

All over the world

We're all familiar with the Christmas traditions of the UK, but how is the festival celebrated in other countries? **Christine Howard** takes to her sleigh to find out...

The Christian festival of Christmas is arguably the most well known religious festival in the Western world and is celebrated in some measure even by many non-Christians. But how it is celebrated varies considerably around the world. As the Yuletide season approaches, early years settings have a wonderful opportunity to explore some of this diversity...

Turkey

Common to most traditions is the gift bringer - in the UK we know him as Father Christmas or Santa Claus - so let's go on a journey with him as he visits children around the world.

First stop is not Lapland or the North Pole, but Turkey. Here the legend of Santa Claus or Saint Nicholas began. Nicholas was the son of wealthy Christian parents, but they died of the plague while he was still young. Nicholas stuck to his Christian faith and when he grew up he became the Bishop of Myra. The story goes that in the town there lived a poor man who had three daughters.

The oldest girl wanted to marry but her father could not afford a dowry for her. The night before the wedding was to have taken place, Nicholas secretly left a bag of money at her home. The wedding went ahead.

Then it was the turn of the second daughter. Again, the poor father had no money for her dowry, but once more

Nicholas secretly left a bag of money at her home. When it was time for the third daughter to marry, her father still could not pay her dowry but, suspecting that the kind benefactor would come again, he watched all night and caught Nicholas in the act of leaving a bag of gold. So now St Nicholas, in his red bishop's cope, is said to leave presents secretly for children just as the Wise Men had brought gifts for the baby Jesus. Nicholas's feast day is 6 December.

Russia

Back on our sleigh, we make our way to Russia. Here we find the story of Baboushka. Baboushka is Russian for 'grandmother'. In the story, the Wise Men visit Baboushka and ask if she knows the whereabouts of the new baby king that has been born. She cannot tell them but resolves to follow them as she too wants to see this wonderful baby. She packs a basket of presents for the child but first she wants to clean the house before she leaves. When finally everything is in order, she picks up her basket to go, but the star has disappeared. Now she searches for the baby and wherever she finds children who have been good, she leaves one of the presents from her basket of goodies - just in case!

A similar story is told in Italy about a kind old witch, La Befana. Her name is said to be an attempt by small children to say Epiphany, which is the day she visits the houses (on 6 January).



India, Australia & Italy

From Russia we pass through South India, where Christians light deva lamps. When neighbours ask why, they can tell the Christmas story to them. Further south, in Australia, it is summer, so although many of the customs are similar to those in the UK, Santa Claus may come riding in on a surf board or on water skis and it may well be a 'barbie' on the beach instead of turkey and roast potatoes! Back on board we return to Italy. Many people believe that it was here, in Assisi, that the first Christmas crib was made by St Francis. He wanted to show what the first Nativity was like so he dressed local people up in traditional clothes and staged a live tableau. Now it is common to find Nativity sets in many homes and churches, and in some countries the Nativities or *precipio* (in Spanish, *nacimiento*, in French, *crèche*) are very ornate, depicting whole village scenes and featuring working models.

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Germany & Sweden

Moving north we arrive in Germany, the home of the popular Christmas markets, the Adventskranz or Advent Crown and the Christmas tree. The Advent Crown is a wreath of greenery with four red or purple candles. On the first Sunday in Advent (the four weeks leading up to Christmas) the first candle is lit; on the second Sunday two are lit, and so on. In many churches there will be a fifth, white candle, which is lit on Christmas Day itself and represents Jesus, the Light of the World.

Some people say that the Christmas tree was first introduced by Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer of the 16th century, but it was Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria, who introduced the Christmas tree into England.

Now we're off to Sweden, where Christmas festivities begin on 13 December with St Lucy's Day. Lucy was a young woman who was martyred for her faith in the fourth century CE. In her memory, the youngest daughter of the family wears a white dress with red sash, places a crown with four candles on her head, then brings coffee and special *pepparkakor* biscuits (ginger snaps) to her family.



The Netherlands

Our next stop is the Netherlands where Saint Nicholas is known as Sinterklass. He arrives, wearing his bishop's cope and mitre, on a boat from Italy with his companion, Black Peter. He rides throughout the country on a great white horse giving presents to those children who have been good but Black Peter is said to punish those who are naughty.

It is thought that it was the Dutch settlers who took Sinterklass to America, where his name became the familiar 'Santa Claus'. Here he also shed his cloak and adopted red trousers and jacket, and picked up his fleet of reindeer, probably influenced by Clement C Moore's 'Visit from St Nicholas'.

Mexico

Before we end our journey we must visit Mexico. Here they believe that the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem took nine days, and so every day for nine days a party or posada take dolls

Learning opportunities

WHY NOT ACCOMPANY THE CHRISTMAS STORIES ABOVE WITH THESE PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES?

- Plot the journey of Father Christmas on a large wall map.
- Add 'Happy Christmas' in the language of each of the countries he visits and then teach the children how to say it.
- Make a St Lucy crown or an Advent wreath.
- Recreate a posada, taking Mary and Joseph to other rooms in your setting.
- Listen to some Christmas carols from other countries and help the children to learn some.
- Set up or make your own Nativity tableau, then read and talk about the Christmas story, which is at the heart of this festival.

dressed as Mary and Joseph around the homes. At the first two houses they are refused entry but at the third they are welcomed in and a party follows. The next day, the whole pattern is repeated. As part of the fun, a clay pot or piñata is filled with sweets and the children are blindfolded, taking it in turns to try to break the pot and claim the sweets.

It is also from Mexico that we find the story of the Poinsettia. A poor young girl was on her way to church one Christmas Eve, but she had no gift for the infant Jesus. In tears, she heard an angel telling her to pick up the plant where her tears had fallen. Thinking they were weeds, she nevertheless did as the angel told her and took them to church. Everyone laughed at her, but their laughter turned to astonishment when the 'weeds' grew the beautiful red bracts of the poinsettia. The poinsettia was first discovered by Doctor Poinsettia, after whom it was named.

Our whistle-stop tour is over, but there are many countries we haven't had time to visit. Perhaps you can find out more for yourselves?



about the author

Christine Howard is a former LA adviser and founder of Articles of Faith (articlesoffaith.co.uk), which supplies a range of Christmas resources. She has written a number of books and articles on religious education.