

## 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.



Christmas Trees are popular in Greece. But an older and more traditional decoration is a shallow wooden bowl with a piece of wire is suspended across the rim. A sprig of basil wrapped around a wooden cross hangs from the wire. Some water is kept in the bowl to keep the basil alive and fresh. Once a day someone, usually the mother of the family, dips the cross and basil into some holy water and uses it to sprinkle water in each room of the house.

This is believed to keep the 'kallikantzaroι' Καλλικάντζαρος (bad spirits) away. The kallikantzaroι are meant to appear only during the 12-day period from Christmas to Epiphany (January 6th). They are supposed to come from the middle of the earth and get into people's house through the chimney! The kallikantzaroι do things like putting out fires and making milk go off. Having a fire burning through the twelve days of Christmas is also meant to keep the kallikantzaroι away

- 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.





The main Christmas meal is often Lamb or pork, roasted in an oven or over an open spit. It's often served with a spinach and cheese pie and various salads and vegetables.



Other Christmas and new year foods include 'Baklava' (a sweet pastry made of filo pastry filled with chopped nuts and sweetened with syrup or honey), Kataifi (a pastry made from a special form of shredded filo dough and flavored with nuts and cinnamon), Theeples (a kind of fried pastry). The pastries are either eaten for breakfast or as starters. Another popular Christmas dessert are melomakarono, egg or oblong shaped biscuit/cakes made from flour, olive oil, and honey and rolled in chopped walnuts.



A traditional table decoration are loaves of 'Christopsomo' (Christ's Bread or Christmas bread). It's a round sweet bread which is flavored with cinnamon, orange and cloves. The top is decorated with a cross. The bread is made on Christmas Eve ready to be eaten on Christmas Day.

In Greek Happy/Merry Christmas is 'Kala Christougenna'.



In Greece, presents are often brought to children by Aghios Vassilis / Άγιος Βασίλης (Saint Basil) on the 1st January.

1st January, New Years Day, is St Vasilis's Day who is also known as St Basil the Great.



People in Greece also celebrate Epiphany on the 6th January. In the Greek Orthodox Church, Epiphany celebrates Jesus's baptism when he was a man. It's also known as 'The Blessing of the Waters'. There are many events throughout the country where young men dive into really cold lakes, rivers and the sea to try to be first to get a cross which has been blessed by a priest and thrown into the water. Whoever gets the cross first is meant to have good luck during the coming year. Epiphany festivals also include blessings of boats & ships, music, dancing and lots of food.

