The 50 days which follow Easter are signified by the Pentecostarion, which are dedicated to the spiritual enjoyment of the participants in the deep belief that God is with all men in everyday life and thoughts. It starts with the celebration of the Jesus' Resurrection. During this period, the Church of Christ (Christ's mystical body) was instituted and strengthened. His disciples and Apostles miraculously witnessed the appearance of the risen Christ, and from that became recipients of the Holy Spirit. From this momentous event, the Apostles became the ambassadors of the new message of salvation in the name of Christ, 'the Savior'. Nowadays, Christians are also called to commemorate the same divine events and to enact them in their hearts and minds in realization that 'Christ is Risen'. This is also one of the reasons why the Church from the very beginning set forth as the center of its worship, the faith and Resurrection of Christ. From the earliest days after Pentecost, the Apostles designated the first of the Sabbath of each week for the remembrance of the Resurrection of Christ.



Holy Week itself, begins after 'Palm Sunday' and runs from Monday, where fasting and observance lead up to the so-called, 'Passion'. The Tuesday following it is usually devoted to scripture reading and Wednesday is devoted to the anointing the faithful with holy oil or a spig of oregano. These sprigs are later thought to have healing powers. Thursdays usually finds the

household up and about very early decorating the churches as priests read bible passages from the Last Supper. Later, the taking of communion begins in which all the faithful participate. In the evening services, the priest recites passages from the twelve gospels, describing the Passion of Christ. On Good Friday, most shops and businesses are closed and flags are flown at half-mast in commemoration of Christ being taken down from the cross. On Friday evening, the bier of Christ is decorated with gold cloth and fresh flowers, where the faithful bow and stoop to kiss the symbolic body of Christ. After this, the bier is carried out of the church and paraded through the streets in a lengthy funeral procession. Finally on Holy Saturday, the ceremonies come to a close as people begin to break their fasts, savoring specially prepared dishes like 'margeiritsa' soup, made of lambs innards. The rest of the day is spent preparing for next day's big lamb feast at the Easter Sunday celebrations.

April 1st - 4th

ITALY

Easter day

While you probably won't see the Easter bunny if you're in Italy for Easter, you will find some interesting Italian Easter celebrations. Like all holidays in Italy, Easter, *Pasqua* in Italian, has its share of rituals and traditions. The Monday following Easter, *la Pasquetta* is also a holiday throughout Italy. While the days before Easter in Italy include solemn processions and masses, Easter is a joyous celebration.

Good Friday and Easter Week Processions

Solemn religious processions are held in many towns on the Friday or Saturday before Easter and sometimes on Easter Sunday. Many churches have special statues of the Virgin and Jesus that play a big part in the processions. The statues may be paraded through the city or displayed in the main square. Parade participants are often dressed in traditional ancient costumes. Olive branches are often used instead of or along with palm fronds in the processions and to decorate churches.

Enna, in Sicily, has a large procession on Good Friday, with more than 2,000 friars dressed in ancient costumes walking through the streets of the city. *Trapani*, also in Sicily, is a good place to see processions, held several days during Holy Week. Their Good Friday procession is 24 hours long.

Easter food

Since Easter is the end of the Lent season, food plays a big part in the celebrations. Traditional Easter foods include lamb or goat, artichokes, and special Easter breads that vary from region to region. *Pannetone* and *Colomba* (dove shaped) breads are often given as gifts as are hollow chocolate eggs that usually come with a surprise inside.

Easter Monday - La Pasquetta

On Easter Monday, some cities hold dances, free concerts, or unusual games often involving eggs. In the Umbrian hill town of *Panicle*, cheese is the star. *Ruzzolone* is played by rolling huge wheels of cheese,



weighing about 4 kilos, around the village walls. The object is to get your cheese around the course using the fewest number of strokes. Following the cheese contest, there is a band in the *piazza* and of course, wine. Read more about the town of Panicale. Easter Monday is a time to gather with friends and have fun.

SPAIN

1st Holy Thursday (Easter)

