Webquest: Summer solstice

**Level:** Intermediate–upper intermediate  
**Target age:** Teenagers / Young adults  
**Time needed:** 60 minutes  
**Key skills:** Reading, writing, speaking  
**Materials:** One copy of the worksheet per student

In this webquest, students will investigate solstices: what causes them, how they were celebrated in ancient times and how they are celebrated today.

**Activity 1: Solstice science**

Students read the article ‘What are the solstices?’, then follow the web link. They find the answers to the questions and write them down. They could do this individually or in pairs. When students are finished, check their answers and confirm they understand the vocabulary.

**Key:**
1. because the Earth is tilted  
2. the longest day of the year and, officially, the first day of summer  
3. the shortest day of the year and, officially, the first day of winter  
4. a midpoint when day and night are both 12 hours long  
5. the North Pole begins to move away from the Sun; around 22 September  
6. the North Pole begins to lean towards the Sun again; around 21 March

**Activity 2: Summer solstice celebrations**

Ask students if they know of any summer solstice celebrations, either in their own country or internationally. Then split students into pairs or groups and assign each group one of the topics A to G, or let them choose one themselves.

If the group is small, or you have less time, you can limit it to the first few topics and set the remaining topics as a written homework task. The activity can also be done individually, but it is best done in groups to maximize opportunities for communication in English.

Students look at an online article and find the answers to the questions. They then use the answers to prepare a report. The reports can be oral or written but, if they are written, they should still be read out loud to the class.

**Key:**

**A. Significance of the summer solstice**

1. The snow had disappeared; the ground had thawed out; warm temperatures had returned; flowers were blooming; leaves had returned to the deciduous trees. Some herbs could be harvested, for medicinal and other uses. Food was easier to find. The crops had already been planted and would be harvested in the months to come.
2. the Honey Moon; Tradition holds that this is the best time to harvest honey from the bee hives.
3. People believed the God and Goddess joined together at this time, and they thought it was unlucky to compete with them.
4. Traditionally, newly married couples were fed honey during the first month after the wedding to ensure love and fertility.

**B. Midsummer celebrations in ancient times**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Society</th>
<th>Name of celebration</th>
<th>What or who did it celebrate?</th>
<th>How was it celebrated?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ancient China</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>the earth, the feminine and the yin forces</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient Gaul</td>
<td>Feast of Epona</td>
<td>a mare goddess who personified fertility, sovereignty and agriculture</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient Rome</td>
<td>Vestalia</td>
<td>Vesta, the Roman goddess of the hearth</td>
<td>Married women could enter the shrine of Vesta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient Sweden</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>rain for the crops</td>
<td>A tree was set up and decorated; villagers danced around the tree; women and girls bathed in the river.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
C. Modern pagan celebrations
1. solstice; the stopping or standing still of the sun
2. The Goddess took over the Earth from the horned God at the beginning of spring and she is now at the height of her power and fertility. For some pagans, the summer solstice marks the marriage of the God and Goddess.
3. that the power of the sun will start to decline once more towards winter
4. Stonehenge and Avebury

D. Celebrations at Stonehenge
1. a neolithic monument in Wiltshire
2. about 10,000
3. Yes, they can – see the photo. (People are not allowed to walk amongst the stones except during solstice celebrations.)
4. because the monument is aligned to the midsummer sunrise (It is believed to have been built as a temple to the Sun.)
5. thousands of years

E. Celebrations in Denmark
1. sankthans or sankthansaften (St John’s Eve)
2. on the evening of 23 June
3. Large bonfires are lit on the beach and the shores of waterways to ward off evil spirits.
4. The burning sends the ‘witch’ away to a mountain where a great witch gathering was thought to be held on that day.

F. Celebrations in Germany
1. fires
2. a. Lovers jump through fires to bring luck.; b. Herbs and flowers were believed to take on special healing powers.; Water was credited with healing powers on Midsummer’s Day, ‘the day of healing’; c. ‘Fire Magic on the Mountains’ takes place on Germany’s highest mountain. Hundreds of bonfires are laid out on the mountainside, each set of fires making a picture like a bear or an eagle.

G. Celebrations in California
1. wonder
2. over 100,000
3. The party continued at Alameda Park.
4. 1974
5. a T-shirt and poster design competition; to raise money for the event