

Christmas in Germany

Frohe Weihnachten! In other words, Merry Christmas! During the Christmas season in Germany, the streets are filled with beautiful decorations, songs of cheer, and the smell of delicious gingerbread cookies. Families celebrate by participating in holiday activities, like visiting the markets, baking treats, or singing carols. Many other cultures have their primary celebrations on Christmas Day, but in Germany, the main festivities are on Christmas Eve.

In Germany, Christkind (the Christ Child) is celebrated along with Weihnachtsmann (Santa Claus). Christkind is a young girl with qualities that reflect Christ. While mostly a Catholic tradition, Christkind is celebrated across the country. For example, each year in Nuremberg, a young girl is chosen to be the city's Christkind and has many responsibilities. She participates in the Christmas parade, acts in the town play, and opens the Christmas market before Advent. Advent is the time period before Christmas Day as observed by many Christian churches. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. As the holiday season starts, children write letters to Christkind and Santa Claus asking for presents. Christkind brings children presents on Christmas Eve instead of Santa Claus in some parts of Germany.

The modern tradition of a decorated evergreen tree is believed to have begun in Germany. Originally, branches of evergreen were simply used to decorate homes during the wintertime as a symbol of everlasting life and served as a reminder that spring was coming. Over time, families began adding decorations to the branches, such as candles, berries, apples, marzipan cookies, and nuts. Over time, the decorated evergreen became a symbol for the holiday season. In the early 1800s, British Queen Victoria and her German husband, Prince Albert, popularized the Christmas tree. This tradition quickly spread the custom all over Europe.

North America embraced the Christmas tree as Germans emigrated overseas. Canada's first tree was in 1781 in Quebec when a German general stationed there had a decorated tree for his officers' Christmas party. The tradition in the United States began in the first half of the 19th century. Today, the Christmas tree is a holiday tradition that countries all over the world share.

Unlike many other places, children in Germany are not traditionally involved in the decorating of the tree. Instead, they are not allowed to see it until Christmas Eve. A bell is rung to allow the children to view the tree, often decorated with special ornaments, family heirlooms, candles, tinsel, and candies. Presents are placed under the tree. While gifts are opened, the family sings carols.

Once they have finished exchanging gifts, they all sit down together for a delicious Christmas Eve feast. The table is often full of traditional German foods. It is common for families to prepare goose or pork as the main course. Side dishes include apple and sausage stuffing, potato dumplings, a fruit bread called stollen, and other German specialties.

Although Christmas Eve is more widely celebrated, large meals are prepared for Christmas Day as well. Baking cookies and treats is also a large part of the holiday season. Children enjoy baking and decorating lebkuchen cookies which are similar to gingerbread cookies.

Another important part of the holiday season in Germany is the Christmas market, which dates back to the 15th century. The most famous Christmas market (“Weihnachtsmärkte”) in Germany is held in Nuremberg and attracts nearly two million visitors each year. The market opens at the beginning of Advent and remains busy throughout the rest of the Christmas season. Families, especially children, enjoy going to the market to find all sorts of items for sale, like decorations, presents, and glass ornaments. This is also where many families find their Christmas trees. Throughout the market, vendors set up stalls to display their handcrafted goods, unique foods, and delicacies as visitors walk around and listen to the Christmas carols.

All over the world, Christmas is celebrated through traditions that have been carried on for centuries. Whether it is writing letters to Christkind, visiting the holiday market, or enjoying a Christmas Eve feast, Germany has its own set of celebrated holiday customs that are special to its history. Wherever it is celebrated, there is one thing that is certain: the Christmas season is a joyful time of year.

Questions

1. What does *emigrated* mean here: “North America embraced the Christmas tree as Germans emigrated overseas.”?
2. What part of the German Christmas Eve dinner would you like best?
3. How do the German children know when the tree is ready for viewing?
4. What is Advent?