

THE WORLD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
CHRISTMAS

GERRY BOWLER



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Australia In Australia Christmas is a summer festival, allowing for much outdoor celebration.

of Australian origin, such as “The Three Drovers,” “The Melbourne Carol,” and “Six White Boomers.” At midnight all hold hands and sing “Auld Lang Syne.” Those who cannot attend can follow the proceedings on television or radio. Many Australians also attend a Christmas Eve church service.

Back at home children put out at the foot of the bed their version of the Christmas stocking, the Christmas pillow slip, which will hold the candies and small gifts; the larger presents are left under the tree. Snacks are left out for Father Christmas (cookies and milk, or perhaps beer) and water for the kangaroos that pull his sleigh while he is in Australian airspace. As chimneys are rare Father Christmas is expected to make his entrance through a window.

The next morning presents are opened and the family prepares for the Christmas lunch. The hot summer weather leads many to expect a cold meal or a barbecue at the beach, but others cling to the habits of their British ancestors and sit down to a feast of roast turkey and plum pudding, with perhaps a pavlova for native colour. The queen’s Christmas broadcast in the afternoon is a fixture for those Australians who are not of the republican persuasion. Those who insist on a cold Christmas may have gotten their wish months earlier by taking part in a “Christmas in July” trek to the mountains, where all the trappings of a northern celebration can be enjoyed around a roaring outdoor fire.

December 26 is Boxing Day in Australia, a holiday often dedicated to the enjoyment of sporting events, either attending a local fixture or watching the opening day of the test match at the Melbourne Cricket Ground or the start of the Sydney-to-Hobart Yacht Race.

Australian Christmas Tree *Nuytsia floribunda*, a Western Australian parasitic mistletoe. The tree grows 20 to 30 feet and produces clusters of bright yellow flowers during the Christmas season.

Austria For a country of such small size Austria crams a lot into its Christmas season, with bizarre folk customs, beautiful music, rich foods, and snowy Alpine settings.

In late November the Christmas markets of Austria open for business. In Salzburg the *Christkindlmarkt* (Christ Child Market) is set up in front of the cathedral; in Vienna it is in front of the town hall. Children begin to open their Advent calendars on December 1, and some pluck branches on ST. BARBARA’S DAY, December 4, but Christmas really gets underway on December 6, St. Nicholas Day. Children set out their shoes by the window in hope that the saint will fill them

full of good things, and they are seldom disappointed. On his day, the saint, in his bishop’s garb, visits homes, schools, and public places to greet children and take part in the many St. Nicholas processions that wind their way through Austrian towns and villages. He is often accompanied by the devilish figure of KRAMPUS, who makes a show of scaring the children while good Nicholas hands out treats. This is also the time for some villages to stage *Krampus* or PERCHTENLAUFEN processions, where grotesquely costumed characters parade about, making noise and frightening passersby.

As Christmas approaches Advent candles are lit and children hurry to complete their letters to the Christ Child, who is believed to bring the presents on Christmas Eve. The Austrian postal service operates a special office for such letters in Christkindl in upper Austria. The glorious heritage of Austrian music is given full scope in the many concerts that precede Christmas, and other art forms are also on display: the carving and painting of manger scenes for which Tyrolean craftsmen are famous and the dramas that re-enact the search of Mary and Joseph for shelter. In Igls, near Innsbruck, the costumed children of the village take part in a torch-lit procession on December 23 to a stage where they perform a Nativity play.

Shops close at noon on Christmas Eve and people hurry home for last-minute preparations. Some spend the afternoon visiting the graves of family members, placing flowers and lighting candles. The Christmas tree must be decorated – many Austrian homes still favour real candles as a decoration and place a manger scene at its foot – and the Christmas Eve meal made. Carp and goose are traditional favourites, but turkey is making inroads. For the children the best part of the evening comes when a bell is rung to announce that the Christ Child and his angels have descended from heaven to bring the gifts. They are admitted to the room where the tree has been set up, the Nativity story is read from the Bible, carols are sung, and presents are opened. Midnight church services are widely attended; few are more popular with tourists than that in Oberndorf’s chapel, where the carol “Silent Night” was first sung.

Christmas Day is spent receiving friends and eating. Austrians are devoted to the arts of Christmas baking; there are dozens of types of cookies available, including gingery *Lebkuchen*, crescent-shaped *Vanillekipferl*, or the *Zimtsterne* cinnamon stars, not to mention the *Christstollen* bread and *Sachertorte* or *Linzertorte* cakes. Sekt wine or *Glühwein* punch will wash it all down.

The Twelve Nights in Austria are the *Rauhnächte* (“Rough Nights” or “Smoke Nights”), a time of increased demonic activity and thus a time to purge the house and farm of evil spirits. Processions of masked figures armed with brooms parade about sweeping away the bad influences, while some homes are purged using holy smoke from a censer.

On January 6 the Christmas season ends with Epiphany, or the day of the Three Kings. Homes are visited by men dressed as Magi and a ceremony takes place: carrying a representation of the crib and accompanied by a servant with a censer, the Kings move through the house, blessing it and its inhabitants. As they leave they chalk a mark on a door post with the year of their visit and their initials, as in “19 K+M+B 99.”

Autry, Gene (1907-98) The quintessential “singing cowboy,” who made a career in radio, television, and the movie screen and a vast fortune in real estate and the communications industry. In the late 1940s and early 1950s he contributed greatly to the popular culture of the North American Christmas with three hit recordings: “Here Comes Santa Claus (Right Down