

## Christmas Around the World: Traditions and Transformations

Christmas is celebrated with unique traditions and activities across the globe, reflecting the cultural diversity and historical evolution of this festive season. From the wintry landscapes of Europe and America to the sun-drenched beaches of Australia, each region brings its own flavour to the holiday, with customs ranging from the origins of Santa Claus and his reindeer to the baking of plum pudding and playing beach cricket.

The modern image of Santa Claus, a jolly old man in a red suit, has evolved from various folklore and historical figures. The most significant of these is St. Nicholas, a 4th-century Greek bishop from Myra (modern-day Turkey), known for his generous gifts to the poor. Over the centuries, St. Nicholas's legend spread across Europe and underwent various transformations.



In 1823 in America, Clement Clarke Moore's poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (also known as "The Night Before Christmas") introduced the idea of Santa Claus delivering presents in a sleigh drawn by eight reindeer. This depiction was further popularized by Thomas Nast's illustrations in the 19th century (image on the left). Dancer and Prancer are two of Santa Claus's reindeer, famously known through the same poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas". In the poem, Moore introduces Santa Claus's eight reindeer, naming them individually: Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donder (later changed to Donner), and Blitzen. Rudolph, the most famous reindeer of all, was created much later than his

peers Dancer, Prancer, and the others. He was introduced in a booklet written by Robert L. May in 1939. May created Rudolph as part of his assignment for Montgomery Ward, a department store that wanted a Christmas story to give away as a promotional gift to shoppers. The story of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, who has a shiny, glowing red nose that is powerful enough to illuminate the path of Santa's sleigh during foggy Christmas Eves, quickly captivated readers.

The idea of Santa's reindeer might be ubiquitous today, but in some parts of the world,



notably in indigenous Australian culture, a different and quite fascinating creature is associated with the lore of Santa Claus—the dugong. Dugongs, also known as sea cows, are marine mammals related to manatees and share a similar plump appearance and gentle temperament. They are found in warm coastal waters from East Africa to Australia, primarily grazing on underwater grasses. The association of dugongs with Christmas and Santa Claus is particularly noted in the Torres Strait Islands, which lie

between the northern tip of Queensland, Australia, and Papua New Guinea. Instead of flying reindeer Santa is imagined to be carried across islands with the help of dugongs.



Written by Rolf Harris in 1960, the song "Six White Boomers" narrates the story of a baby kangaroo looking for its mother during Christmastime. Santa Claus, in this song, uses white kangaroos instead of his traditional reindeer to pull his sleigh across the Australian landscape. The song has become a staple during Christmas celebrations in Australia, especially appealing to children with its locally

relevant portrayal of Santa's journey. In modern Australian Christmas celebrations, imagery such as Santa in shorts, using a surfboard, or riding kangaroos can also be seen, all of which serve to "Australianize" this global holiday.

The symbols of the Christmas angel and the Three Wise Men are deeply embedded in Christian tradition, each stemming from the biblical narrative of Jesus' birth. The Christmas angel primarily originates from the Christian Bible's New Testament, where



angels play a crucial role in the Nativity story. In the Gospel of Luke, an angel named Gabriel visits Mary, a young virgin in Nazareth, to announce that she would miraculously conceive and give birth to Jesus, the Son of God (Luke 1:26-38). Moreover, angels are also described as announcing the birth of Jesus to the shepherds in the fields on the night of Jesus' birth, bringing them good news of great joy for all the people: a Savior has been born (Luke 2:10-11). The angels' message, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men," is a central theme of Christmas and highlights the role of angels as messengers of God.

The narrative of the Three Wise Men, also called Kings or Magi, comes from the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 2:1-12). The story tells of wise men from the east who followed a



miraculous guiding star to Bethlehem to find the newborn Jesus, whom they honored as the King of the Jews. Upon finding Jesus with his mother Mary, they presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The Wise Men are often referred to as "kings" because of a prophecy in the Old Testament book of Isaiah, which speaks of kings coming to the brightness of a rising star (Isaiah 60:3),

and because their gifts were such as might be offered to a king. Their traditional names—Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar—were not given in the Bible but were added in later Christian traditions. In many parts of the world, the arrival of the Three Wise Men is celebrated on Epiphany (January 6th), marking the end of the Christmas season. In some cultures, this day is as significant as Christmas itself, with special meals, parades, and the giving of gifts, particularly in Spanish-speaking countries and parts of Europe.

