

## Hogmanay in Scotland

Consider yourself lucky if you find yourself ringing in the New Year in Scotland. Their Hogmanay holiday is one of the world's greatest New Year's celebrations.

No one is exactly sure what the term *Hogmanay* means. It first appeared in writing back in 1604, and historians believe the festival was celebrated decades earlier. Some speculate that *Hogmanay* derives from the French word *hoganine*, meaning "gala day." Others believe it comes from the Norman French word *hoguinan*, meaning "New Year's gift." Historians agree that both the term and the celebration likely appeared after Mary, Queen of Scots, returned to Scotland from France in 1561.

One of the foremost Hogmanay traditions is *redding the house*. This involves a deep cleaning of the home for the new year. It was traditional to clean the ashes from the hearth. Some community members were called upon to read the ashes, the way some soothsayers read tea leaves. The cleaning wasn't complete until a smoking juniper branch was carried from room to room, dispelling evil spirits. One last way of keeping house was to clear up all family debts before midnight.



The stroke of midnight brings the *first footing*. The *first foot* refers to the first person to set foot in your house on New Year's Day, and this first footing is symbolic of the year to come. This is why

many new year's visitors come bearing gifts of shortbread and black buns, both considered luxurious foods. Hosts are obliged to offer their first footers a small drink, or *wee dram*, of whiskey. First footers often visit many homes, and the wee drams certainly add up.

Bonfires are also traditional. Since ancient times, fire has symbolized purification in Scotland. This is yet another means of cleaning for the new year. Of course, Hogmanay wouldn't be complete without the singing of *Auld Lang Syne*, written by Scotland's national poet Robert Burns.

## December Birthdays

In astrology, those born between December 1–21 are the Archers of Sagittarius. The Archer's open mind, optimism, curiosity, and enthusiasm make them the travelers of the zodiac. They treasure freedom: freedom to roam, freedom of thought, and freedom to express themselves. Those born between December 22–31 are Capricorn's Goats. Goats are responsible masters of self-control. They are practical planners and leaders who value experience and expertise.

## Residents Birthdays

December 6 - Marjorie S.

December 16 – Idella N.

December 27 – Lora H.

December 28 – Merrill B.

## Peak Performance



December 11 is International Mountain Day, a day to show appreciation and respect for the high places in the world. It is also a day to honor those with the courage to explore the mountains.

On December 3, 1910, Australian mountaineer Freda du Faur became the first woman to reach the summit of Mount Cook in New Zealand. As a young girl growing up in Sydney, Australia, Du Faur taught herself rock climbing at a nearby national park. Summer vacations to New Zealand inspired her to summit the island's snow-capped peaks. Du Faur's dedication to physical fitness and rock-climbing would become standards for mountaineers of any gender. Du Faur made many first ascents in New Zealand's rugged ranges, for which she would become famous in the mountaineering world.

# Whispering Oak Place

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## A Tough Nut to Crack

December brings many beloved holiday traditions, but one soars above the rest. No, not flying reindeer, but the dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy. Tchaikovsky's classic ballet *The Nutcracker* has become a holiday staple all around the world, despite not mentioning the nativity story or Santa Claus.

It was not Tchaikovsky's idea to write *The Nutcracker*. After enjoying success with his ballet *The Sleeping Beauty* in 1890, Tchaikovsky was asked to compose a ballet for the Imperial Theatre. Tchaikovsky turned to his friend and collaborator Marius Pepita, who suggested they write a ballet based on the fairy tale *The Story of a Nutcracker*, by the French writer Alexandre Dumas. Dumas himself had "borrowed" the story from the German writer E.T.A. Hoffman, who wrote *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* in 1816. In the 1800s, nutcrackers were common decorations in German households, revered as symbols of good luck. While composing in France, Tchaikovsky discovered a new instrument, the *celesta*. He decided to feature its wonderful sound in his new ballet. Before the ballet premiered, a short concert of the musical suite was played in St. Petersburg. Every number was given an encore. Tchaikovsky knew the music was good, but he worried about the performance.

Tchaikovsky was right to worry. Critics did not like *The Nutcracker* when it premiered at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia, on December 18, 1892. One particularly harsh review read, "*The Nutcracker* cannot in any event be called a ballet." For decades, only the first half of the ballet, featuring the battle between the soldiers and the rat king, was performed. But in 1944, the San Francisco Ballet, led by William Christensen, staged the entire ballet, and it became an instant holiday hit. Nutcrackers suddenly became cherished holiday decorations. By the 1960s, dance companies all across America were performing *The Nutcracker* as an annual December tradition. For many children, *The Nutcracker* remains their first and best exposure to ballet and classical music.

## Celebrating December

**Universal Human Rights Month**

**Bingo's Birthday Month**

**Cookie Cutter Week**  
*December 1–7*

**Hanukkah**  
*December 10–18*

**Gingerbread House Day**  
*December 12*

**Christmas Bird Count**  
*December 14–January 5*

**Free Shipping Day**  
*December 17*

**Christmas**  
*December 25*

**Kwanzaa**  
*December 26–January 1*

**New Year's Eve**  
*December 31*



## Are You Game?

Games Day was created partly out of desperation in 1975 when an annual gaming convention scheduled for August was canceled. Games Workshop, a British-based manufacturer of miniature tabletop wargames, decided to sponsor their own Games Day to fill the void. On December 20, 1975, the first Games Day was held in Seymour Hall, London, as an opportunity for game enthusiasts to meet each other and play. Furthermore, it was a chance for Games Workshop to advertise their games and promote gaming communities throughout England. Today, the UK Games Expo is an annual event held in Birmingham, but for many, Games Day remains a perfect time to play their favorite games, be they board games, card games, video games, or strategy games.



