

History of Christmas in Iceland

Icelanders celebrate 13 days of Christmas. The period starts on December 24 and ends on January 6, which is when all Christmas decorations are removed from streets and houses.

Icelanders celebrate Christmas in the evening of December 24 and this custom is thought to be a development from an old Catholic custom where people would have a wake the night before big church holidays as it was often believed that a new day started at 6 p.m., which is when Icelanders traditionally either go to church or begin the festivities at their home.

Christmas Decorations and Preparations

Icelanders take their Christmas decorating very seriously. Everyone decorates. The most common decoration are Christmas trees which are almost universal in Iceland. The trees are decorated with lights, garland, ornaments etc.

Another common Christmas decoration is the Advent light. There are two different types of Advent lights in Iceland, both very popular. One is the Advent wreath, which has four candles, one for each Sunday of the Advent. The other type of Advent light are seven candles arranged in a triangle-shaped candelabra. These are mostly electric light nowadays. They are very popular and many families have more than one. They are usually put onto a window sill and are lit from the first Sunday of the Advent and until January 6.

Þorláksmessa – St. Þorlákur's Mass

Þorláksmessa is the day before Christmas, or December 23rd. It is generally the biggest shopping day in Iceland as people run to the stores in a frenzy to get the last Christmas presents.

The dish of the day is skate. The reason for this is that it is the last day of the Christmas fast and no one was supposed to eat meat. The skate is pickled and putrefied because, much like shark, skate has enzymes that can be harmful when consumed fresh. It is served mostly with boiled potatoes. The tradition of eating skate on December 23rd is still very popular in Iceland despite the strong smell of ammonia that comes from the pickling and putrefying of the fish.

Children Come First

Church holidays, especially Easter and Christmas, have become an important strand in the social fabric of Iceland. As in many other countries, Icelandic Christmas is centered around children. For example, Christmas is not seen as an occasion for drinking alcohol. Families get together, enjoy good food, dress up in their best clothes and spend time with each other. Christmas, more than any other time of the year, is when Icelanders abroad travel home to be with their families. Children get around 2 weeks of Christmas holidays. In elementary and middle school, the last day of school before Christmas is called "small Christmas". On this day, children bring cookies and soft drinks to school, light candles in their previously decorated classrooms, sing Christmas carols and sometimes even dance around a Christmas tree.

The ‘Christmas Cat’

An old Icelandic folklore states that everyone has to get one new piece of clothing at Christmas. Anyone who was left out was in danger of being eaten by a malicious beast called the Christmas Cat. The Christmas Cat is Grýla’s cat (see Yule Lads) and every effort was made to ensure that no-one would “go to the Christmas Cat”. Thus, everyone worked very hard to make a new piece of clothing for each member of the household.

The Yule Lads

Icelanders have not one, but thirteen Santas, or Yule Lads. These lads are not related to Santa Claus in any way. They are descendants of trolls and were originally used to scare children. In the last century, however, they have become a lot friendlier.

Their names are: Stekkjastaur (Sheepfold Stick), Giljagaur (Gilly Oaf), Stúfur (Shorty), Þvörusleikir (Spoon-licker), Pottasleikir (Pot-licker), Askasleikir (Bowl-licker), Hurðaskellir (Door-slammer), Skyrgámur (Skyr-glutton), Bjúgnakrækir (Sausage-pilfer), Gluggagægir (Peeper), Gáttaþefur (Sniffer), Ketkrókur (Meat-hook) and Kertasníkir (Candle-begger). As you can tell from these names, the lads are very mischievous and they have retained their unique characteristics to this day. They live in the mountains with their parents, Grýla and Leppalúði. They come to town, one by one, in the days before Christmas. The first one arrives on December 12th and the last one on December 24th. Formerly, they tried to pilfer their favorite things or play tricks on people (hence their names), but now their main role is to give children small gifts.

Every child in Iceland puts their best shoe on their bedroom window sill on December 12th (some try to put their boot, in the hope that they may get more, but so far the Yule Lads haven’t been fooled) and they get a small gift from each lad when he arrives in town. But beware not to be naughty or the lad might just leave a rotten potatoe in your shoe!

They often make appearances at Christmas dances, which are very popular among Icelandic children. Children (adults are of course welcome to join them) dance around a Christmas tree and sing carols. The highlight of the dance is when one of the Yule Lads joins the celebration and dances and sings with the kids and usually gives them a goody bag before he leaves.

The day after Christmas the first lad returns to the mountains. Then they leave, one by one, until the last one leaves on January 6th, which is the last day of the Christmas season.

A Silent Night

The ringing of the bells of the Lutheran Cathedral in Reykjavík, broadcast nationally as the beginning of a special religious service, is a signal for all (except those in church) to embrace and wish one another a Merry Christmas. This is the formal beginning of Christmas. After that it is time for dining. Christmas Eve is the high point of the holiday season in Iceland, and the sumptuous dinner is just the beginning of the night. Afterwards the big moment arrives when everyone is sitting comfortably in the living room and everyone gets a package to open.

All regular public services come to a standstill on Christmas Eve. No buses are running, no restaurants or places of entertainment are open.

New Year's Eve

New Year's Eve is probably the biggest party night of the whole year. The most distinguishing characteristic of an Icelandic New Year's Eve are the fireworks. Everyone buys fireworks and on this night everyone is allowed light fireworks (usually requires special permission from the authorities). And Icelanders make sure they take full advantage of that. Fireworks are lighted all night long, reaching the high point at midnight, when the sky lights up for a few minutes as the fire trucks and harbored ships ring their bells and blow their horns to welcome the new year.

Þrettándinn – Last Day of Christmas

January 6th is normally referred to as þrettándinn (13th day). It is the last day of Christmas and is often referred to in English as 'Twelfth Night' or 'Epiphany'. By this day, pretty much everything is back to normal; everyone is back at work and schools have started. In the evening of this day, families usually get together, have dinner, maybe light the remainder of their fireworks from New Year's Eve and bid farewell to Christmas. Christmas decorations are taken down immediately after January 6th.

Christmas in Icelandic

A few phrases in Icelandic:

Christmas	Jól
Merry Christmas	Gleðileg jól
Happy New Year	Gleðilegt ár
Advent	Aðventa
Santa Claus/Yule Lad	Jólasveinn
Christmas Tree	Jólatré
Christmas Present	Jólagjöf
Christmas Card	Jólakort
Christmas Eve	Aðfangadagur
Christmas Day	Jóladagur
December 26 th (Boxing Day)	Annar í jólum
New Year's Eve	Gamlaárskvöld
New Year's Day	Nýársdagur