Activity 1: The history of Christmas

a. Read the introduction to Christmas taken from history.com.

‘Christmas is both a sacred religious holiday and a worldwide cultural and commercial phenomenon. For two millennia, people around the world have been observing it with traditions and practices that are both religious and secular in nature. Christians celebrate Christmas Day as the anniversary of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, a spiritual leader whose teachings form the basis of their religion. Popular customs include exchanging gifts, decorating Christmas trees, attending church, sharing meals with family and friends and, of course, waiting for Santa Claus to arrive. December 25 – Christmas Day – has been a federal holiday in the United States since 1870.’

Before we visit the site to find out more about the history of Christmas, what do you already know about its history? Discuss your ideas with a partner.

b. Now, work with a partner to discover more about the ancient origins of Christmas.

Both of you should visit the following weblink:
www.history.com/topics/christmas/history-of-christmas

Student A: Read the first section entitled ‘An ancient holiday’ and look for the answers to the following questions.

1. What did Europeans celebrate long before the birth of Jesus?
2. Why did people celebrate during the winter solstice?
3. Who celebrated Yule from 21 December in Scandinavia?
4. How did fathers and sons mark the return of the sun?
5. Up to how many days was it possible for the Yule feast to last?
6. What did the Norse believe that each spark of the fire represented?
7. Why was the end of December a good time for celebrating?
8. Why were German people terrified of the god Oden? How did they show their fear?

Once you have completed all the answers, tell your partner what you learnt.

Student B: Read the second section entitled ‘Saturnalia’ and look for the answers to the following questions.

1. Who was Saturnalia intended to honour?
2. How did Roman society change during Saturnalia?
3. In what century did the Church decide to make the birth of Christ a holiday?
4. What was the problem with choosing the date of Christ’s birth?
5. Why was 25 December chosen?
6. Why do some churches celebrate Christmas on 7 January?
7. What was the main disadvantage for church leaders of holding Christmas at the same time as other winter festivals?
8. In what way were Christmas celebrations during the Middle Ages similar to those of Roman times?

Once you have completed all the answers, tell your partner what you learnt.
Now, you and your partner should both read the third section entitled ‘An outlaw Christmas’. Look at the statements below and decide, with your partner, whether they are true or false. Write T for true and F for false.

1. Oliver Cromwell took control of England in 1645. [ ]
2. Cromwell and his Puritan forces encouraged the English people to celebrate Christmas. [ ]
3. When the monarchy was reintroduced and Charles I became king, Christmas was celebrated again in England. [ ]
4. As a result of the Puritan pilgrims coming to America in 1620, Christmas was not a holiday from 1659 to 1681. [ ]
5. In Boston, from 1659 to 1681, anyone exhibiting ‘Christmas spirit’ (= publicly celebrating Christmas) was fined five shillings. [ ]
6. Christmas wasn’t declared a federal holiday in the USA until 26 June, 1870. [ ]

Discussion

• In what ways is the modern way of celebrating Christmas different from how it was done in the past?
• What do you like most (and least) about Christmas nowadays?

Activity 2: Santa Claus

a. Read the introduction to Santa Claus taken from history.com.

‘The man we know as Santa Claus has a history all his own. Today, he is thought of mainly as the jolly man in red, but his story stretches all the way back to the third century. Find out more about the history of Santa Claus from his earliest origins to the shopping mall favorite of today.’

What do you already know about Santa’s history? Discuss your ideas with a partner.

b. Work in a group of four (students 1, 2, 3 and 4). Now, go to the weblink text www.history.com/topics/santa-claus and read the section that you are asked to look at below (depending on which student number you are).

Student 1: Read the first section entitled ‘The legend of St Nicholas’. Answer the following questions, then share the answers with your group.

1. When do people think that St Nicholas was born? In which modern-day country is his birthplace?
2. For what qualities was St Nicholas most admired?
3. Was St Nicholas born into a poor family?
4. Which two groups of people is he particularly associated with?
5. When is his feast day celebrated? What do people think it is lucky to do on that day?
6. Why was the way in which St Nicholas was regarded in Holland different from other saints?

