



American Customs and Holidays

As with most countries, the United States has traditions, customs and holidays that are observed. Some are national holidays, some are religious in nature and some are just for fun.

The government and most businesses observe national holidays and some religious holidays. These holidays are marked by an “**” below. On these holidays, all banks, the post office, government buildings, schools and many businesses will not be open. Your workplace may be open, although you may take available vacation / personal time to celebrate a holiday of your choice.

New Years Eve and Day - December 31 and January 1 **

Throughout the country, parties are traditionally thrown on New Year's Eve, Dec 31st, to bring in the New Year. Times Square, in New York City celebrates with a giant ball drop, which is broadcast all over the world. At the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve people will kiss, honk car horns, bang pots and pans; blow whistles and make sounds with other noisemakers. The song “Auld Lang Syne” is played at the stroke of midnight to ring out the old and bring in the new. Some eat a soul food of black-eyed peas and rice called Hoppin’ John. Cake and champagne are also consumed for “good luck”.



On New Year's Day, the popular sport of American football is televised all day long and special parties called Football Parties are thrown. Popular foods of the day are: beer, soda, large sandwiches up to 5 feet long called submarine sandwiches, potato chips, potato salad, pizza, pretzels, nuts, and candy. Those who do not watch football usually go shopping. Stores refer to the wives of men who watch the sports programming as Football Widows to dramatize the popularity of the sport. Happy New Year!

Martin Luther King Day **

Martin Luther King Day is a celebration of the Man and the Holiday. It is an occasion for the nation to remember the injustices that Dr. King fought. It is day to remember his fight for the freedom, equality, and dignity of all races and peoples, to remember the message of change through nonviolence. You may find community and religious gatherings, inter-faith services and parades to celebrate the day. Martin Luther King Day was originally celebrated on his birthday, which is January 15th. It is now celebrated the 3rd Monday of January each year.

Valentine's Day - February 14

Valentine's Day, a holiday honoring love and lovers, is celebrated on February 14th. Across the country, candy, flowers, and gifts are exchanged between loved ones, all in the name of St. Valentine. The history of Valentine's Day -- and its patron saint -- is shrouded in mystery. But we do know that February has long been a month of romance. St. Valentine's Day, as we know it today, contains vestiges of both Christian and ancient Roman tradition. According to one legend, Valentine actually sent the first 'valentine' greeting himself. While in prison, it is believed that Valentine fell in love with a young girl -- who may have been his jailor's daughter -- who visited him during his confinement. Before his death, it is alleged that he wrote her a letter, which he signed 'From your Valentine', an expression that is still in use today. Although the truth behind the Valentine legend is murky, the stories certainly emphasize his appeal as a sympathetic, heroic, and romantic figure.



President's Day - February 22 **

President's Day is the combined celebrations of the birthdays of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. The original version of the holiday was in commemoration of George Washington's birthday in 1796 (the last full year of his presidency). In 1796, many Americans celebrated his birthday on the 22nd of February, and by the early 19th century, Washington's Birthday had taken firm root in the American experience as a bona fide national holiday. Then along came Abraham Lincoln, another revered president and fellow February baby (born on the 12th of the month). The first formal observance of his birthday took place in 1865, the year after his assassination, when both houses of Congress gathered for a memorial address. While Lincoln's Birthday did not become a federal holiday like George Washington's, it did become a legal holiday in several states. Apparently, while the holiday in February is still officially known as Washington's Birthday (at least according to the Office of Personnel Management), it has become popularly (and, perhaps in some cases at the state level, legally) known as "President's Day". This has made the third Monday in February a day for honoring George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, as well as all the other men who have served as president. (Yes, it is true. All of our presidents have been men, so far.)



St. Patrick's Day - March 17

St. Patrick's Day honors Saint Patrick. It is also a celebration of Irish culture. In many cities there are St. Patrick's Day parades. In New York City, it is celebrated with a parade down Fifth Avenue, with people drinking "green" beer and eating corned beef and cabbage, traditional Irish foods. Most people, Irish or not, wear green on this day.



