

Notes for Christmas around the world 2022

A. Introduction

1. Which date?

Do you know when Christmas Day was first celebrated? No, actually NOT right after Jesus was born! It was 1st celebrated on 25 December in the 6th century AD, after the proclamation of the Christian leaders in the Western Roman Empire in France in 567. But the Christians in the Eastern Roman Empire preferred the 6 January, so the 12 Days of Christmas between these two dates are considered holy days. Do you know that Christmas was banned in England during the time of the Puritans (1652-60) as it was a pagan festival, until the Stuarts became kings?

Nowadays, Christmas is actually celebrated on several different dates around the world. In France they start celebrating on December 6th (St. Nicholas Day) and in Italy in addition to Dec 25th many families still only exchange gifts on January 6th (Day of Epiphany). In Russia, Christmas is celebrated on January 7th because the Russian Orthodox Church uses the Julian calendar for religious celebrations. The official Christmas/New Year holiday season in Russia lasts from December 31st to January 10th!

2. Which countries?

Do you think Christmas is celebrated in every country? Actually the answer is no.

There are many countries where there are still very few Christians and most of the people follow other religions. Have you heard of any other religions? [Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam or Animist/witchcraft]

In fact in Bethlehem itself, where Jesus was born, over a million tourists like to visit at Christmas, although they often only stay for 3-4 hours. Most of the people that now live in the Bethlehem area are either Jewish or Muslim (and personally don't celebrate Christmas). Only 2% of the population of Israel is Christian and the Palestinian Christians living in Israel have to get a special permit to visit Bethlehem!

Then there are places where the government is atheist and bans ALL religions – like China and North Korea. Christians living in such countries must be very secretive, often only meeting in caves or homes at night, as if they are caught they could be sent to prison or even killed! Work continues as usual during the Christmas season and if they CAN celebrate, it will probably only be with a special meal and perhaps a church meeting.

3. Which special foods?

What do YOU like to eat for your special Christmas meal? Did you know that around the world there are some very different traditional Christmas meals? You can actually try some Christmas snacks from other countries when we finish!

4. Which special characters?

Apart from Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus, here in the USA we often think of other special characters at Christmas – like ?? [Santa, the Grinch, elves...] Did you know that in other countries they may have very different Christmas characters?

5. Which special customs?

How does YOUR family celebrate every year? Perhaps with a Christmas tree, decorations and lights, presents and parties.... Often in December we have Advent calendars with 24 windows that we open one by one each day until Christmas Day.

We're going to talk about how people celebrate Christmas around the world with very different traditions....

B. With slides to illustrate unusual traditions (locate each country on world map)

Austria – Bad Santa

The devil is smart – any time there's something good, he wants to corrupt or mess it up with something bad! Kids here are well acquainted with Father Christmas, Santa Claus or Saint Nick, but they can consider themselves lucky they don't live in Austria. That's because it's there that a scary creature called 'Krampus', the evil accomplice of St Nicholas, is said to wander the streets in search of badly behaved children. During the month of December, you can expect to see terrifying masked figures out and about scaring kids and adults alike with ghastly pranks.



Ukraine – Cobweb decorations

People in the Ukraine usually have Christmas trees – but instead of colorful ornaments, tinsel and stars, they use decorations that look like spiders' webs shimmering with dew. The tradition goes back to a folktale about a poor widow who could not afford to decorate a tree for her children. Legend has it that spiders in the house took pity on the family, and spun beautiful webs all over the tree, which the children awoke to find on Christmas morning. Spiders' webs are also considered to be lucky in Ukrainian culture.



Japan – Colonel Santa

Christians make up less than 1% of the population in Japan, but back in 1974, the American fast food restaurant KFC released a festive marketing campaign in Japan. The seemingly simple slogan "*Kurisumasu ni wa kentakkii!*" (Kentucky for Christmas!) started a national tradition that carries on to this day. Although Christmas isn't a national holiday in Japan, families from all over the country head to their local KFC for a special Christmas Eve meal.



Venezuela – Roller skate mass

In the Venezuelan capital of Caracas, crowds of people make their way to church every year on Christmas morning on roller skates! The tradition is now so well established that many of the city's streets are closed to traffic from 8am, so that the skating congregation can get to church safely. It's even said that children will sleep with one lace from their skates tied around their toe, the other skate dangling from the window so that their friends can wake them up with a friendly tug on the lace.



