Seasons and Celebrations

In English-speaking countries around the world people celebrate Easter, Valentine’s Day, Christmas, and other special days. Some celebrations are new, like Remembrance Day and Mother’s Day; others, like the summer solstice, go back thousands of years.

What happens on these special days? What do people eat, where do they go, what do they do? Why is there a special day for eating pancakes? Who is the ‘guy’ that children take onto the streets in November? And where do many people like to spend the shortest night of the year in England?

Come on a journey through a year of celebrations, from New Year’s Eve to Christmas. (Word count 6,508)
SEASONS AND CELEBRATIONS

Thousands of years ago, people celebrated special times. New plants and animals in the spring, the longest day of summer, good food from the trees and fields in the autumn – these were all times to celebrate. Later, Christianity came, and old and new festivals came together as Easter, Christmas, and other celebrations.

Each season brings its own celebrations. Spring has eggs at Easter; in summer there are outside festivals at the summer solstice, and barbecues for the Fourth of July; autumn has fires and fireworks; and winter has the wonderful traditions of Christmas food and presents. But there are new celebrations too – Mother’s Day, Remembrance Day, the special days of new countries, and the festivals that people bring with them when they move to different countries.

Here is a year of celebrations – old and new, inside and outside – in Britain, the USA, and other English-speaking countries. Learn about the traditions, read the stories – you can even cook the pancakes if you want!
This book is dedicated
to my wonderful husband Steve,
to my dear family and friends,
and to sufferers and survivors of breast cancer
everywhere around the world.
May you always have something to celebrate.

Jackie Maguire 1959-2007
JACKIE MAGUIRE

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1 Festivals old and new

The people of Britain have had festivals for thousands of years. Long ago the sun, the moon, the wind, rain, animals, and trees were all important in their religions, and they had festivals for them. When Christianity came to Britain, people wanted to keep some of their old festivals so they brought the religions together. Saint Valentine’s Day, Easter, Halloween, and Christmas are all old festivals that became Christian festivals.

Food, family, and flowers are an important part of most celebrations. Most people have a big family dinner at Christmas, and many people get together at Thanksgiving too. A lot of people give chocolate and other sweets as presents on Valentine’s Day and at Easter and Christmas, and some festivals have special food. Restaurants are very busy on Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day, and flower shops sell a lot of flowers on those days.

People today often live far away from their families, so they send cards at special times like Mother’s Day, Easter and Christmas. The cards say things like: ‘Thinking of you across the miles’. Post offices and telephones are very busy too, and many people use their phones and computers to send messages.

Times change, and festivals also change. People have celebrated many of these festivals for hundreds of years, and will go on finding new ways to enjoy them.
The year begins

New Year’s Eve is on 31 December, the last day before the New Year begins. In many places, people go to parties or restaurants with friends in the evening. Sometimes they meet outside: in New York, thousands of people go to Times Square; in Sydney they go down near the sea; in London, they go to Trafalgar Square. Just before midnight, people look at the clock, and together they count the last ten seconds before the New Year begins: ‘Ten, nine, eight . . .’

At midnight they stand in a circle, hold hands and sing an old song called *Auld Lang Syne*. A Scottish man called Robert Burns wrote the words of this song about two hundred years ago. The song says that it is good to remember your old friends. Then many people drink a glass of champagne, light some fireworks, or dance until the sun comes up.

In Scotland, New Year’s Eve has a special name: Hogmanay. At Hogmanay, there is a tradition called first-footing. The first person to come into the house in the New Year is the ‘first-foot’: if he is a tall man with dark hair, he will bring good luck to the house. He must carry some food, some money, or a piece of black coal for the fire.

In Edinburgh and other Scottish cities, there are house parties and street parties, Scottish music and dancing,
parades and lots of fireworks. Sometimes the parties go on all night and into the next day.

New Year’s Day, 1 January, is a holiday for most people, and the banks and many shops do not open. Many people stay at home and rest on that day. And a lot of people
make a New Year’s resolution. This means that they decide to do something different because they want to be a better person. For example, they say: ‘I’m going to stop smoking,’ or ‘I’m going to eat better,’ or ‘I’m going to learn something new.’

After the holiday the shops are very busy with January sales. At sale time things in the shops are cheaper – sometimes much cheaper – so it is a good time to go shopping. And when people do go out, they usually say ‘Happy New Year!’ when they see friends and family for the first time in January.

A few weeks later it is Valentine’s Day. This started more than two thousand years ago, as a winter festival, on 15 February. On that day, people asked their gods to give them good fruit and vegetables, and strong animals.

When the Christians came to Britain, they came with a story about a man called Saint Valentine. The story is that Valentine was a Christian who lived in Rome in the third century. The Roman Emperor at the time, Claudius the Second, was not a Christian. Claudius thought that married soldiers did not make good soldiers, so he told his soldiers that they must not marry. Valentine worked for the church, and one day he helped a soldier who wanted to marry. The Emperor said that Valentine had to die because of this, and he sent Valentine to prison. But Valentine fell in love with the daughter of a man who worked there. Just before he died, he sent a note to this woman, and at the end of the note, he wrote: ‘Your Valentine.’ He died on 14 February, so the date of the festival changed from 15 to 14 February and the name changed to Saint Valentine’s Day.

In the early nineteenth century people started to give Valentine’s cards to the person they loved on 14 February. The cards had pictures of birds and flowers on them—perhaps red roses, the flower of love—and inside there were words like these:

Roses are red, my love,
Violets are blue
Sugar is sweet, my love,
But not as sweet as you.
People still send each other Valentine’s cards, but often they do not write their names inside: they just write ‘Be my Valentine,’ or ‘From your Valentine’.

Some children give their friends or teachers cards or chocolates. A man will perhaps give red roses to the woman that he loves. A lot of people go out to restaurants for the evening and have dinner for two, and some people think it is a good day to marry.
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