



Greek Christmas Guide

Whether you live in Greece or you are planning to spend your Christmas holidays in Greece for the first time, there are a few essential pieces of information you should know about Greek Christmas traditions.

Christmas and New Year is a beloved holiday period for the Greeks. Schools close for 15 days, people start spending their extra salary on gifts and shopping and prepare their houses for the coming celebrations. Christmas is considered a family holiday and Greeks tend to spend it with long meals and traditional feasts at home, with friends and relatives.

Christmas day and New Year day are less intense than Easter Day in Greece – although New Year's Eve is usually a party-out night. Weather also plays its role in this, since winter is not the best time to be outside, or organize large outdoor feasts with lambs on the spit and kokoretsi, as on Easter.

Greek Christmas, the Greek Hristougenna

✓ The holidays officially begin on December 22nd, although the festal atmosphere is evident almost from the beginning of December, when Greeks decorate their houses and plan their holiday activities.

✓ Christmas traditions in Greece are followed by younger and older genera-

tions, but traditions range significantly in the different regions in Greece. However, there are many common Christmas customs, such as the Christmas tree, the 40-days fasting before Christmas and the Christmas Carols sung in every neighborhood in Greece these days. Going to the church on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day is also common, especially to older people or smaller villages and towns.

✓ In Greece, until a few decades ago, the Christmas tree was not



among the traditional customs; people used to decorate a small wooden (even handmade sometimes) boat, which was incorporated to the Greek tradition because Greece is a nautical country and much related to the marine traditions.

✓ Christmas tree became part of the Greek Tradition as Greeks adopted many Western customs and habits, among which the Tree and the colorful



lights they put in their balconies or living rooms and windows.

✓ Greeks tend to decorate the windows of their shops as well as their offices at work, in order to add a touch of festive mood and ambience for these holy days. Decorations last till January

7th, on the day of Saint John (Agios Ioannis), the next day of the Epiphany.

Greek Recipes and Foods for Christmas

✓ As mentioned earlier, holiday meals are a big part of the overall Christmas tradition; Greeks make their sweets first of all, because in many areas sweets are associated with happiness and hospitality. Preparation of Christmas sweets starts usually towards the second half of December, when the festive mood is much more evident.

✓ The most common sweets are melomakarona and kourampiedes a for Christmas and of course the sweet cake Vasilopita made for the New Year.

✓ Vasilopita is cut on the first day of the New Year; a coin is hidden inside Vasilopita and whoever gets the piece with the coin will have a good year – and maybe a gift as well!

✓ On Christmas day, during the family meal, Greeks usually eat roasted turkey with filling of chestnuts, pine seeds, meat and raisins. In some areas they also eat roasted piglet with baked potatoes, salads and soups. Lamb fricassee, a simpler dish, is also popular for the Christmas dinner.

✓ Christmas meal is supposed to be eaten slowly and enjoyed – it is a lovely occasion for family re-unions and

friends' gatherings. This is why wine or other spirits never miss from the Christmas table!

Greek Carols

✓ One of the most known Christmas customs, the Christmas Carols or Kalanta in Greek, are sung by children to bless the house and the people living in it.

✓ There are three different carols in Greece,

sung on Christmas Eve, on New Year's Eve and the day before the Epiphany, which are less popular than the previous two. The carols feature different verses, although their common ground is the offer of blessings and wishes to the household.

✓ These days, groups of small children visit the houses early in the morning to sing the Christmas carols. The first carol-singers will come early in the morning and more children will keep coming until noon hours. Christmas carols are a nice way for children to earn some money for their gifts or personal needs.

✓ They will ring your bell and will ask you: "Na ta poume?" (should we sing them?). The answer should be "Peite ta" (Sing them) if you want them to sing, or "Mas ta cipan" (they sung them already), if many groups have passed by already and you are fed up with carols.

✓ When the children are done, a tip of 1-5 euro is enough. Once upon a time instead of money people were offering sweets, kourampiedes and melomakarona or even fresh eggs to the children, but you should not try it today, unless you want kids to be cursing when leaving your home.

New Year's Eve, the Greek Protohronia

✓ Greeks tend to exchange holiday gifts on New Year's Eve; according to the tradition Santa Claus (Agios Vassilis) for the Greeks brings the gifts and leaves them below the tree for the kids. This is why the Greeks leave a plate full of sweets and other delicacies for Santa. Agios Vassilis is not the same person as Santa Claus though; Agios Vassilis comes from Caesarea not from Northern Europe.

✓ While Christmas is a family holiday, celebrated mostly in the house, Greeks celebrate the Eve of the New Year in a

How to say Merry Christmas in Greek

- If you want to wish "Merry Christmas" to someone in Greece, then you should say: Kala Hristouyienna.
- If you want to wish "Happy New Year" to someone in Greece, then you should say: Kali Hronia.
- For "Happy New Year Day" in Greek you should say "Kali Protohronia".
- If your friend is called Manolis or Hristos, his nameday is on December 25 (Christmas day). Wish him "Hronia Polla" (Many Happy Returns) for his nameday.
- The same applies if your friend is called Vassilis, Yiannis or Fotis. Vassilis nameday is on January 1, Fotis' nameday is on January 6, Yiannis' nameday is on January 7.
- During Christmas holiday period, which lasts from December 24 until January 6, plus a couple of weeks past that, it is a custom in Greece to wish "Hronia Polla" to the people you meet. So, if you meet someone in the morning, the proper way to greet him or her is: Kalimera, Hronia Polla! (Good morning, Many Happy Returns).