



New Year's Eve Traditions Around the World

Why January 1?

New Year's Eve is December 31 and New Year's Day is January 1. The calendar as we know it is a fact of life. But let's take a step back. Why exactly is January 1st the first day of the year?

This tradition of starting the new year, and the new calendar, on January 1st dates back to 46 B.C. The Romans had traditionally followed the lunar calendar, where the year started in March. Julius Caesar cast off the lunar calendar in favor of the Julian calendar and decided the year would begin in January.

January is named for Janus, the Roman god of beginnings, who had two faces that allowed him to look into the past and into the future at the same time — a symbolic start for a new year!

New York City (and the U.S.)

Millions of people across the United States every year watch the Ball Drop in Times Square, whether in-person or on television. How did this tradition start?

The first drop was on Dec. 31, 1904, from the rooftop of One Times Square, spearheaded by The New York Times to celebrate their brand new headquarters in... you guessed it, Times Square! (It used to be called Longacre Square. Doesn't have the same ring, right?) Sailors used to reference "time balls" to adjust their timepieces — they'd look to harbors to drop the ball at specific times. The Times decided to reimagine that concept for a city-wide end-of-the-year party.

The first New Year's Eve Ball was 5 feet in diameter and weighed 700 pounds, decorated with 100 lightbulbs. The tradition really took off and has become quite the spectacle! The current ball, introduced in 2008, is 12 feet in diameter and weighs a whopping 11,874 pounds. Every year, there's a brand new pattern displayed on the ball.

Scotland

Scottish poet Robert Burns' poem, "Auld Lang Syne," has become the anthem of new year celebrations in many countries around the world. The phrase "auld lang syne" literally translates to "old long since," but the meaning is more like "the olden days." Many of its lines seem inscrutable to us: While this poem-turned-song is beloved in the English-speaking world, it's actually written in 18th century Scots language.

New Year's is the apex of the holiday season in Scotland, and this song is a point of national pride. The song is about meeting up with old friends you haven't seen in a while and reminiscing over a drink together. Its sentimentality has made it a favorite for all those coming together with loved ones to reminisce about the year past and look forward to the year to come.

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Brazil

Looking for a New Year's Eve outfit? The Brazilians would encourage you to wear white! The color symbolizes peace and good fortune for the year ahead. The beach is also of great symbolism and importance to their New Year's traditions: Wearing white and tossing flowers into the ocean will bring good fortune, as well as jumping over seven waves and making a wish for each wave you jump over!

Denmark

Waking up on New Year's Day to a pile of broken dishes on your front doorstep may seem like a party gone sideways, but it's actually a sign of good luck in Denmark. It is a Danish tradition to break dishware on the front steps of your friends and family, and the bigger your pile of broken dishes, the greater the luck you will have in the coming year.

Romania

In Romanian mythologies, bears are sacred beings and deeply meaningful, having the power to heal and protect people. To mark the new year and bring good fortune and protection to their loved ones, Romanians perform bear dances to ward off evil spirits.

South Africa

Missed spring cleaning? South African traditions make up for that aplenty. Folks in South Africa throw out old furniture on the first of the year to rid themselves of baggage that will no longer serve them moving forward.

Spain

Looking for a snack after all that New Year's partying? The Spanish have a tradition for you. Exactly at the stroke of midnight, they eat 12 grapes at each of midnight's 12 o'clock chimes while actively thinking of the year to come. This symbolizes the 12 months of the year ahead. But this tradition comes with a tight deadline. If you don't finish your grapes by the 12th chime...good luck!

Guiding Questions

We love to explore how people across the world celebrate the new year with traditions unique to their countries and cultures.

- What do all these traditions have in common?
- What traditions do you have in your family to celebrate the New Year? What about in your motherland? In the countries you have visited?

Learning Behind the Play

- Comparing and contrasting traditions helps little ones learn to make narrative connections and explore similarities and dissimilarities.
- Learning about different cultural customs builds understanding and helps develop empathy.

Take It Further

- Make and color a map of different countries and write a new year tradition on the map related to each country.
- Suggest a new tradition for your family.