



# Christmas Celebrations in Greece

*4th Primary School of Zefyri*

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## CHRISTMAS TREE

In Greece most people decorate Christmas trees, firs. Ordinary people put the manger below the tree. They always decorate the fir with Christmas balls and lights and on the top of it they put a star or an angel.

According to Christmas traditions in Greece, the patron saint of the holiday is Saint Nicolas, who is also the protector of sailors. For this reason, in some houses we see boats decorated with many sparkling lights instead of the traditional Christmas trees.

Finally they put Christmas presents under the tree which they exchange on new year's eve at midnight!



## TRADITIONAL SWEETS

A portion of high ingredients, a pinch of history, tradition and a great quantity of greek creativity (in greek is called "meraki") constitute an exceptional recipe of greek cuisine known as Traditional greek sweets such as:

**Melomakarona** and **kourabiedes** are the two varieties of Christmas and New Year's cookies in Greece. The first are egg shaped semolina, cinnamon, and clove cookies drenched in honey, while the second are rosewater and fresh butter cookies sprinkled with powdered sugar that are normally served on New Year's but many succumb to temptation and begin consuming them earlier.



**Christopsomo** is the bread that is made on Christmas Eve, which has a cross carved into the top crust before it is baked. On Christmas Day, the head of the household makes the sign of the cross above the loaf of bread, cuts it and gives a piece to each person at the dining table.



**Loukoumades** are a pastry made of deep fried dough soaked in sugar syrup or honey and cinnamon and sometimes sprinkled with sesame.

## CHRISTMAS EVE

**Christmas Eve** is the evening or day before Christmas Day, the widely celebrated annual holiday. It occurs on December 24 in Western Christianity and the secular world and is considered one of the most culturally significant celebrations in Christendom and Western society, where it is widely observed as a full or partial holiday in anticipation of Christmas Day.

Children in Greece both the day before Christmas and the New Year's Eve go around houses and sing **carols** (in greek it is called kalanta), from early in the morning till noon. They knock on people's doors and ask them to let them announce the happy message:

" Jesus Christ is born!"

And they are given money or sometimes traditional sweets. They carry a triangle made of iron, which is used as a musical instrument while singing the carols





## CHRISTMAS

Christmas is a very religious holiday in Greece. It is customary for those of faith to go to church on Christmas morning for the religious service.

Then the family gathers together around the Christmas table. The table is nicely decorated and the best plates, glasses and cutlery are used. Christmas turkey has become very popular as the main dish of the holiday. Traditionally, the main course of Christmas dinner in Greece is roast pork, with a variety of side delicacies. No matter what the main dish is, one thing is certain: Christmas food in Greece is delicious!



During Christmas holidays in Greece a wide variety of events and festivities take place. Christmas, like many other holidays in Greece, is a time for feasting.

## NEW YEAR'S EVE

New Year's Eve in Greece has many traditions. During the day, children sing the New Year's carols to be given money. Then, it is time to have family lunch or dinner. In the evening, people cook a pie named "Bill's pie (Vasilopita locally)".



Vasilopita is a cake that is eaten on New Year's Day. Before the cake is baked, a coin covered in foil is placed in it. The New Year is written on top of the cake with almonds. The person who cuts the cake makes the sign of the cross three times above it and then starts serving the pieces, one to each person, the house, Christ, The Virgin Mary and Saint Vasileios. Whoever has the coin in his piece of cake will have luck for the rest of the year. When midnight arrives, the families count down and then they turn off all the lights and reopen their eyes to "enter the year with a new light". After the fireworks show, they cut the "Vasilopita" and serve it. The



person that gets the wrapped coin is the lucky person of the day. Gifts exchanges may follow. After the pie, a traditional game of cards called *triantaena* (31) follows.

In many parts of Greece, people hang a pomegranate above the front door of their house. By the New Year Greeks throw it on the ground so it breaks, and step into their house on their right foot. According to tradition, this brings good luck for the year to come.



## NEW YEAR'S DAY

**New Year** is the time at which a new calendar year begins and the calendar's year count is incremented. In many cultures, the event is celebrated in some manner. The celebrations held world-wide on January 1<sup>st</sup> as part of New Year's Day commonly include the following: entertainment, usually enjoyed from the comfort of home, family time, traditional meals and church services.

Like most nations on earth, *Greece* celebrates the start of the New Year on January 1st. This date is the Name Day of Vassilis (Basil) and persons named Vassilis will receive a gift and congratulations on this day. All churches or monasteries named for this saint will offer special services and a celebration including food and drink. In *Greece*, it is considered lucky to gamble on this day, whether you win or lose, and traditionally, people would gather to play cards on a table covered with green felt. On this day, any vessel of water is emptied and filled with fresh water, an echo of ancient New Year traditions. Finally, it is the custom for money (*kali hera*) to be given to children visiting on New Year's day - usually grandchildren or nieces and nephews. Several decades ago, the money was the only gift the children received on New Year's Day. And, in many cases, the gift was just sweets or pastries, as money was scarce and toy shops were almost non-existent.





## EPIPHANY- THEOPHANIA

Epiphany is celebrated on the 6th of January. In Greece, Cyprus and the Greek diaspora throughout the world, the feast is called the Theophany, or colloquially called the *Phōta* (Greek: Φώτα, "Lights") and customs revolve around the Great Blessing of the Waters.

On this day around Greece, waters are blessed and priests around the country throw a cross into the waters. It marks the end of the traditional ban on sailing, as the tumultuous winter seas are cleansed of the mischief-prone *kalikántzaroi*, (according to a myth the mischievous and dangerous elves called "Kalikantzari" come to Earth only during the twelve days of Christmas, from Christmas Eve to



Epiphany Day) the goblins that try to torment God-fearing Christians through the festive season. At this ceremony, a cross is thrown into the water, and the men clamour to retrieve it for good luck. Dozens of brave young people dive into the freezing water to retrieve the cross, which is said to bring good luck to the person that reaches it first.

The *Phota* form the middle of another festive triduum, together with Epiphany Eve, January 6 (and eve of January 5), when children sing the Epiphany carols, and the great feast of St. John the Baptist on January 7 (and eve of January 6), when the numerous Johns and Joans celebrate their name-day.

**MERRY CHRISTMAS  
AND  
A HAPPY NEW YEAR**

**ΚΑΛΑ  
ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥΓΕΝΝΑ  
ΚΑΙ  
ΚΑΛΗ ΧΡΟΝΙΑ!**



## CHRISTMAS CAROLS IN GREEK LANGUAGE

Καλήν ημέραν άρχοντες  
κι αν είναι ορισμός σας  
Χριστού τη Θεία γέννηση  
να πω στ' αρχοντικό σας  
Χριστός γεννάται σήμερα  
εν Βηθλεέμ την πόλη  
οι ουρανοί αγάλλονται  
χαίρει η φύσις όλη,  
εν τω σπηλαίω τίκτεται  
εν φάτνη των αλόγων  
ο Βασιλεύς των Ουρανών  
και ποιητής των όλων,  
πλήθος αγγέλων ψάλλουσι  
το Δόξα εν Υψίστοις  
και τούτο άξιον εστί  
η των ποιμένων πίστης,  
εκ της Περσίας έρχονται  
οι μάγοι με τα δώρα  
άστρο λαμπρό τους οδηγεί  
χωρίς να λείψει ώρα...

(σ' αυτό το σπίτι που 'ρθαμε  
πέτρα-πέτρα να μη ραγίσει  
κι ο νοικοκύρης του σπιτιού,  
χρόνια, χρόνια πολλά να ζήσει)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QiEBBKQwLJk>)