Student 2: Read the second and third sections, entitled ‘Sinter Klaas comes to New York’ and ‘Shopping mall Santas’. Answer the following questions, then share the answers with your group.

1. How did St Nicolas first become popular in America?
2. Where did the name Santa Claus come from?
3. As Sinter Klaas’s popularity grew, did people agree about what he looked like?
4. What did the advertisements for shopping stores feature by the 1840s?
5. What happened in 1841?
6. In the early 1890s, what did the Salvation Army do to raise money?

Student 3: Read the fourth section entitled ‘Twas the night before Christmas’. Answer the following questions, then share the answers with your group.

1. What was the poem that became largely responsible for our modern image of Santa Claus? Why wasn’t its author sure that he wanted to publish it?
2. What, according to the now familiar image of Santa Claus, are his physical characteristics and special powers?
3. What cartoonist drew on Moore’s poem to create the first likeness of our modern-day image of Santa?
4. How did the cartoon depict Santa?
5. What new elements did Nast add to the image created by Moore’s poem?

Student 4: Read the fifth section entitled ‘A Santa by any other name’. What are the names of similar figures all over the world and what is special about each one? Complete the table, then share the answers with your group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>country</th>
<th>name of their ‘Santa figure’</th>
<th>special features of their celebration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tbody>
</table>
Webquest: Christmas

Discussion

• What do you call Santa in your country?
• If Santa is part of your culture, did you believe in Santa when you were young? Can you remember when you found out he wasn’t real?
• Find images of Santa on the internet. In what ways are they similar to – or different from – the familiar image of Santa Claus?

Activity 3: Christmas around the world!

Christmas is a global celebration. You have already seen how the legend of Santa Claus varies greatly from country to country. For the following task you will read about different traditions around the world celebrated at Christmas time.

a. Take a look at the following traditions. As you read them, try to guess which countries these traditions come from. (Some countries are used more than once!)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>El Salvador</th>
<th>Great Britain</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Estonia</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
<th>Armenia</th>
<th>Colombia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Twenty Christmas traditions from around the world**

1. During the Christmas meal, Christmas crackers containing toys, jokes and a paper hat are pulled.
   __________________

2. A white sponge cake covered with cream and decorated with strawberries is often consumed.
   __________________

3. Children put their shoes in the window in the hope that the three wise men will deliver them presents.
   __________________

4. Christmas carols are heard as early as 1 September.
   __________________

5. On 6 January, female puppets are burned on a pyre to symbolize the death of the old year and beginning of the new year.
   __________________

6. They celebrate the Cavalcade of Lights Festival.
   __________________

7. The Christmas tree usually stands centrally in the home, decorated with ornaments, tinsel and lights, with an angel or star at the top.
   __________________

8. People dress up in an ornamental hat named a Puritina and dance in a line.
   __________________

9. Potato salad with frankfurters and wiener sausages is a popular meal in some families.
   __________________

10. Children take presents of fruits, nuts and other sweets to older relatives.
    __________________

11. In many cities, and even in small rural towns, neighbourhoods get together and decorate their whole neighbourhood or street, turning streets into ‘tunnels of light’.
    __________________

12. Neighbourhoods get together for night festivals where children play with skateboards, rollerblades and bicycles.
    __________________

    __________________
b. Now, visit the following weblink en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_traditions and check your answers. Don’t try to read the whole article from top to bottom; instead, try to find the countries as quickly as you can.

Discussion
• What traditions above are similar to those in your country?
• What is your favourite tradition from the list?
• What is your favourite tradition from your country?
• If you celebrate Christmas, do you think your country is losing any of its Christmas traditions? If so, why?
• If you could start a Christmas tradition of your own, what would it be?

Activity 4: Interesting facts about Christmas

The following article facts.randomhistory.com/christmas-facts.html lists some interesting facts about Christmas.

Your teacher will give you a set of facts to read in this fun and surprising article. Make notes on your chosen facts to relate back to your group. You may need some help with vocabulary so ask your teacher!

Discussion
• Which fact did you find the most interesting/the funniest/the strangest?
• Do you know any other facts about Christmas to share with your classmates?

We hope you’ve enjoyed learning all about Christmas. Perhaps it will change the way you think about it this year. All that’s left to say is – have a very merry Christmas!