

Christmas Traditions

AROUND THE WORLD



Kentucky Fried Christmas, Japan

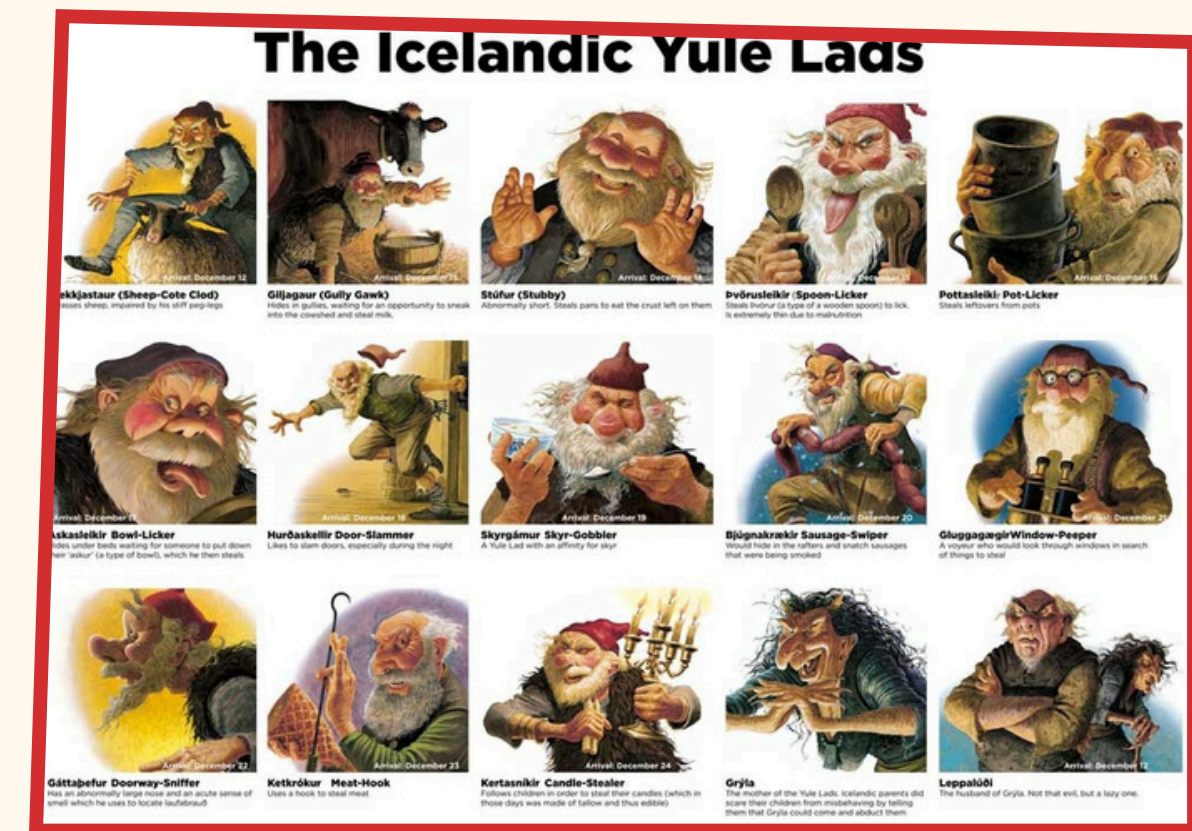
Christmas wasn't traditionally a major holiday in Japan. It had no deep religious roots and was more of a low-key seasonal celebration. That all changed in the 1970s when KFC launched an inspired advertising campaign that transformed fried chicken into the ultimate festive feast. The message? "Kentucky for Christmas." And it worked. Families flocked to the nearest KFC, and a quirky seasonal meal quickly solidified into a national tradition. These days, tucking into a bucket of crispy chicken on December 25 is so beloved that people make restaurant reservations months in advance. Special Christmas meal boxes, festive sides, and limited-edition desserts sell out every year!



