

## BULGARIA

# CHRISTMAS DAY



Bulgaria's Orthodox Church turned to the reformed Julian calendar in 1968. Since then, Bulgaria has celebrated Christmas for three days starting on December 25, same as most of the Christian world.

Christmas is one of the greatest holidays in Bulgaria, which is celebrated all over the country. It is also a winter holiday that is connected with many rituals and traditions. *Ignajden* (St. Ignatius' Day) is considered to be the beginning of the Christmas holidays but the real and most important holiday in this period is Christmas. Its connection with that crucial moment of the nature – cycle explains its significant

position in their folk calendar and the wealth of the holiday rites. Christmas is the beginning of the new sun – year and that is why its ritual complex is rich in future telling, magic rites, rituals to secure the prosperity of the family and the farm. This holiday is a continuation of Christmas Eve, because it starts at midnight with a ritual, called *Koleduvane*. All the participants in it are men – bachelors, fiances and young men who have just married. This ritual group has its own name that differs from place to place and is connected with the region of the country – *koledari*, *kolednitzi*, *koledare* etc. All the men choose their leader at St. Ignatius' Day – he is called *stanenik*, an old man – and make smaller groups of 10-15 persons. Each group includes younger boys (they are called *cats*), who walk around the houses and tell the hosts that the *koledari* are coming. The *koledari* wear traditional holiday clothes – with beautifully decorated fur caps. They go round the houses in the village or in the town from midnight till dawn. On their way, in front of the gate and in the house they sing specific ritual songs. The songs differ from one another according to the place they are sung and the person they are dedicated to. As a whole, these songs are ritual wishes for happiness in the family and rich crop in the farm. The first song usually begins with this verse:

*“Get up, get up dear host!  
We are singing for you!  
We have come to visit you,  
We are good guests for you, koledari!”*

The leader of the group carries in his hands the ring – shaped bun, which is a gift from the host. After the songs have been sung he tells a Christmas blessing:

*“Let God grant you health;  
We have brought in your house revelry! “*



## CZECH REPUBLIC

In the Czech Republic, Christmas is celebrated on what is considered Christmas Eve in the United States. Traditionally Czechs fast all day until they sit down for the meal of carp, potato salad, and special Christmas cookies. Once everyone has finished eating, a bell is rung to announce that Baby Jesus (Ježíšek) has come and gone and left presents underneath the tree.

December 25 and December 26 are respectively the first and second Christmas holidays. They are traditionally spent at home with families.

## GREECE

### Christmas

The feast is of great importance, as it is celebrating the birth of the Christ. The traditional Greek decoration used to be a wooden boat but today, the decorations are more similar to the western tradition.

The 25th is also a day when children traditionally sing Christmas carols (kalanda) from door to door.

Christmas in Greece is a traditionally a solemn, religious holiday. Beautiful carols called kalandas have been handed down from Byzantine times and add to the reverent quality of the celebration. Traditionally the Christmas holiday period lasts 12 days in Greece. There are many customs associated with the "twelve day of Christmas," some very old and others relatively recent, like the decorated tree and the turkey on the Christmas-day table. Today almost everyone buys and decorates a Christmas tree in Greece, whether it be real or artificial.

Usually they are decorated a few days before Christmas and remain in the homes until Epiphany. The Christmas tree, assumed to be foreign, may even have some Greek roots. Use of decorated greenery and branches around New Year is recorded as far back as in Greek antiquity. In older times, this custom did not exist in Crete and in some other parts of Greece they would decorate little boats instead.



## ITALY

### Christmas day

**Christmas** or **Christmas Day** is a holiday held on December 25 to commemorate the birth of Jesus, the central figure of Christianity.



Although a Christian holiday, Christmas is also widely celebrated by many non-Christians, and some of its popular celebratory customs have pre-Christian or secular themes and origins. Popular modern customs of the holiday include gift-giving, music, an exchange of greeting cards, church celebrations, a special meal, and the display of various decorations;