April Fool's Day - April 1

Today Americans play small tricks on friends and strangers alike on the first of April. One common trick on April Fools Day, or All Fool's Day, is pointing down to a friend's shoe and saying, "Your shoelace is untied." Teachers in the nineteenth century used to say to pupils, "Look! A flock of geese!" and point up. School children might tell a classmate that school has been canceled. Whatever the trick, if the innocent victim falls for the joke the prankster yells, "April Fool". Most April Fools jokes are in good fun and not meant to harm anyone. The cleverest April Fools joke is the one where everyone laughs, especially the person upon whom the joke is played.



Easter Sunday

Easter Sunday is considered the holiest of Christian days, as it is the celebration of the resurrection and life of Jesus Christ. Easter is also the time of springtime festivals, a time to welcome back the tulips, the crocuses and the daffodils. In the material sense, it is a time of new suits, new dresses and patent leather shoes; chocolate bunnies, marshmallow chicks, and colored eggs! Depending on the calendar, it falls in March or April. However, Easter always falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon of spring. The week prior to Easter Sunday is called Holy Week. There are religious observances throughout the week. Many employers often observe Good Friday as a day off from work.



The Easter egg is one of the oldest springtime symbols in the world. Ancient Persians, Phoenicians, Hindus and Egyptians believed the world began with an egg. A legend says a great egg broke in half forming the earth and sky, with the yolk as the sun. Eggs were given as gifts in ancient China, Greece and Rome. As Christianity evolved, the egg became the symbol of Christ's resurrection from the tomb. Now people decorate eggs of all types and they can be encrusted with gold, silver, and precious stones.

Passover

Passover is the 8-day Jewish observance commemorating the freedom and exodus of the Israelites from Egypt during the reign of the Pharaoh Ramses II. At family gatherings and lavish meals called Seders, the story of Passover is retold through the reading of the Haggadah. With its special foods, songs, and customs, the Seder is the focal point of the Passover celebration. It is celebrated on the 15th night of the Jewish month of Nissan (Hebrew Calendar), which usually falls in April.



Mother's Day

Mother's Day is a time of commemoration and celebration for Mom. It is a time of breakfast in bed, family gatherings, and crayon scribbled "I Love You".



In the US, Julia Ward Howe first started Mother's Day in 1872 as a day dedicated to peace. Ms Howe would hold organized Mother's Day meetings in Boston, MA every year.



In 1907, Ana Jarvis from Philadelphia began a campaign to establish a national Mother's Day. Ms Jarvis persuaded her mother's church in Grafton, West Virginia to celebrate Mother's Day on the second anniversary of her mother's death, the 2nd Sunday of May. Ms Jarvis and her supporters began to write to ministers, businessmen, and politicians in their quest to establish a national Mother's Day. It was successful as by 1911, Mother's Day was celebrated in almost every state. President Wilson in 1914, made the official announcement proclaiming Mother's Day as a holiday that was to be celebrated each year on the 2nd Sunday of May. It is one of the busiest restaurant days of the year as families go out to eat rather than have Mom cook for them.

Memorial Day **

Cities all around the United States hold their own Memorial Day ceremonies on the last Monday in May to pay respect to the men and women who have died in wars or in the service of their country.



Memorial Day is not limited to honoring only those Americans from the armed forces. It is also a day for personal remembrance. Families and individuals honor the memories of their loved ones who have died. Church services, visits to the cemetery, flowers on graves or even silent tribute, mark the day with dignity and solemnity. It is a day of reflection.

To many Americans, the day also signals the beginning of summer with a three-day weekend to spend at the beach, in the mountains or at home relaxing. It is the unofficial beginning of the summer season. There are always great shopping deals to be found with most retail establishments having storewide Memorial Day sales. Memorial Day is celebrated the last Monday in May.

Father's Day

Father's Day commemorates and celebrates Dad. It is a day to not only honor your father, but all men who have acted as father figures in your life - whether as Stepfather, Uncle, Grandfather, or "Big Brother."



Mrs. John B. Dodd, of Washington, first proposed the idea of a "father's day" in 1909. Mrs. Dodd wanted a special day to honor her father, William Smart. William Smart, a Civil War veteran, was widowed when his wife died in childbirth with their sixth child. The first Father's Day was observed on June 19, 1910 in Spokane, Washington. At about the same time in various towns and cities across America, other people were beginning to celebrate a "father's day." In 1924, President Calvin Coolidge supported the idea of a national Father's Day. Finally in 1966, President Lyndon Johnson signed a presidential proclamation declaring the 3rd Sunday of June as Father's Day.

