

# Ireland

Christmas celebrations in Ireland begin on Christmas Eve and culminate on the feast of the Epiphany (Little Christmas) on January 6th.

Many people place a natural holly wreath on their front doors. Lighted candles are placed in windows on Christmas Eve, as a guide for the Holy Family or any poor traveler to find their way. The candles are usually red in color, and decorated with sprigs of holly.



The insides of homes are decorated with natural material such as natural Christmas trees (usually a Noble fir), holly, pine cones, ivy and glass, wooden or plastic ornaments. Most homes will display a nativity scene, placing baby Jesus in the manger on Christmas morning. Nativities are also erected in churches, town centers and shopping malls.



Most homes have fireplaces with mantelpieces and these are often decorated with holly and ornaments. It is common to hang mistletoe in a doorway.

Children often put out Christmas sacks instead of stockings. It is tradition to leave mince pies and a bottle of Guinness out as a snack for “**Daidí na Nollag**” (Father Christmas). Gifts usually include an apple, orange or tangerine, and chocolate coins.

Christmas dinner is usually eaten in the mid-afternoon or early evening. The beginning of the meal will start with smoked salmon or prawns, soup or melon. This is followed by the main course of roast goose (or turkey) and ham, accompanied by bread stuffing, roast potatoes, mashed potatoes, gravy and sometimes cranberry or bread sauce. The traditional vegetable is brussel sprouts, but celery, carrots, peas, broccoli and others may also be served. Desserts would follow the meal with **Christmas pudding** with brandy butter or sherry sauce, sherry trifle, **mince pies** or a slice of rich and fruity **Christmas cake**. Irish women bake a **seed cake** for each person in the house.



They also make three puddings, one for each day of the Epiphany such as Christmas, New Year's Day and the Twelfth Night. After the Christmas evening meal, bread and milk are left out and the door unlatched as a symbol of hospitality.

One old custom that many continue to observe is the placing of a candle in the window on Christmas Eve, a symbol to welcome strangers and to remember those who are far away from home.

One long standing tradition in Sandycove, a suburb of South Dublin, is the Christmas Day Swim in the Irish Sea. Quite a crowd of less brave people - wrapped up in coats, hats and scarves - gather to watch the blue swimmers emerge from the water.

**St Stephen's Day**, the day after Christmas, is the day when the Wren Boys come out, mostly in the South of Ireland but also in certain localities elsewhere. The Wren Boys', dress in straw suits or other costumes (not unlike Halloween costumes) and go from door to door, beating drums and playing whistles, and repeating the rhyme below while asking for "a penny for the wren".



The **Feast of the Epiphany** is celebrated on January 6<sup>th</sup> and marks the official end of the Christmas season. It goes by many names in Ireland: **Little Christmas**, **Women's Christmas** or **Nollaig na mBan**. Traditionally the men of the house take over for the day, preparing meals and allowing the women to have a rest. It is also the day when the tree and all the Christmas decorations are taken down and put into storage for another year. It is considered unlucky to take the decorations down prior to this.

**"Nollaig Shona Dhuit"** is "Merry Christmas" in Irish Gaelic.

**Resources:**

Australian Media Pty Santa's Net. "Christmas in Ireland".. <http://www.santas.net/irishchristmas.htm>

Nolan, Katherine. DoChara, Your Irish Friend. "Christmas in Ireland".. <http://www.dochara.com/>

Williamson, Hillary. Kaboose. "Christmas in Ireland". 2008. <http://holidays.kaboose.com/christmas/traditions/ireland/xmas-around-ireland.html>

Why Christmas. "Christmas in Ireland". <http://whychristmas.com/cultures/ireland.shtml>