



Sons of Norway Information Banks

#204: NORWEGIAN CHRISTMAS

IN THIS INFORMATION BANK

Introduction	01
Julenisse	02
Santa Lucia	02
Christmas Eve	03
Julebord	04

INTRODUCTION

The Christmas season brings light and warmth to the people of Norway during a time of dark, shivering cold winters. December is filled with festivities and the anticipation of *Julaften* (Christmas Eve), the main affair for any Norwegian Christmas celebration. Norwegians young and old typically celebrate by decorating their home, singing carols, baking cookies, preparing a large Christmas feast, reuniting with friends and family, giving gifts, and for Christians, attending church. The traditions are strong and the roots are deep.



Photo: CH - Visitnorway.com, Innovation Norway

Norway's Christmas celebrations involve a number of long held traditions combined with modern ways to celebrate that have evolved through the years. Some are unique to the country and others are similar to those

held in other parts of Europe, Canada, and the United States. One thing is clear though, the Christmas holiday is a joyous, festive occasion that leaves little to be desired.

Evidence of midwinter celebrations called *Jól* date back to Viking times before the spread of Christianity. But it is unclear as to why exactly these winter celebrations took place. It is possible that the Norse used *Jól* as a time to rejoice at the end fall harvests, honor their dead, or celebrate

the winter solstice and the slow return of the sun. One thing is known however, these pre-Christian celebrations were of great importance to the early Norwegians. Celebrations took place beside the warmth of the open hearth during the dead of winter with family and neighbors. There was plenty of drink to go around and large feasts on slaughtered animals were bountiful. Pigs were sacrificed to the god of fertility, Frey, at the festival, and thus became symbols of fertility. Beer symbolized successful grain crops and harvest. Midwinter festivals were also a time of great mystery and danger for the superstitious. Supernatural forces were believed to influence individuals who did wrong.

King Haakon the Good tried unsuccessfully to introduce Christianity to Norway in the 10th century. Eventually, however, the new religion stuck and began to spread, becoming well established in Norway by the 11th century.

The introduction of Christianity brought new traditions. Heathen festivities were replaced with Christian ones although some words and customs were retained. By the time stave churches were being built in the 13th century Christian traditions were finding their way into homes and communities across Norway. The Midwinter festivities transformed into a holiday focused around religious customs. Today Norwegians celebrate *Jul*, a word coincidently derived from the old Norse word for the midwinter festivities of *Jól*. *Juletid* (Christmas time) in Norway today is a strong mix of pre-Christian traditions and religious elements.



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Julebukking

Dressing up as a Yule goat became part of the Christmas festivities. Supposedly the Norse God Thor would travel from house to house during the winter solstice disguised with goat skins. This tradition continued after Christianity took hold, with people wearing masks and costumes to go *julebukking*, which is similar to going trick-or-treating on Halloween. Neighbors and relatives would answer their doors desperately trying to determine who was behind the masks. Once revealed, *julebukkers* would be asked inside for a special treat. Today this tradition is most commonly compared to Christmas caroling from door to door. This tradition typically occurs between Christmas Day and New Year's Day.

Juleøl

Brewing *juleøl* (Christmas beer) was a long held holiday activity. The Vikings and old Norse prized their beer and kept plenty on hand during the holiday season. The symbol of the cross was often used during the process to protect or bless the brew. Sometimes crossed straws in the container or a cross of tar painted on or under each container would serve as enough to protect the special beer. In most districts, the brewer—usually the master or matron of the household—worked alone and started two to three weeks before Christmas on a full moon night. The process had to be completed by St. Thomas Day (December 21) or winter solstice because brewing at the turning of the sun was considered to be tricky.



Postcard featuring celebrities and politicians depicted as nisse in 1895 by Andreas Ollestad. National Library of Norway. www.nb.no

JULENISSE

An iconic Norwegian personality that was ever-present on farms during the Christmas season was the *Julenisse*. Dating back to the 13th century the *nisser* were small gnome-like creatures that appeared during Christmas to either wreak havoc on farms or bring good luck for a successful year ahead. These male figures were depicted with a long white beard, wearing a red knit cap, wool sweater and knee high socks. Norwegian farmers truly believed that if they did not tend to their animals and left their barn messy their crop for the coming harvest would be spoiled by the *nisser*. The obedient farmers would always leave the *nisser* offerings of bowls of porridge in

the barn. If treated well the *nisser* would help around the barn and even bring presents to good little children by asking, "*Er der noen snille barn her?*" (Are there are nice children here?). This phrase and the presents that followed can be paralleled to the role of Santa Claus bringing presents to only good little girls and boys. Today family members dress up as a taller *nisser* and arrive on Christmas Eve to bring everyone in the house a gift.