Independence Day - July 4 **



Independence Day (Fourth of July) celebrates the birthday of the United States of America, founded July 4th 1776, commemorating the signing of the Declaration of Independence. America celebrated its 225th birthday in 2001. The 4th of July is a time for America's national colors of Red, White and Blue to be proudly displayed. It is also a time for picnics, parades and marching bands; a time for beaches, barbeques and "Bombs Bursting in Air." It is usually celebrated with cities and towns having elaborate firework displays. The 4th of July is a national holiday, with most office businesses closed in celebration of United States freedom from persecution, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and to display one's love of country. Look for July 4th sales in all the stores.

Labor Day **

Labor Day, the first Monday in September, is an annual and national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity and well being of the country. The Labor Day holiday is a creation of the labor movement and is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers.



"It is appropriate, therefore, that the nation pay tribute on Labor Day to the creator of so much of the nation's strength, freedom, and leadership -- the American worker."

Labor Day is generally observed with parades, speeches, barbecues, and picnics. The day has also become the unofficial end of the summer season with many colleges, secondary and elementary schools beginning classes immediately after the Labor Day weekend. As with our other patriotic holidays, shopping (that great American pastime) is prevalent as "back to school" items are bought.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, are the most important and most solemn of all Jewish Holidays. Rosh Hashanah is celebrated the 29th night of the Jewish month of Elul. Yom Kippur is on the 9th night of Tishrei. These holidays usually fall in October.



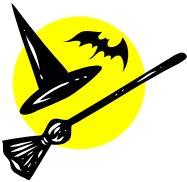
Columbus Day **

Columbus Day honors Christopher Columbus' first voyage to America in 1492. Columbus Day became a legal federal holiday in the United States in 1971. It is celebrated on the second Monday in October. Before 1971, a number of states celebrated Columbus Day on October 12. Cities and organizations sponsor parades and banquets on Columbus Day.



Few celebrations marked the discovery until hundreds of years later. The continent was not even named after Columbus, but an Italian explorer named Amerigo Vespucci. In 1792, a ceremony was held in New York honoring Columbus, and a monument was dedicated to him. Soon after that, the city of Washington was officially named the District of Columbia and became the capital of the United States. In 1892, a statue of Columbus was raised at the beginning of Columbus Avenue in New York City. Americans might not have a Columbus Day if Christopher Columbus had not been born in Italy. Out of pride for their native son, the Italian population of New York City organized the first celebration of the discovery of America on October 12, 1866. The next year, more Italian organizations in other cities held banquets, parades and dances on that date, and they called it Columbus Day.

Halloween - October 31

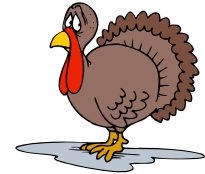


“Trick or Treat”...Halloween is the time of Ghosts, Goblins, Gravestones and Graveyards, of Spooks and Spirits and silly-fun tricks, of Witches and Warlocks and Scary Black Cats, and Candy Corn, Jelly Apples, Pumpkins and Bats. Traditionally, children and adults alike go from house to house in their neighborhoods and receive sweets. They dress up in colorful costumes. It is a day of fun for all.



Thanksgiving Day **

Thanksgiving Day in America is a time to offer thanks at family gatherings where large amounts of food are consumed. Thanksgiving always falls on the last Thursday of November, though most businesses will give their employees both Thursday and Friday off. It is a time of turkeys, stuffing, and pumpkin pie; along with Indian corn, holiday parades and giant balloons. Of all the Thanksgiving symbols the Turkey has become the most well known. Throughout history, mankind has celebrated the bountiful harvest with thanksgiving ceremonies. In 1621, after a hard and devastating first year in the New World (the United States) the Pilgrims' fall harvest was very successful and plentiful. There was corn, fruits, vegetables, along with fish and meat. They found they had enough food to put away for the winter. The custom of an annually celebrated thanksgiving, held after the harvest, continued through the years. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln appointed a national day of thanksgiving. Many cities host parades. Macy's department store in New York City has one of the biggest parades. It marks the beginning of the Christmas holiday season with the arrival of Santa Claus.



