

# Greek Customs

## Christmas in Greece

Christmas (Xristougenna), the Feast of the Nativity of Jesus is one of the most joyful days of the Greek Orthodox Church. Traditionally, the Christmas holiday period in Greece lasts 12 days, until January 6, which marks the celebration of the Feast of the Holy Theophany (Epiphany). There are many customs associated with the Christmas holidays, some of which are relatively recent, "imported" from other parts of the world (like eating turkey on Christmas day and decorating the Christmas tree). In the past, Greeks decorated small Christmas boats in honour of St. Nicholas and today, they are increasingly choosing to decorate boats, instead of trees, reviving this age-old Christmas tradition.

- **"Kalanda" or Carols**

The singing of Christmas carols (or kalanda) is a custom preserved in its entirety to this day. On Christmas and New Year Eve, children go from house to house in groups singing the carols, accompanied usually by the sounds of the musical instrument "triangle," but also by guitars, accordions, lyres and harmonicas. Until some time ago, children were rewarded with pastries but nowadays they are usually given money.

- **Christmas Elves**

Greece's hobgoblins are called "kallikántzari", friendly but troublesome little creatures which look like elves. Kallikantzari live deep down inside the earth and come to surface only during the 12-day period from Christmas until Epiphany. While on the earth's surface, they love to hide in houses, slipping down chimneys and frightening people. Throughout Greece, there are various customs and rituals performed to keep hobgoblins away. Kallikantzari disappear on the day of Epiphany when all waters are blessed, and they return to the earth's core.

- **Sweets & Treats**

Traditional culinary delights symbolize good luck in the New Year and adorn the white-clothed tables. "Melomakarona" (honey cookies) and "kourabiedes" (sugar cookies with almonds) are the most characteristic and they characterize the beginning of Christmas festivity. Another traditional custom that dates back to the Byzantine times is the slicing of Vassilopita (St. Basil's pie or New Year's Cake). The person who finds the hidden coin in his slice of the cake is considered to be lucky for the rest of the year.

## Easter in Greece

### The Feast of all Feasts

Considered the most important holiday on Greek calendar and one of the richest in folklore, the celebration of Orthodox Easter (Pascha) is unique throughout Greece. From Crete to Macedonia, Easter customs become a herald of the spirit's and nature's rebirth, while Easter celebrations constitute a vivid aspect of the folk culture, rich in meaning and symbolism.

Easter is a moveable holiday. Its celebration falls on the first Sunday after the full moon of the spring equinox. All over Greece, a plethora of customs and traditions are observed during the week prior to Easter, the Holy Week. The preparations for the celebration of the Resurrection start on Holy Thursday. On that day, housewives traditionally prepare special

cakes named tsourekia, biscuits and red color eggs. The use of egg is a symbol of rebirth while the red color stands for the blood of Christ. In the past, in many households, people used to place the first red egg on the icon stand of the house in order to cast out evil spirits.

Friday is the most sacred day of the Holy Week, the day of the culmination of the passion of Christ with the deposition from the cross and Christ's burial. Because it is a day of mourning, housewives avoid doing housework. Women and children go to church to decorate the Epitaph (Bier of Christ) with flowers, while in the evening the Epitaph procession takes place. On Saturday morning, preparations start for the festive dinner and a special soup is cooked called "maghiritsa".

Shortly before midnight, people gather in church holding white candles which they light with the "Holy Light" distributed by the priest. When the latter chants "Christ is risen" (Christos Anesti), people exchange wishes and the so-called "Kiss of Love". With the "Holy Light" of the candles they make three times the sign of the cross on the door post over the front door of their houses for good luck. Then they all gather around the table, they crack red eggs and wish one another Christos Anesti. On Sunday morning, mainly in Greek countryside, lamb is prepared on the spit and people eat and dance usually until late at night.

### **Easter Banquet**

Easter is by far the holiest of Greek holidays, but it is also the most joyous, a celebration of spring, of rebirth in its literal as well as figurative sense. As Greeks leave the cities in droves to spend Easter in the countryside, food is central to all festivities.