Iceland – The Yule Cat

One of the more unique festive traditions comes from Iceland, where a giant cat is said to roam the snowy countryside at Christmas time. Traditionally, farmers would use the Yule Cat as an incentive for their workers - those who worked hard would receive a new set of clothes, but those who didn't would be eaten by the gigantic cat-like beast! Today it is customary for everyone in Iceland to get new clothing for Christmas "just in case".



South Africa – Fried caterpillars

When you think of Christmas food, ham, turkey and Christmas cookies are often high on the list. In South Africa, however, it's the creepy crawlies that local children look forward to. Festive fried caterpillars may seem like one of the more unusual Christmas traditions, but these caterpillars aren't just the regular ones you find in the garden. The Pine Tree Emperor Moth, or Christmas caterpillar, is covered in very festive colors - giving all who swallow it a little extra luck in the coming year.



C. Interview international guests

Poland (Mary)

When does the celebration of Christmas begin in Poland? - On the evening of December 24th, when we have the traditional Christmas Eve vigil supper. Polish people believe that the way they spend Christmas Eve determines how the whole year will pass, so they try to make this day really wonderful and warm. It's then that we decorate the Christmas tree, prepare the traditional meals, clean the house, get dressed up, etc. All of the dishes should be cooked and housework done before the first star appears in the sky, which corresponds to the Star of Bethlehem.

Do you have Christmas trees? – Yes, but in addition to balls, it is decorated with a large number of apples, sweets, nuts wrapped in wrappers, cookies, and straw stars. Such fruits symbolize the harvest.

What are the traditional Christmas dishes? – Fish like carp and herring, little stuffed dumplings called pierogis, and poppy seed cake. After dinner, people start giving out presents and singing carols. Polish people really love its Christmas carols and there are thousands of them. According to a recent survey from Polish National Radio, nearly 80% of Poles sing carols at the Christmas dinner table. When midnight comes many people attend a Christmas church service which is often called “The Shepherd’s Mass”.

Guatemala (Katie)

When do Christmas celebrations begin in Guatemala? - In some places it starts on Dec 7 when piñatas in the likeness of the Devil are burned in preparation for the good hopes they have for the upcoming year. This is referred to as *El Quema del Diablo*. Then comes the Procession of the Virgin Mary where an enormous statue of Mary is carried through the town streets. From the 16th through 24th, posadas are held. A large display of Mary and Joseph is carried to three special homes and are not granted entry until the third house is reached. Here they are fed and the statue is left until the following night. On the final night, a “baby Jesus” is added to the display.

So when is the main celebration? – Dec 24th. On Christmas Eve, everyone is at home with family. Once the sun sets, the kids bring out all the fire works!! You will hear fireworks go off from about 6pm all through the night. Everyone stays up until midnight, when we all yell Merry Christmas! We give Christmas hugs to everyone and then the family blows whistles and sets off firecrackers like crazy! On Christmas morning, the air is filled with smoke from all of the celebrations.

Do you celebrate with a special dinner? - After all the fireworks and hugs, we pray and open up tamales for everyone to eat, and enjoy hot fruit punch. Then we open presents. On Christmas Day, everyone relaxes and gives thanks for the blessings they have received and look forward to. We celebrate with a big family lunch of favorite foods since everyone stayed up the night before.

India (Lori)

Is Christmas celebrated in India? - Compared to other religious festivals, Christmas is quite a small festival in India, as Christians make up only about 2% of the population compared to people who belong to other religions. Having said this, the population of India is over 1 billion, so there are over 25 million Christians in India – though most tend to live in only a few states. Yet many stores, markets, and malls are decorated in multi-colored and twinkling fairy lights, paper streamers, and flowers. Although, unlike the US, giving and receiving gifts during Christmas isn't as common, so you might not see a shopping frenzy in the last few days before the day.

How do the Christians celebrate it? - Midnight mass is a very important service for Christians in India, especially Catholics. The whole family will walk to the mass and this will be followed by a massive feast of different delicacies, and the giving and receiving of presents. Instead of having traditional Christmas trees, a banana or mango tree is decorated (or whatever tree people can find to decorate!). Sometimes people use mango leaves to decorate their homes. In Southern India, Christians often put small oil burning clay lamps on

the flat roofs of their homes to show their neighbors that Jesus is the light of the world. Most Christian families also have a nativity scene with clay figures in it, and churches are often decorated using stunning light shows that look spectacular in the night. On Christmas Eve, Christians in Goa hang out giant paper lanterns, in the shape of stars, between the houses so that the stars float above you as you walk down the road.