In the biblical accounts of the Nativity there is no record of a direct meeting between the Angel and the Wise Men. The narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which mention these figures, do not intersect in a way that suggests they met. This get together is the first time in the history of the world, marking the special occasion of the 2x2 event.

Following the mystical and merry journey of Santa Claus, the Angels and the 3 Wise Men, the culinary traditions of Christmas, like the making of Christmas biscuits, also hold a special place in the holiday festivities.

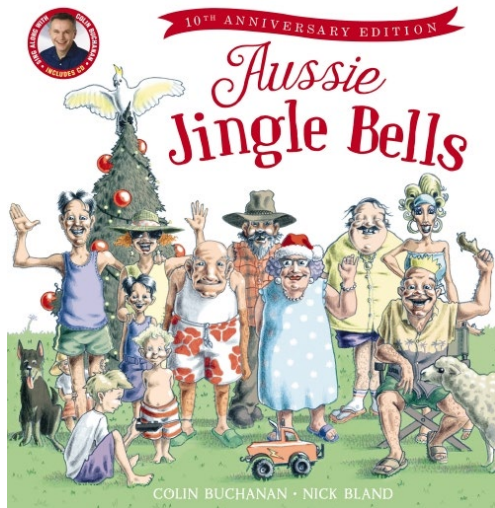


Christmas Kringles are a type of pastry that originated from Scandinavia, particularly popular in Denmark and Norway. These treats are part of the festive tradition during the Christmas season. The word "kringle" itself means "ring" or "circle" in Scandinavian languages, reflecting the shape of the pastry. A

Kringle is a pretzel-shaped or oval pastry that has been filled with a variety of ingredients such as fruits, nuts, cinnamon, and cardamom. The dough is typically a rich, flaky, and buttery pastry, akin to a puff pastry or a Danish pastry dough. After being shaped and filled, it is baked until golden and often topped with a simple icing or glaze and sometimes sprinkled with nuts or sugar. In the United States, particularly in areas with large Scandinavian populations like Wisconsin, the Kringle has become quite popular. Racine, Wisconsin, is known as the "Kringle Capital of America," where Danish immigrants have established numerous bakeries that specialize in this pastry.

In the United States, more common traditional foods are turkey, pies, and the seasonal beverage eggnog, making Christmas a melting pot of traditions and flavors. Europe is renowned for its atmospheric Christmas markets, such as Germany's Christkindlmarkt, where festive stalls offer everything from handicrafts to warm Glühwein and Lebkuchen.

Christmas carols are an integral part of the holiday season, with singers and choirs playing a significant role in spreading festive cheer. From classic carols that recount the



story of the nativity to modern pop holiday hits, vocal performers bring these songs to life in concerts, on street corners, and through recorded music that fills homes and public spaces. Notable groups like the Vienna Boys' Choir have become famous for their Christmas performances, while Australian Christmas carols uniquely blend traditional festive themes with local cultural elements, creating songs like "Aussie Jingle Bells" feature lyrics about kangaroos, barbecues, and sandy beaches, painting a picture of Christmas in the summer.

Beach cricket remains a staple of Australian Christmas celebrations, often followed by a barbecue or a picnic. It's common to see "Beach Cricket Boys" and girls along the coast,



all enjoying their version of the game. This tradition has also been featured in various Australian media, from commercials that capture the festive spirit to television segments that showcase holiday celebrations. The "Beach Cricket Boys" are a testament to Australia's innovative adaptation of its British heritage to suit its unique

environmental and cultural context.

Christmas is not just a holiday but a global mosaic of traditions, each piece reflecting the unique cultural and historical essence of its region. From the Holy Land of Nazareth and Bethlehem to the snowy sleigh rides of the north and the beachside cricket fields of the south, each tradition enriches the festive tapestry of Christmas. As we embrace Santa Claus and his dugongs and white boomers, we share the universal spirit of joy, giving, and community that defines Christmas around the world.

by *Caroline*