The Easter table is a reflection of tradition combined with the seasonality of Greek cuisine. The ingredients, the seasonings, and the dishes might differ from place to place, there is always one rule surely followed: nothing must be wasted.

The most typical dishes are whole lambs on a spit, slowly roasting; red-dyed eggs; braided sweet breads (tsourekia); Easter soup (magiritsa) and grilled tripe roll (kokoretsi).

### **Travelling**

Travelling in Greece during Greek Orthodox Easter offers visitors the opportunity to enjoy the Greek countryside and to experience some traditional and festive atmosphere.

- Visiting the Ionian island of Corfu during Easter is ideal, since the town hosts the most splendid and melodic celebrations in the country, with the city's philharmonics in full action. On Holy Saturday morning, one of the highlights is the dropping of ceramic pots "botides" full of water from the windows onto the cobblestone streets.
- In the Aegean island of Chios, another custom takes place where residents of the village of Vrontados revive the tradition of "the rocket war." After Resurrection, Vrontados breaks into a pandemonium of fireworks lighting up the midnight sky.
- In the Cycladic island of Tinos, on Holy Friday, parishioners of both Orthodox and Catholic churches carry the Holy Sepulchres of their churches to the port, where they join forces in chanting hymns, before each Sepulcher follows its own itinerary through neighborhoods.

### **Apokries: The Greek Carnival**

Greece's Carnival season known as "Apokries" is mainly a period of masquerading, but also eating, drinking and dancing. Traditionally, it begins ten weeks before Greek Orthodox

Easter and culminates on the weekend before "Clean Monday," (Ash Monday) the first day of Lent. "Apokria", literally means "goodbye" to the period of meat-eating, or abstinence from meat (Apo-kreo, meaning away from meat).

Carnival officially begins on a Saturday evening with the "opening of the Triodion," the Lenten Triodion, as it is called - which is a liturgical book of the Orthodox Church that contains hymns with three odes and begins to be chanted on the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee through Holy Saturday.

The following week is a fast-free week until Meatfare Sunday which is the last day before Easter for eating meat. On Thursday of this week which is known as Tsiknopempti- Charred, Smoky or Barbeque Thursday- because of the smell of the grilled meat in the air, family and friends gather in taverns or homes to eat large quantities of charred meat and celebrate, just ten days before the beginning of Lent.

The last Sunday of the Carnival period is known as Cheese-fare Sunday or Tyro-fagos as only dairy products can be consumed on this day. Cheese-fare Sunday is the final day of pre-Lent, as the Monday following -known as Clean or Ash Monday- marks the beginning of Great Lent. During the weekend preceding Clean Monday, carnival celebrations around Greece culminate with vigorous parades, masquerade parties, reviving many traditional customs in different parts of the country, and proving that carnival in Greece is closely related to the cultural heritage of each region.

Clean (or Ash) Monday is a public holiday in Greece which marks the end of the carnival festive season and the start of Lent or the period of fasting until Easter. Weather permitting, people spend Clean Monday outdoors, organizing picnics while children fly kites. Since it marks the beginning of the fasting period special food is eaten on this day. Eating red meat, poultry, fish or dairy products is not permitted. However, a host of other dishes and delicacies is available: lagana (a special unleavened bread eaten only on this day), taramasalata (a fish roe spread), dolmadakia (vine leaves stuffed with rice), grilled octopus, gigantes plaki (oven-baked broad beans), seafood salads and shellfish as well as a special semolina pudding known as halvas are just some of them.

#### • **Patras: The King of Greek Carnivals**

The port city of Patras hosts the biggest carnival in Greece, and one of the biggest in Europe. The "king" of Greek carnivals begins in January with an announcement by the town crier, and reaches its peak in the last weekend of carnival. Patras carnival features a variety of events: balls, parades, street theatre, and much more. The carnival reaches its apogee on the last weekend of Triodion: Saturday evening brings the walking parade (with participants taking the streets holding torches), while the phantasmagorical floral, artistic, and satirical floats parade on Sunday, with the Carnival King and Queen in all their splendor. But Patras carnival is mostly the thousands carnival-goers of all ages, participating spontaneously to the events taking place everywhere in the city -homes, bars, streets - turning the whole city into a gigantic party.