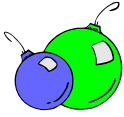
Christmas Eve and Day - December 24 and December 25 **

Christmas is a time for families, fun, and festivities! It is a time of family gatherings and holiday meals; Santa Claus, stars, singing carolers, ornaments, gifts, and twinkling lights, sleigh rides, hot cocoa, and gingerbread cookies.

Christmas is a Christian religious holiday, but is celebrated by other faiths, too. It is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.



Advent: Is the preparation for Christmas. Advent marks the beginning of the ecclesiastical year. It starts on the Sunday closest to November 30th, the feast of Saint Andrew, and lasts for four Sundays. Advent calendars are purchased, which have tiny cut out numbered windows for each December day. An advent wreath of evergreen with four candles is placed in the home and one candle is lit for every Sunday. Sometimes a lit candle is placed in the center to celebrate Christ being the light of the world. The last Sunday before Christmas is called Golden Sunday.



Christmas decorations are available for purchase in stores usually the beginning of November. The most popular of the holiday decorations is the Christmas tree. Traditionally, gifts and surprises are placed under the tree until Christmas morning. The holiday spirit includes both indoor and outdoor colored electric lights, lighted angel tree toppers, ribbons, tinsel, candy canes, holly, poinsettia flowers, glass balls, dolls, and popcorn in fancy tins. Americans elaborately decorate the outdoors of their homes with colored electric lights and contests are held for the most beautiful and creatively lit houses by local newspapers in



some areas. The Christmas tree is placed in the front room of the house and gifts are piled underneath it. Christmas "stockings are hung by the fireplace with care in the hopes that St. Nick will soon be there." Holiday cookies and candy are baked. Christmas parties are held the week before Christmas at places of business, homes, and schools. Christmas cards are also sent to family members and friends as an expression of joy and the good wishes of the season.

On the night before Christmas, all across the world, millions of children are tucked in their beds while "visions of sugarplums dance in their heads." When they awake, they will check their stockings and under the tree to see if Santa Claus had come. Santa Claus has become the most beloved of Christmas symbols and traditions. The image of a jolly old elf, dressed in red, flying in a sleigh pulled by reindeer and leaving toys and gifts for every child, is known worldwide.

Kwanzaa - December 26 to January 1

Kwanzaa is a 7-day festival celebrating the African American people, their culture and their history. It is a time of celebration, community gatherings, and reflection; a time of endings and beginnings. Kwanzaa begins on December 26th and continues until New Year's Day, January 1st. Each evening a family member, usually the youngest child, lights candles in a special candleholder and discusses one of the seven principles of Kwanzaa. On the sixth day, which falls on New Year's Eve, family and friends get together to enjoy a large feast and to celebrate their history, culture, and the upcoming New Year.



Chanukah



Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, is a celebration in the Jewish religion of the victory of the Maccabees and the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple. It also commemorates the miracle of the oil that burned for 8 days. Every year between the end of November and the end of December, Jewish people

around the world celebrate the holiday of Chanukah, the Festival of Lights. Chanukah begins on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev, but the starting date on the western calendar varies from year to year. The holiday celebrates the events that took place over 2,300 years ago in the land of Judea, which is now Israel.

The Chanukah menorah is called a HANUKIYAH. It has nine candleholders. There are eight candles, one for each night of Chanukah. The ninth is called the SHAMASH. The Shamash is lit first and then is used to light the other candles.

One of the best-known symbols of Chanukah is the Dreidel. A dreidel is a four-sided top with a Hebrew letter on each side. These letters mean "A Great Miracle Happened There". In Israel, the dreidel is a bit different in that there letters mean " A Miracle Happened HERE!" Dreidel is also a popular game played during the Holiday. Players use pennies, nuts, raisins, or chocolate coins (gelt) as tokens or chips. The player spins the dreidel. When the dreidel stops, the letter that is facing up decides the fate.



For more detailed information on US holidays and traditions, the following sites are suggested:

www.holidays.net

www.usis.usemb.se/holidays/celebrate

http://dir.yahoo.com/society_and_culture/holidays_and_observances

A holiday or special occasion greeting can be sent to someone special over the Internet from various greeting card sites:

www.bluemountain.com

www.hallmark.com

www.americangreetings.com