Any farmer who paid attention to the *nisser* and treated him well would have good luck in all his endeavors. In some districts *rømmegrot* (porridge with sour cream) with a lump of melted butter was left for him in the barn. In other districts, he received *lefse* and ale. These traditions were widely followed until the 19th century. Some Norwegian farmers do it today whether it is based on superstition or done in order to uphold a treasured Christmas legend for their children. *Nisse* decorations are seen everywhere during Christmas time. Similar to Santa Claus, the *nisser* has been commercialized as a strong symbol for Christmas.

SANTA LUCIA

The Saint of Light is celebrated all over Norway and Scandinavia on December 13th. Her story is one of martyrdom but her legacy lives on each holiday season as children participate in St. Lucia processions in school, institutions and various community gatherings. One little girl is picked to lead the way wearing a white robe, red sash, and candles on her head. Many Norwegians celebrate Santa Lucia day on December 13th, a tradition also very popular and deep-rooted in Sweden.

Santa Lucia, or St. Lucy, was an early Christian martyr from Sicily who became a symbol of Light at winter solstice. Early in the morning, a young girl wearing a long white dress and a crown of light would bring food and drink to her household. According to Nordic beliefs, evil spirits were out and about as the winter solstice approached. If anyone dared to walk outside they would surely meet terror from the demon *Lusse* (deriving from roots from both Lucia and Lucifer). In order to stay safe people and animals were given extra food to ensure magical protection. Today little girls who dress up like St. Lucia distribute food and drink while singing traditional songs. *Lussekatter* (Lucia cats) are saffron-flavored buns that are served as a treat on this special holiday. This day for many marks the start of the holiday season and delivers goodness and light during the dark winter months.



Photo: Lucia celebration in a Swedish church, Claudia Gründer, Wikimedia Commons.

CHRISTMAS EVE

Christmas Eve is the biggest day of celebration for Norwegians during the holiday season. There is a lot of anticipation and decorating involved, with a great importance put on family togetherness. Schools and offices are shut down as people head home to ready the house. Wood is cut and fireplaces are burning bright to warm excited children inside. Outside the snow is white and the houses are bright and cozy. Most Norwegian homes display a big bright star and candles in their windows to symbolize the celebration of the holiday season and to brighten the home during the dark winter season. Norwegian decorations are simple and classic. White Christmas lights might cover a few outside trees and candles are plentiful inside and out to welcome family and friends.



Few holiday home decorations appear in Norway before December 23rd, known as *Lillejulaften* or "Little Christmas Eve." This is the day for tree trimming and setting out decorations, although Christmas Eve morning also serves this purpose for some. Tree nurseries provide the fir trees and pines that most people prefer, but just as in the U. S., some families are fond of searching for a tree to chop down. Owners of wooded property provide access to the public so that they can find their tree the old fashioned way. Norway borrowed the Christmas tree tradition from Germany. In the 1700s, only well-to-do urbanites had trees, but gradually, clergymen and teachers brought the custom to rural areas. Various species of trees were used at first, based on what was locally available. The tree was typically trimmed on

December 23rd or 24th. Tree trim has changed over time from crude handmade and natural ornaments to glass balls, tinsel garlands, electric candles and illuminated stars for tree tops. Many trees sport small Norwegian flags as well as pine cones, stars, and birds, yarn and felt nisser and angels, and handmade heart shaped paper baskets, colorful paper strip chains, and ornaments of straw. In addition to candles, Christmas home decorations are usually of natural materials—pine cones, lingonberry twigs, heather, moss, reindeer lichen, straw, thin wooden strips (spon), fir, pine, and juniper twigs, felt, cotton, and linen placed in baskets or bowls or on trays or platters. Wreaths, however, are associated with cemeteries, so if they are used at all, they are placed on a flat surface. Many Norwegians in city and country hold on to some old traditions, such as putting up a sheaf of grain for the birds and filling the home with representations of nisser.

December 23rd and 24th are special days for Norwegians at Christmas because time is devoted to spending time with family. The house is prepared with decorations and the fires are kept burning. Children still in their pajamas will open their *julestrømper* (stockings) on Christmas Eve morning and indulge in the treats found inside while watching traditional Christmas reruns on TV that play only at this time of year throughout the day. Simultaneously the kitchen is busy with the baking and cooking of traditional Christmas delicacies. Christmas baking usually started during *kakelinna*, a period of mild weather that frequently occurs in Norway in December. But women baked for others before that time, going from farm to farm to make *flatbrød*, usually a whole year's supply. Special Christmas breads were also baked. In many districts it was common to give bread and a bottle of liquor to farm workers in order to provide them with something that they could serve at their own Christmas get-togethers between Christmas Day and New Year's Eve. This tradition has largely disappeared in Norway but the baking of cookies and breads is still very dominant at this time of year.