The Yule Lads, Iceland

Forget one jolly man in a red suit, Icelandic kids get thirteen. And they're not Santas either... they're a chaotic gang of prank-happy trolls known as the jólasveinar, or Yule Lads. For the two weeks leading up to Christmas, these troublemakers roam the country one by one, each with their own bizarre speciality. Think Snow White's dwarves but with far worse manners: Doorway-Sniffer, Spoon-Licker, Sausage-Swiper, Candle-Stealer, Curd-Gobbler, and the rather unsettling Window-Peeper are just a few of the lineup.

Traditionally, children leave their shoes on the windowsill at night. If they've been well-behaved, they wake up to small treats from that night's visiting Yule Lad. If they haven't? They get the Icelandic equivalent of coal: a squishy, rotten potato.



The pooper and the pooping log, Catalonia



For reasons that no historian has ever fully explained, Catalonia celebrates not one but two Christmas traditions involving... well, poop. And yes, both are supposed to bring joy rather than disgust.

The first is the caganer, which literally translates to “the pooper.” It’s a cheeky little figurine of a peasant with his trousers down mid-number-two. Traditionally, he’s hidden in nativity scenes among Jesus, Mary and Joseph, which makes spotting him something of a festive treasure hunt. Then there’s caga tió, affectionately known as the pooping log. It’s a cute wooden log with a painted smile and a blanket, kept on the table through December. Children “feed” it nuts and sweets, and keep it warm like a pet. But on Christmas Eve the mood changes: the kids grab sticks and whack the poor thing while singing a special song, encouraging it to poop out presents. (In reality, the kids wander off to pray for gifts while the adults sneak the treats under the blanket.)



Mari Lwyd, Wales

Wales has a long, ancient tradition full of folklore, mystery, and a healthy dose of superstition. So it feels perfectly on-brand that in South Wales one of the most festive local Christmas customs is... parading an undead horse around town.

The tradition is called Mari Lwyd, and it's thought to date back to pre-Christian, possibly even Celtic times. Picture this: a real horse skull mounted on a pole, draped in a white sheet and decorated with ribbons, bells and glowing eyes. A group of locals carry the ghostly creature from house to house, knocking on doors and challenging residents to a musical battle. The Mari Lwyd party sings first, and the people inside are expected to sing back. If they lose the sing-off, the horse and its attendants are allowed inside to claim food or drink.

No one is entirely sure where the name "Mari Lwyd" comes from. Some say it means "Holy Mary," others insist it translates as "Grey Mare." Either way, it's equal parts eerie and enchanting: part wassailing, part folklore parade, part supernatural street theatre.



Krampus, Austria

As if the fear of missing out on presents wasn't traumatic enough, Austrian children have an even darker threat hanging over their heads at Christmas: Krampus. He's a horned, hairy, half-goat monster who stalks the streets in early December, scooping up naughty kids into his wicker basket and carting them away. Think of him as Saint Nicholas' nightmarish sidekick; the ultimate festive enforcer.

Across Austria and neighbouring Alpine regions, especially around Salzburg and Tyrol, Krampusnacht is celebrated on December 5th. Dozens of men don elaborate costumes with shaggy fur, rattling chains and carved wooden masks topped with curved horns. They march through the streets, chasing spectators and brandishing sticks while bells clatter around their ankles



La Befana, Italy



Italian Christmas has a magical guest star who isn't Santa, a reindeer, or even an elf. Instead, Italy welcomes a mysterious, wine-drinking witch named La Befana. And no, this isn't a joke about that one questionable relative. Every year on the night before the Epiphany (January 5), families leave out a glass of wine and a plate of treats like sausages or biscuits, ready for La Befana to swoop down their chimney on her broomstick.

Her origins are rooted in one of Italy's oldest Christmas legends. According to folklore, the Three Wise Men stopped at her house on their way to visit the newborn Jesus and invited her to join them. The busy old lady refused and regretted it immediately. Ever since, she's been flying across the country every winter, searching for the child she missed.

Of course, she multitasks while she's at it. La Befana peeks into homes, delivering presents and sweets to well-behaved children and leaving lumps of coal for the naughty ones. (Though in modern Italy, even the coal is often candy, so it's a win-win.)