#### • **Xanthi: The Folk Carnival**

The Thracian city of Xanthi hosts one of the most popular carnivals in the country. Xanthi carnival started in 1966 as an urban event but has incorporated many traditional elements, based on the city's multicultural character that renders it the most folklore of urban

carnivals. The highlight is the Folk Parade on Saturday before Ash Monday: bringing together cultural associations from all over Greece, the troupes go singing and dancing through the neighborhoods of the picturesque Old Town and merge in an all-night Balkan folk music fiesta in the main square. Cheesefare Sunday leads to the custom of Burning the tzaros, a human effigy placed on top of a pile of brushwood.

- **The "Old Men" of Skyros**

The carnival in the Aegean island of Skyros comes alive with the sounds of clanging goat bells. These are worn around the waists of the island men who take part in the carnival playing the role of geros (old man), a figure dressed in a hooded black cape and hanging goat skin. The "old men" run through the streets individually or in groups, singing, dancing and making as much noise as possible, while locals and guests must always toast, drink and dance with the "old men".

- **"Flour War" in Galaxidi**

In Fokida Prefecture, the town of Galaxidi is one of Greece's top destinations especially during carnival season. The picturesque small town impresses visitors with its tranquil charm and its rich maritime heritage, notably the old captains' mansions, the so-called kapetanospita. During Carnival, the town revives the unique custom of "alevromoutzouromata" dating back to the heyday of the town's merchant fleet, as a fun event for departing sailors at the end of the Carnival. On Clean Monday, Galaxidi is transformed into a battlefield as hundreds of people pelt mercilessly one another with large quantities of flour and dance around the fires – the most daring even jump over them!

### **Did you know?**

In Greece, people celebrate the "name day" of the saint that bears their name rather than their own birthday.

There are over 4000 traditional dances that come from all regions of Greece. There are also Pan-Hellenic dances, which have been adopted throughout the Greek world.

In Greece, people celebrate the name day of the saint that bears their name.

Greeks do not wave with an open hand. It is considered an insult to show the palm of the hand with the fingers extended.

## **Traditions in Greece & the islands**

Customs and traditions in Greece and the Greek Islands are an important aspect of the Greek culture. There are either of a religious character or coming from paganism. Furthermore, most of the traditions and festivals still celebrated today are religious.

The Greeks are very superstitious and believe a lot in religion but also in supernatural or paranormal phenomenon. Traditions and superstitions vary from island to island, from villages to villages and from region to region.

You will find below the many Greek traditions still honored in Greek modern culture, no matter people's age, until today.

After reading about the traditions, get also informed about the Greek language.

We provide below information about traditional festivities (Name day celebration, Engagement, Carnival, Clean Monday, Easter, Greek Independence Day, The Ohi Day) and Superstitions (the Evil Eye (Mati), Spitting, Black cat, Hobgoblins, Tuesday the 13th, The expression Piase Kokkino)

## **Traditional festivities**

### **Name day celebration**

Most Greeks are named after a religious saint. A very important tradition is that everyone who has a name coming from a saint celebrated by the church celebrates his name on a given day of the year. On the "name day" of someone, his friends and family visit him without invitation and offer wishes and small presents. The hostess of the house offers pastries, sweets and hors d'oeuvres to the guests. In Greece, name days are more important than birthdays.

### **Engagement**

It is a custom in Greece to get engaged before getting married. The man has to ask for the hand of the woman from her father and close family, while the two families give presents to the bride and groom. The couple exchanges wedding rings that are worn on the left hand. After the wedding, these rings will be worn on the right hand. In Greece, the engagement period may last for years and it is like a commitment to the families. This custom is still vivid in the Greek mainland and the islands, while gradually it tends to disappear.