including Christmas trees, lights, garlands, mistletoe, nativity scenes, and holly. In addition, Father Christmas (known as Santa Claus in some areas, including North America, Australia and Ireland) is a popular folklore figure in many countries, associated with the bringing of gifts for children. Christmas in Italy is primarily a season of religious observance. It lasts for three weeks, from December 6th to Christmas Eve, beginning with a novena, or nine-day period of religious devotion. The celebrations end with the feast of Epiphany on January 6th. During the novena, children go from house to house to recite Christmas poems in return for small coins with which they buy sweets. In another Italian tradition, children write letters to their parents, extending wishes for a wonderful Christmas celebration and including promises that they will be good. Christmas decorations and trees are becoming more popular in Italy. Lights and decorations are often seen starting around December 8, the Feast Day of the Immaculate Conception, or even the end of November. The main focus of decorations continues to be the *presepe*, Nativity scene or creche. Almost every church has a *presepe* and they are often found outdoors in a piazza or public area, too. Traditionally, a meatless dinner is eaten on Christmas eve with the family, followed by a living nativity scene and midnight mass. In parts of southern Italy a seven fishes dinner is traditionally served on Christmas Eve. Traditional bonfires are often held on Christmas Eve in the main square of town, especially in mountain areas. Dinner on Christmas day is usually meat based. Although you'll find Christmas celebrations all over Italy, these are some of the most unusual or most popular Christmas celebrations, events, and decorations. **Naples** is one of the best cities to visit for Nativity cribs. Naples and southern Italy have other Christmas traditions, including the Christmas Eve dinner of the seven fish dishes, although it doesn't really have to be seven fishes and not everyone serves it.

Bagpipe and flute players, *zampognari* and *pifferai*, are a part of Christmas celebrations in Rome, Naples, and southern Italy. They often



December 25<sup>th</sup>

wear traditional colorful costumes with sheepskin vests, long white stockings, and dark cloaks.

## LITHUANIA

### CHRISTMAS DAY



On Christmas morning in Lithuania the family members used to have breakfast after they had returned from church. Various meals such as meat jelly, cake, coffee and other meals were served. After breakfast children used to sleigh down the hills. Adults used to tell different stories. Lunch was served late in the afternoon. Guests were welcomed only on Boxing day. On that day children usually 4-5 boys used to visit other houses in the village. They had a Christmas Star which was put on the pin. The boys used to sing a carol and were given pocket money, cakes and apples.

Today Christmas Eve is mainly associated with a solemn supper bringing the whole family together. However, Lithuanians have other Christmas traditions as well.

Christmas Eve starts only when the Hesperus shows up in the sky. Just as in other parts of the world, one of the most important traditions during the Christmas Eve is decoration of the Christmas tree. In former times, this beautiful green tree used to be brought from the forest and decorated with apples, sweets or cookies. However, this tradition has changed over the 20th century, and today all you need to decorate a Christmas tree, can be easily found in a supermarket, including the Christmas tree itself.

There is an old tradition in Lithuania that each member of family should bath and put on clean clothes on the day before Christmas. After this, the whole family gathers at the Christmas table, which is traditionally covered with white huckaback tablecloth.

Another common Lithuanian custom is to serve twelve meals for the supper, since this number symbolizes the number of Jesus' apostles. The supper begins with a prayer, then everybody starts eating. The meal that should be eaten first is a Christmas wafers, so they are handed around to everybody by the oldest member of the family.

It was also believed in earlier times and is still believed today that the souls of those who have died do not leave their house after the death. Therefore, an empty plate is always prepared for the souls of the deceased, expecting them to join the supper during the Christmas Eve. All meals on the festive table are traditional: herring, hot potatoes, mushrooms, beetroots, nuts, bread and beans. Cranberry jam or pear compote were essential on the Christmas table. Nowadays, people drink red wine at supper, but long time ago, there was no such kind of thing in Lithuania, so villagers used to drink bear or poppy milk.

December 25<sup>th</sup>

After the supper, it's time for magic. There's an old custom - trying to guess his luck in the future, each member of the family pulls a straw from underneath the table cover. If one succeeds to get a long straw, he will live a long life, but if the straw is short, the life will be short. After the meal, girls try to guess when they get married. All of them go outside and listen if there is any dog barking. The sound shows the way where the groom lives. They also observe the wind as it shows the direction where the girl is going to live after she gets married.

Old men used to say that the Christmas night is holy and full of miracles. For example, ancient Lithuanians believed that animals begin to speak in human voice during this magic night, so people used to feed them from their table.

On Christmas morning, people wake up early. It is believed that if the weather is cold, the spring will be warm and fertile.

In earlier times, children used to spend the morning waiting for the oracle (the oldest dweller in the village) who would bring them some presents. Usually, he had his body covered with an animal skin, had a wooden stick and a long gray beard. The oracle was walking across the village, giving present to children and shouting "Merry Christmas". This custom has changed a lot over time, and the function of oracles is performed by Santa Claus today.



## *SPAIN*

### **Christmas Day**

One of the most important Spanish Christmas traditions is to set a nativity scene and /or a Christmas tree at every home. On Christmas' Eve, it is usual for people to have a familiar dinner and to stay all together.

On these dates, lunches and dinners are different from the other ones and we cook more food than the average.

In Galicia, the traditional Christmas dinner used to be cod with cauliflower and farm-yard chicken together with some nougat if we could afford it.

Nowadays, we normally have a lot of seafood, fish, and of course, meat. We also include every kind of national products such as nougat, shortbread and marzipan.

## *ESTONIA*

### **Christmas**

