

Christmas 'Round the World!

Here are some of the unusual Christmas traditions around the world which we talked about in class. Don't forget that American Christmas traditions might seem pretty weird to someone from a different culture! Elderly overweight guy illegally entering millions of homes in one night, flying sleigh, leaving gifts for millions of kids that somehow fit in one bag....

Anyway, here they are:

1. **The Gävle goat (Sweden)** – a giant (13-meter-high) version of the traditional Swedish “yule-goat” made of straw and set up in the square in Gävle, Sweden. There is another tradition – arson. The goat has been burned down most years since its first appearance in 1966, in spite of heavy security measures.

2. **Krampus (Austria)** – this is an evil demon-like creature said to accompany St. Nicholas in order to frighten and/or whisk away naughty children in his sack. During the first week of December, before St. Nicholas day on December 6, young men dress up as Krampus and roam city streets scaring kids. How is this contributing to the Christmas spirit?!

3. **The Yule-Lads (Iceland)** – thirteen characters from Icelandic folklore, each with a different name and different characteristics (such as Spoon-Licker, Window Peeper, Sausage-Swiper, Doorway Sniffer), a different one is said to visit children on each of the thirteen nights before Christmas. They leave gifts or rotten potatoes for the kids in the shoes they have left out (depending on their behavior throughout the year).

4. **The Book Flood (Iceland)** – people in Iceland will often exchange books as gifts on Christmas Eve, then spend the rest of the night reading. This is part of the season called **Jólabókafloðið** (meaning “Yule Book Flood”)

5. **St. Nicholas and “Knecht Ruprecht” (Germany)** – St. Nicholas (who is based on an actual historical person who lived in 4th century Turkey) is said to travel around on a donkey on the night of St. Nicholas Day (December 6) giving small treats to kids all over Germany. He might also show up at homes or schools during the day and give treats in exchange for singing a song, reciting a poem or drawing a picture. Unfortunately, he's often accompanied by Knecht Ruprecht, a sinister character in a dark dirty robe covered in bells, who carries a stick or small whip to beat the bad children. Kind of a toned-down version of Krampus (see above). Christmas in Germany isn't all jolly and merry and good-cheery, people. Better watch out.

6. **Little Candles Day (Día de las Velitas) (Colombia)** – celebrated on December 7, this is the start of the Christmas season in Colombia, South America. The day is intended to honor the Virgin Mary (Jesus' mother) and people put candles or paper lanterns in their windows, balconies and front yards. In some places there are big light displays, with entire neighborhoods competing against each other.

7. **La Nochebuena (Latin America and Spain)** – this is the name for Christmas Eve in Spanish-speaking countries, literally meaning “The Good Night.” It is a feast time, with roasted pig the main course in most countries (except Peru, where they have turkey). People usually go to mass

(a Catholic church service) late in the evening, then return home to feast, open gifts, and toast each other at midnight. The gifts are put around a nativity scene, rather than a tree, and it is considered lucky to be the one who gets to put the baby Jesus into the manger in the nativity scene.

8. **Kiviak (Greenland)** – this one wins the award for the most interesting (some might say gross) Christmas food. Eaten by Inuits (sometimes called Eskimos), kiviak is a hollowed-out seal stuffed with around 500 dead auks (that’s a sea bird), feathers and beaks and all, sealed up and put under a rock to ferment for months. The auks are then served directly from the seal carcass on special occasions, especially Christmas.

9. **Deep-fried caterpillars (South Africa)** – speaking of interesting Christmas dishes, this is another one, popular in South Africa for the holidays.

10. **KFC (Japan)** – For the past 40 years, Kentucky Fried Chicken has been considered the traditional food of Christmas in Japan, a non-Christian country where Christmas is not ordinarily a big deal, because of some really slick advertising by the Japanese branch of KFC. Now over 3.6 million Japanese families eat KFC at Christmastime each year, sometimes standing in long lines weeks in advance to order chicken for the occasion.

11. **Macedonian Christmas on January 7th (Macedonia)** – Eastern Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas on January 7. Actually festivities start on the 5th, in the evening, with a big bonfire. Then, early on January 6 (Christmas Eve), groups of kids go around knocking on doors and singing special song for the holiday. They expect to receive treats. On Christmas special foods are eaten and many people go to church. A special bread is baked which contains a coin; whoever finds it is believed to have good luck for the year. The traditional Macedonian greeting is “Khristos se rodi” (meaning “Christ is born”), to which you should reply “Navistina se rodi” (meaning “Truly he is born.”).

12. **Grandfather Frost and Snegurochka (Russia)** – Russia also celebrates Christmas on January 7. Grandfather Frost (called Ded Moroz in Russian), who carries a big magic staff, goes around giving out gifts to kids and is accompanied by his granddaughter, Snegurochka; they are more associated with New Year’s than with Christmas, though.