

Christmas in Denmark is the oldest of the Nordic festivals

Christmas is the oldest of Nordic festivals. Even in heathen times, mid-winter festivals were held around the shortest day of the year; gentleness, gifts and peace belonged to Yule even then. And to this day, some Christmas customs are altogether not free from the influence of both old heathen and early Christian traditions.

Christmas preparations begin with mailing of greeting cards and letters for relatives and friends abroad to which you attach the Christmas seal of the year. Each year a new design is issued—a mini work of art. The revenue from these seals goes toward convalescence facilities for ailing children. Then, when all the mail is sent, you can look forward to all the nice greetings returning to you.

On the first Sunday of advent (fourth Sunday before Christmas) many Danes hang up a wreath of pine twigs mounted with four candles and light one candle for a short while after dusk. The following Sundays, the additional candles will be lit, till on the last Sunday before Christmas, all four candles are burning. Children begin their

Christmas countdown on December first. They light their tall 24-day candle once every day. Many Danish youngsters also have a Christmas calendar. It may be a cardboard house with 24 windows or a homemade tapestry with 24 hooks to which are attached 24 little parcels, one for each day. This countdown takes place in the morning, and therefore it causes no problem to get the children out of bed in the dark December mornings.

In early December, decoration of the home begins in earnest. Cut-out pixies and fairies find their way around the house peeking from behind picture frames and mirrors. And in the dark winter nights, the whole family gathers around the dining room table with scissors, glue and coloured paper to fold, and all the traditional figures for the Christmas tree like cones, baskets, angles, birds and hearts are produced.

A day or two before Christmas, it's time to get a tree. Many are available, either from one of the many stands or from the woods, where you can chop down the tree that suits your taste. The Christmas tree as a symbol of Christmas is relatively recent in

Denmark. In Alsace, it was known as early as the 16th century. In Denmark and in Sweden, the Christmas tree was introduced in the early 19th century.

Christmas cooking is traditional in Denmark although you hear many a house-wife say, "This year I simply don't intend to exhaust myself! We'll buy what we need—the baker's ginger biscuits are really a treat..." But somehow most of the family ends up in the kitchen anyway, mixing flour, kneading dough and shaping gingerbread men. And gradually the consensus is that nobody can quite make liver-paste the way Mum does—and Dad's special mixture of marinated herring is a

'must' at every Christmas time. And so things are back as they were last year.

The conclusion is, though, that you have enough food to last you through the Christmas holiday all the way into the New Year.

Christmas Eve is the biggest evening of the year, the most beautiful. Relatives travelling to relatives, last minute shopping, the tree is brought in and decorated out of sight to the children and a wonderful smell of something cooking wafts from the kitchen.

The traditional Christmas Eve dinner in Denmark starts after church, around 6 p.m. with a rice pudding with one solitary almond.

The finder wins a prize, often a marzipan porker.

Then the menu moves on to roast pork, duck, goose or turkey accompanied by candied potatoes, red cabbage and jelly. If there are children at the table, the meal seldom lasts long—they cannot stand the suspense.

The tree is lit, everybody forms a ring round the tree, holding hands, singing Christmas carols and then the moment arrives when we open the parcels that were placed under the tree. Surprise is an important element. The excitement is over, and gradually the best evening of the year draws to a close.

Christmas Day is rather sociable with a busy menu. Groaning lunch-tables in the company of family and friends, and all the delicious food is washed down with beer and snaps. Boxing Day is virtually a repeat performance, but it may also be a relaxed 'unorganized' day with everyone lying around recovering from a hectic time.

After Boxing Day, things get back to normal, but in fact they don't-not yet. The Christmas tree is still standing there, the kids run around it singing as if Christmas was tomorrow.

In many Danish homes, New Year's Eve is a quiet, traditional evening for young and

old together. An appetizing meal, a few games with the children—a few crackers and perhaps some fireworks. Around midnight, the family welcomes the New Year with a toast.

But, in perhaps the majority of homes, especially the younger, the occasion calls for a party with all the masked fun and games of carnival, streamers and champagne, a shower of fireworks and practical jokes throughout the neighbourhood—with bicycles perched up on garage roofs and garden gates hung up the neighbour's flagpole. Then back to the party and dance the rest of the night away.

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