Rosettes and goro were made as early as the 1700s in some parts of the country. Regular Christmas cookies were not common until well into the 1800s and in some districts not until the 1900s. When the tradition was well established, a proper baker needed seven to 12 cookie types in order to do things "right." Rosettes, goro, *fattigmann*, *berlinerkranser*, *sandbakkels*, and *krumkaker* were just a few of the treats served to family and guests. Today that tradition is upheld. Cookies of all types, including gingerbread houses, are made by young and old.



Butter

Butter is and has always been a staple and special treat for Norwegians. At Christmas time the butter was to be pressed into square wooden butter molds made of four or five individual pieces of wood with elaborate carved patterns on one side. The tops of some of these molds were pyramid-shaped. The carvings might be simple or elaborate, with swirls, flowers and initials. With the mold pieces removed, the butter became a table decoration that was meant to last until after New Year's Eve. Today it is likely that you will still see and experience a butter mold at a traditional Norwegian Christmas dinner.

JULEBORD

The Christmas Eve dinner is a formal event with family and/or friends. The table setting is set with fine china, sterling silver table wear, special table cloths and napkins embroidered with Christmas decoration. The intended overall effect is simple but elegant. Norwegians tend to dress up for this special dinner, with some wearing *bunader*. In many homes, before eating, a family member reads the Christmas Gospel. The traditional formal feast is common across Norway on this day but the actual foods at the meal vary by district. A side of pork with ribs left in it (*ribbe*) is probably the most popular meat in Østlandet. Sausages made of finely ground fat and lean of pork (*medisterpolser*) and pork patties (*medisterkaker*) are also served. Side dishes include boiled, parsley-sprinkled potatoes, sweet and sour cabbage with caraway (*surkal*), and lingonberries. Lutefisk and fresh, poached torsk with bacon is a fairly common meal in Nord Norge, and ribs of lamb (*pinnekjøtt*) is typical in Vestlandet, salted and dried and simmered on a rack of juniper or birch twigs. Rice porridge (*Risengrynsgrøt*) and rice cream (rice porridge mixed with whipped cream) are still traditional desserts almost anywhere you go. Common beverages are soft drinks such as the traditional *julebrus*, beer or wine, and of course, aquavit (*akevitt*).



For children, excitement escalates after dinner because gifts are exchanged on Christmas Eve. In some homes, all gifts are placed under the Christmas tree. In others, *julenisse*, blend of *nisse* and Santa Claus, comes with a sack of gifts on his back. He typically says, “*God dag, god dag, er det noen snille barn her?*” (Good day, good day, are there any nice children here?) upon arrival. Norwegian children respond no differently than American children respond to Santa—with anything from excited yells to terror. Some openly hug *julenisse* in thanks, while others have to be dragged from under a table to accept a gift. Later in the evening, adults enjoy coffee before beginning the cherished tradition of circling the Christmas tree together. The family holds hands and walks around the tree, singing Christmas carols. Later in the week, *Juletreffs* (Christmas tree feasts) give children another chance to circle a large tree, eat goodies and meet the *julenisse* a second time. As the night winds the excitement and anticipation of the day dies down as well. Board games are out and Christmas movies are played so everyone can sit and relax after a busy day and a giant feast.

As in the past, Christmas Day in Norway is quiet. Many families go to church again and have guests at their homes for dinner. Less traditional, more contemporary foods are usually prepared, such as beef or lamb roasts, salmon, and even turkey. Before or after dinner walks provide opportunities for contemplation and exercise. If snow is present, children and adults alike can be seen trying out new skis and sleds.

Christmas parties with friends and neighbors start on the Second Day of Christmas and continue through the week. Many Norwegians take a week’s vacation and spend some holiday time at a mountain cabin where they can ski, ice skate and snowshoe. Cities also provide plenty of places for this type of recreation. “Now it is jul again, and now it is jul again, and jula lasts until Easter,” are lyrics of a popular Norwegian Christmas song, and while they are an exaggeration, the Norwegian Christmas holiday can seem that long because of ongoing festivities, with few complaining about it.

Christmas in Norway brings expectancy, joy, church bells, snow, candlelight, tree lights, warmth, and generosity. All things cozy and good can be used to describe the Christmas holiday in Norway.