Health experts have repeatedly demonstrated that habits matter when it comes to brain health. Adding a game night to your lifestyle is a fun way to increase mental stimulation and improve mental acuity. There are many computer games or puzzle websites that promote mental acuity, but many of these are designed to be played alone. Tabletop games not only challenge your mind but they promote social bonds as well. December 20 falls so close to the holidays that perhaps visiting family members can be convinced to play. Not only is a new game a great holiday gift but games provide a wonderful and creative way to pass the time with relatives.

Game aficionados have seen a tabletop gaming renaissance during the past few years. While traditional board games like Monopoly, Clue, and Scrabble are fun, designers have been busy developing new card, tabletop, dice, and role-playing games for players of all ages. There are even game-design conferences where inventors showcase their games while attendees get to play them and offer feedback. What new games are out there? Log on to websites like boardgamegeek.com or boardgamequest.com to peruse the newest offerings.

## Sitting Down for Equal Rights

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks was commuting home after working a long day at a Montgomery, Alabama, department store. Segregation was written into law and Blacks were required to sit in the back of the bus, with seats in the front reserved for white riders. When a white man entered the bus and found no open seats, the bus driver asked four Black riders seated in the first row of the “colored” section to stand. Three complied, but Parks did not. This was not because she was tired from working all day. In her own words, she “was tired of giving in.”

Parks was arrested and later released on bail, but not before word of her arrest reached civil rights activist E.D. Nixon. Nixon quickly organized a boycott of the Montgomery buses and enlisted the support of Martin Luther King Jr. Despite threats and bombings of both Nixon and King’s homes, the boycott continued. Nearly a year later, the Supreme Court ruled Montgomery’s bus segregation unconstitutional. Parks’ story has remained an inspiration for generations of civil rights activists seeking equality, justice, and equal protection under the law.

## A Pearl of Wisdom



December 15 is Wear Your Pearls Day, a day to wear the pearl jewelry that’s been hiding out in your jewelry box. It is also a day to appreciate nature’s design. A pearl is created when an irritant, often a parasite (not a grain of sand as commonly thought), invades an oyster, mussel, or clam. To defend itself against the foreign invader, the oyster secretes a fluid called *nacre* that envelops the irritant. Layer upon layer of nacre coats the irritant until a pearl is formed. Nacre is more commonly known as mother-of-pearl. It is incredibly strong and beautifully iridescent. For this reason, Wear Your Pearls day is also a day to recognize the hidden beauty and strength that comes with life’s small imperfections.

## Strange Christmas Traditions

Christmas brings with it many beloved traditions: trimming the tree, hanging stockings, and singing carols. Many countries around the world enjoy traditions you may be less familiar with.



In Japan, an estimated 3.6 million families eat Kentucky Fried Chicken during the Christmas season. This is largely thanks to Takeshi Okawara, who managed the first KFC franchises in Japan. In 1970, Okawara marketed the Christmas “party barrel,” a complete fried chicken dinner replicating American turkey dinners. There were so few existing Christmas traditions in Japan that KFC filled the void. These days, if you do not pre-order your KFC dinner weeks in advance, you will have to stand in line for hours to get your “Kentucky Christmas.”

If you happen to be in Norway for Christmas, you’ll be hard-pressed to find a broom, for they are all hidden away. Norwegian folklore tells of how evil spirits and witches emerge on Christmas Eve. Norwegians hide their brooms so that witches cannot steal them for riding.

In Caracas, Venezuela, Christmas morning brings presents and roller skates. Authorities close down the city streets on Christmas morning so that thousands of residents can roller-skate to church in safety. One tradition tells of how children go to sleep with one end of a skate lace tied around their toe and the other end dangling out the window. In the morning they are awakened by skaters tugging at the lace to alert them that it is time for mass.

In Ukraine, trees are not decorated with tinsel and ornaments but with faux spider webs. A common folktale tells the story of a poor woman who could not afford tree decorations. When she awoke on Christmas morning, she found her tree glistening with spider webs, courtesy of the spiders in her house who took pity on her.

These traditions may seem strange to you, but does your family have any Christmas traditions that others may find nontraditional?

## The Tale of Beatrix Potter

On December 16, 1901, 35-year-old Beatrix Potter was so fed up with receiving rejection letters that she decided to publish her book *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* on her own. The book had begun as a letter to the sick son of Potter’s former governess. Potter had written and illustrated a letter in 1893 detailing the silly adventures of a family of rabbits, Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail, Peter, and their mother. The rabbits of the story were modeled after Potter’s own pet rabbits, Peter Piper and Benjamin Bouncer. Potter later asked for the letter back, so that she could turn it into a children’s book.

Potter first printed 250 black-and-white copies of her book. In 1902, it was picked up by the publisher Frederick Warne & Co. and reprinted in color. The book was such a success that it had to be reprinted six times in its first year, selling 20,000 copies. Ever the self-starter, when Potter and Warne disagreed over her next book, *The Tailor of Gloucester*, she again published 500 copies on her own.

## The Bermuda Triangle



On December 5, 1945, five bombers, collectively known as Flight 19, piloted by experienced veterans, took off from a naval air station in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, on a routine training flight over the Atlantic. But then something strange happened. The flight’s leader, Lieutenant Charles Taylor, suddenly believed that his compass was malfunctioning. Soon, all the pilots were disoriented and lost. Some believed they were flying out over the open ocean, while others believed they were heading into the Gulf of Mexico. Then the planes vanished. This disappearance is perhaps the most dramatic of those involving the infamous Bermuda Triangle. Scientists today insist that the pilots made several mistakes under poor flying conditions, yet many still fear the Bermuda Triangle as an inexplicable place of menace and mystery.