### **Carnival**

In Greece, the Carnival is called "Apokries". The festival consists of two weeks of the feast, beginning from the Sunday of Meat Fare and ends with the first day of the Lent, called Clean Monday (Kathari Deutera). Everyone is costumed and parties take place in the streets and bars, throwing colored confetti to each other. The most famous Carnival Parade takes place in the city of Patra. In many towns around Greece and in the islands, local customs revive. The Carnival is believed to come from paganism, and more precisely from the old festivities worshipping Dionysus, the god of wine and feast.

### **Clean Monday**

Clean Monday or Lent Monday is the first day of the Lent (Saracosti) during which families go for a picnic in the countryside and fly kites.

### **Easter**

Easter is the most important celebration for the Greeks, even more than Christmas. On Good Thursday or Good Saturday, women dye eggs in red and bake buns. On Good Friday, the day of mourning, the Epitaphios, the tomb of Christ with its icon, decorated with flowers, is taken out of the church and carried around the village followed by a slow procession. After the procession returns to the church where the believers kiss the image of the Christ.

During the night of the Holy Saturday (Megalo Savato), everybody dresses well and goes to the church where a ceremony is held. Just before midnight, all of the lights of the church are turned off, symbolizing the darkness and silent of the tomb, while the priest lights a candle from the Eternal Flame, sings the psalm Christos Anesti (meaning Christ has risen) and offers

the flame to light the candles of the people. Everyone passes the flame one to another. The bells ring continuously and people throw fireworks. The Good Saturday Dinner takes place after midnight and consists of mayiritsa, tsoureki (Easter cake) and red eggs. On Easter Sunday, the family roasts the lamb on the spit.

### **Greek Independence Day**

The Greek Independence Day is celebrating the declaration of the Independence War against the Ottomans on March 25th, 1821. Apart from a national celebration, this day is also a religious celebration dedicated to the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary.

### **The Ohi Day**

On October 28th, the Greeks celebrate the day when the Greek dictator Metaxas refused to let the Italians invade the country during World War II. It is the celebration of the heroic OXI (NO): most Greeks put a Greek flag on their windows and balconies, while a parade takes place with the participation of school students and the army.

### **Superstitions**

Greek superstitions are coming either from religion or paganism. They vary from region to region.

#### **The Evil Eye (Mati)**

Some Greeks, especially in villages, believe that someone can catch the evil eye, or matiasma, from someone else's jealous compliment or envy. A person who has caught the evil eye usually feels bad physically and psychologically. In this case, an expert in xematiasma must tell a special pray to release the person in pain from the bad effects of the evil eye.

To avoid the matiasma, those who believe in it wear a charm, a little blue bead with an eye painted on it. Blue is believed to be the color that wards off the evil eye, but it is also believed that people with blue eyes are most possible givers of the matiasma.

#### **Spiting**

It is believed that spitting chases the devil and the misfortune away. That is why when someone talks bad news (deaths, accidents, etc), the others slightly spit three times saying ftou, ftou, ftou. Another example is that someone that compliments a baby, a child or even an adult for its beauty, has also to spit three times on the complimented person so that he doesn't give him the bad eye (mati).

#### **Black cat**

If someone sees a black cat, this is supposed to be bad luck for the rest of the day. Also if a glass or mirror breaks, it is believed to be bad luck for seven years.

#### **Hobgoblins**

The hobgoblins are known as kallikantzari in Greek. According to the folk Christmas traditions, the hobgoblins are short, ugly creatures with many deformities. All year round, they live underground and saw the tree of the year. From Christmas until the Epiphany Day (January 6th), they come up to the world and tease people with many pranks. On Epiphany

Day, the priest of the village goes from house to house and sprinkles the rooms with blessed water so that the hobgoblins return underground.

### **Tuesday the 13th**

Unlike the western belief, in Greece, the unlucky day is Tuesday the 13th and not Friday the 13th.

### **The expression Piase Kokkino**

When two people say the same thing together at the same time, they immediately say piase kokkino (touch red) one to another and both have to touch any red item they can find around them. This happens because Greeks believe that saying the same thing is an omen and that the two persons will get into a fight or an argument if they don't touch something red.