

# Christmas in Britain and in Russia



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7<sup>th</sup> Form

Christmas in Britain is the most popular holiday and is characterized by traditions which date back hundreds of years. Many Christmas customs which originated in Britain have been adopted in the United States.

Christmas traditions include carol singing, where many carols are sung by children on people's doorsteps and by professional choirs, and sending Christmas cards. The first ever Christmas card was posted in England in the 1840s, and the practice soon became an established part of the build-up to Christmas. Over a billion Christmas cards are now sent every year in the United Kingdom, many of them sold in aid of charities.





Traditionally, Christmas cards showed religious pictures - Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, or other parts of the Christmas story. Today, pictures are often jokes, winter pictures, Father Christmas, or romantic scenes of life in past times.

In public, there are decorations and lights in most shops, especially in town centers, and even in Indian and Chinese restaurants. Churches and cathedrals across the country hold masses, with many people going to midnight mass or a service on Christmas morning. Even though church attendance has been falling over the decades some people who do not go to church often think it is still important to go at Christmas. Most theatres have a tradition of putting on a Christmas pantomime for children. The pantomime stories are traditionally based on popular children's stories such as Little Red Riding Hood and Aladdin, rather than being directly concerned with Christmas as such, although there is sometimes a link. Television is widely watched: for many television channels, Christmas Day is the most important day of the year in terms of ratings. Many Britons still watch the Queen's annual Christmas message



Christmas Day sees the opening of presents and a traditional Christmas dinner. It usually consists of a roast turkey, goose or chicken with stuffing and roast potatoes. This is followed by mince pies and Christmas pudding flaming with brandy, which might contain coins or lucky charms for children. (The pudding is usually prepared weeks beforehand and is customarily stirred by each member of the family as a wish is made.) Later in the day, a Christmas cake may be served - a rich baked fruit cake with marzipan, icing and sugar frosting.



The pulling of Christmas crackers often accompanies food on Christmas Day. Invented by a London baker in 1846, a cracker is a brightly coloured paper tube, twisted at both ends, which contains a party hat, riddle and toy or other trinket. When it is pulled by two people it gives out a crack as its contents are dispersed.



The day after Christmas is known in Britain as Boxing Day, which takes its name from a former custom of giving a Christmas Box - a gift of money or food inside a box - to the deliverymen and tradespeople who called regularly during the year. This tradition survives in the custom of tipping the milkman, postman, dustmen and other callers of good service at Christmas time.

In many countries of the world, the celebration of Christmas on December 25th is a high point of the year. From November onwards, it is impossible to forget that Christmas is coming. Shopping centers become busier as December approaches and often stay open till late. Most places of work will hold a short Christmas party about a week before Christmas. Although traditional Christmas foods may be eaten, drink (and plenty of it) means that little work will be done after the party!



'Father Christmas' (or 'Santa Claus') has become the human face of Christmas. Pictures will be seen everywhere of the old man with long white beard, red coat, and bag of toys. Children are taught that he brings them presents the night before Christmas (or in some countries on December 6th - St. Nicholas' Day), and many children up to the age of 7 or 8 really believe this is true. In most countries, it is said that he lives near the North Pole, and arrives through the sky on a sledge (snow-cart) pulled by reindeer. He comes into houses down the chimney at midnight and places presents for the children in socks or bags by their beds or in front of the family Christmas tree.



By mid-December, most homes will also be decorated with Christmas trees, coloured lights and paper or plastic decorations around the rooms. These days, many more people also decorate garden trees or house walls with coloured electric lights, a habit which has long been popular in USA

In shops or at children's parties, someone will dress up as Father Christmas and give small presents to children, or ask them what gifts they want for Christmas. Christmas can be a time of magic and excitement for children





Now in Russia Christmas is also celebrated, but in a completely different way. As in other Eastern Orthodox countries, Christmas is celebrated on January 7. Unlike its Western counterparts, Christmas is mainly a religious event in Russia. On Christmas Eve (6 January), there are several long services, including the Royal Hours and Vespers combined with the Divine Liturgy. The family will then return home for the traditional Christmas Eve "Holy Supper", which consists of 12 dishes, one to honor each of the Twelve Apostles. Devout families will then return to church for the "всеночная" All Night Vigil. Then again, on Christmas Morning, for the "заутренняя" Divine Liturgy of the Nativity. The tradition of celebrating Christmas has been revived since 1992, after decades of suppression by the Communist government. Christmas is now a national holiday in Russia, as part of the ten-day holiday at the start of every new year. While Christmas is increasingly important, many Russians continue to focus on the New Year's celebration.

During the Soviet period, religious celebrations were discouraged by the officially atheist state. However, a number of Russian Christmas traditions were kept alive by shifting them to the secular New Year celebration. These include the decoration of a tree, or "yolka" (spruce, or sometimes pine), festive decorations and family gatherings, the visit by gift-giving "Dyed Moroz" (Дед Мороз) "Grandfather Frost" and his granddaughter, "Snegurochka" (Снегурочка).

In the Ded Moroz legend, Snegurochka is the Russian Santa Claus's granddaughter and helper and lives with him in Veliky Ustyug. She is most commonly depicted with long silver-blue robes and a furry cap. Just as Ded Moroz appears in various interpretations during the holiday season impersonated by men in costume, so does Snegurochka assume new disguises around Russia to help distribute gifts. Snegurochka's name is derived from the Russian word for snow, sneg.

On Christmas Day, hymns and carols are sung. People gather in churches which have been decorated with the usual Christmas trees or Yolka, flowers and colored lights.

Babushka is a traditional Christmas figure who distributes presents to children. Her name means grandmother and the legend is told that she declined to go with the wise men to see Jesus because of the cold weather. However, she regretted not going and set off to try and catch up, filling her basket with presents. She never found Jesus, and that is why she visits each house, leaving toys for good children.



The tale of Snegurochka, or The Snow Maiden, is often beautifully depicted on hand-painted Russian crafts. This Snegurochka is the daughter of Spring and Winter who appears to a childless couple as a winter blessing. Unable or forbidden to love, Snegurochka remains indoors with her human parents until the pull of the outdoors and the urge to be with her peers becomes unbearable. When she falls in love with a human boy, she melts.

The story of Snegurochka has been adapted into plays, movies, and an opera by Rimsky-Korsakov.