Spider webs, Ukraine

In Ukraine, Christmas trees look a little different. Instead of twinkling fairy lights and glittering baubles, you'll often find them draped in spiders and webs. It's not a Halloween mix-up; it comes from one of the country's most beloved winter legends: the story of the Christmas spider. According to the tale, a poor widow and her children grew a tiny pine tree from a fallen cone, but they couldn't afford decorations for Christmas. Heartbroken, they went to bed on Christmas Eve with nothing but a bare tree standing in their home. But when morning came, something magical had happened. The tree was covered in beautiful spider webs, glimmering in the early light. As the sun rose, the webs turned into strands of gold and silver. That miracle became tradition. Today, Ukrainian Christmas trees are often decorated with small spider ornaments, known as pavuchky, and delicate artificial cobwebs. Some even say this is where the idea of shiny tinsel came from those sparkling strands that drape trees all over the world.



Roller Skating to Mass – Venezuela



In Caracas, it's tradition to roller skate to early morning Christmas Mass. Streets are even closed off to cars to allow safe skating. Families, dressed in festive clothes, glide their way to church; a fun, energetic twist on holiday devotion.

In Venezuela, the week before Christmas is filled with a special early-morning church service called Misa de Aguinaldo. But the coolest part happens in the capital city, Caracas, where people don't walk to church; they roller skate! Imagine skating through the quiet streets before sunrise while Christmas music plays and church bells ring. Some kids even go to bed with their roller skate laces tied to their toe and hanging out the window so friends can gently tug the laces to wake them up. After the service, families celebrate together and enjoy tasty Christmas food. It's one of the most joyful and unique Christmas traditions in the world!



Klausjagen, Switzerland

In parts of Switzerland, especially the town of Koblenz and regions of Appenzell, the nights leading up to St. Nicholas' feast are lit by hundreds of glowing lanterns in a tradition that is equal parts beautiful and eerie. One of the most famous is the Klausjagen, or "Nicholas Chase," which takes place on December 5th.

The procession is a spectacular sight: men carry massive, handmade lanterns called *Hänseli* or *Lichter*, some shaped like stars, others more intricate, glowing in the dark winter night. They're accompanied by whips, bells, and drums, creating a cacophony of sound that is both thrilling and slightly intimidating. Historically, the lanterns and noise were meant to scare away evil spirits before the arrival of St. Nicholas. Children and adults alike line the streets, marveling at the flickering lights, the rhythmic cracking of whips, and the parade of costumed figures — a reminder that Swiss Christmas traditions often blend light, sound, and spectacle in unforgettable ways.

Some smaller towns have a gentler variant called the Yfe or "Lantern Walk", where children carry simple, handcrafted lanterns through the village singing songs, bringing light into the darkest part of the year. It's a charming mix of community, storytelling, and winter magic.



Radish Carvings, Mexico

Every December, the streets of Oaxaca, Mexico come alive with one of the quirkiest Christmas traditions you'll ever see: La Noche de los Rábanos, or the Night of the Radishes. Don't be fooled by the name — this isn't some low-budget 80s horror flick. It's a festival where enormous radishes become works of art.

Local farmers grow special radishes, fed and nurtured to reach impressive sizes, and then artists carve them into astonishing creations. From intricate nativity scenes to bizarre monsters and whimsical creatures, the level of skill and imagination is jaw-dropping. Thousands of visitors flock to Oaxaca to marvel at these fleeting masterpieces.

There's a bittersweet twist, though: the carvings are delicate and perishable. After just a few hours on display, they begin to wither, leaving behind only memories and photos. It's a celebration of creativity, impermanence, and the strange, wonderful ways people make even the simplest vegetable a reason to gather and rejoice at Christmas.



Barbecue, and Cricket, Australia

Christmas in Australia happens in summer, so instead of snow it's hot and sunny. Many families have Christmas lunch outside and cook food on the barbecue, like prawns, sausages, and chicken. Lots of people go to the beach for a swim or a picnic. There are big Christmas light displays on houses, and people like to walk or drive around to see them. Kids leave cookies for Santa and sometimes carrots for his reeinders. On the day after Christmas, families watch a big cricket match called the Boxing Day Test, and some kids play backyard cricket too. Christmas in Australia is all about sunshine, barbecued food, and spending time outdoors!





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