What special foods are eaten in India at Christmas? Most families have a big lunch and an even bigger dinner with deliciously spicy and fragrant family recipes like tandoori chicken, grilled fish, curries, and rum cakes. Favorite sweets include *neureos* (small pastries which are stuffed with dry fruit and coconut and fried) and *dodol* (like toffee that has coconut and cashew nuts in it). People often make these and other sweets before Christmas and give them to their friends and neighbors.

Nigeria (Nicola)

It is reported that Nigeria has the largest Christian population of any country in Africa (although it actually has more Muslims than Christians), so can you tell me how Christmas is celebrated there? - Certainly, one thing is common all over the country: Christmas in Nigeria means travelling home to the family and so transportation is very crowded everywhere! Christmas decorations are seen everywhere, with palm fronds on houses, streets, shops and churches. You may hear the phrase “*Knock-out*” a lot at Christmas – it refers to firecrackers and bangers. Almost every Nigerian pops some fireworks all through the 25th of December (Christmas day), and after receiving presents, old and young participate in street life with rousing parties lasting a couple of days.

Are there any particular customs that are different? – Yes, no matter the tribe, religion or social status, Nigerians are known to go all out on shopping for the holidays, and most importantly, they select the most gorgeous of all clothing to wear on the 25th of December. Some families even make custom designs, identical fabrics or uniform colors for every single member of the family. Christians usually go together to a midnight church service and watch the Ekon Play, where a drama group dances with a baby doll, symbolizing the Baby Jesus, and spectators may hold it for a small donation.

What special foods are eaten at Christmas? - The idea of Christmas rice has become a tradition in the country. You hear friends asking each other, “*Where is my Christmas rice?*” or making such comments as “*I will visit you for my Christmas rice.*” While the rice can be prepared in a variety of ways, it is customary that rice is available for guests when they call on you for Christmas. The rice can be garnished with meat and combined with other appetizers or desserts, depending on what the family can afford. For most Nigerians, the Christmas meal means eating beef, goat, sheep, ram or chicken with the family at home.

Brazil (Maria)

How is Christmas celebrated in Brazil? - Preseprios, or nativity scenes, are a very popular Christmas decoration in Brazil, and they decorate churches, houses, and storefronts around the nation. Christmas trees are also commonplace, and Rio de Janeiro has a floating Christmas tree, which is said to be the largest in the world. In Brazil, employees receive a 13th salary at the end of the year, or double their salary in December, to help them celebrate and to boost the economy around Christmastime.

What is a traditional Christmas meal in Brazil? - It's tradition to enjoy a big family meal on Christmas Eve, served around 10 PM. The meal often includes turkey, ham, salads, and fresh fruits, served with rice cooked with raisins and a spoonful of seasoned manioc flour, but varies as people from many different cultures live in Brazil. A favorite dessert is Panettone, which is a type of fluffy sweet bread with candied fruit. I brought some for you to try too!

What about a special Christmas service at church? As the majority of the population is Catholic, many Brazilians attend a midnight mass on Christmas Eve called the Misa de Gallo, or Mass of the Rooster, named so because it may last all night, until the rooster crows in the early morning. At midnight, the nation celebrates with a massive show of fireworks. After the long night and because Brazil is in South America where Christmas is often hot, many families spend Christmas day relaxing and celebrating at the beach!

Puerto Rico (Sarah Torres)

When is the Christmas season in Puerto Rico? - Christmas is a big, long party in Puerto Rico! We celebrate from the day after Thanksgiving up until Three Kings' Day on January 6th. People surprise their friends and neighbors by showing up at their houses to decorate, playing very lively music, and eating (and they expect the chosen host to cook, of course)!

What special customs celebrate Christmas there? – People love to sing special Christmas carols called “*parrandas*”. Friends and families gather in front of a house – usually after 10:00 p.m. – with instruments like *maracas* and guitars to sing traditional Christmas songs. The idea is to surprise the household, so the *parranderos* round up as quietly as possible and then break into song with the intention of waking people up with joyful and jubilant music. It is a tradition for the household to offer refreshments and then join the group to bring the party to the next house. The last home is the longest stay and where the party usually ends when the sun rises. On Christmas Eve, presents under the (fake) Christmas tree are opened, and children also get gifts on Three Kings' Day. But the night before, they leave grass out for the camels to eat!

Please tell us about the special foods eaten at Christmas - The food is amazing and delicious, like *arroz con gandules* (rice with pigeon peas) and the fantastic dessert called *tembleque* (a coconut-based pudding topped with cinnamon) In fact, I even made some to bring with me to share with you!

[Go back to classrooms to play Christmas games and taste some traditional snacks, and receive handout.]

