

# Italy

The Christmas season in Italy lasts for three weeks, starting 8 days before Christmas known as the **Novena**. During this period, children go from house to house dressed as shepherds, playing pipes, singing and reciting Christmas poems. They are given money to buy presents. In some parts shepherds bring musical instruments into the villages, play and sing Christmas songs.



The popularity of the Nativity scene, one of the most beloved and enduring symbols of the holiday season, originated in Italy. In 1222, St. Francis of Assisi asked a man named Giovanni Vellita of the village of Greccio to create a manger scene. St. Francis performed mass in front of this early Nativity scene, which inspired awe and devotion in all who saw it. The creation of the figures or **pastori** became an entire genre of folk art.

The city of Naples, Italy is world famous for its nativity cribs and crib making. These are known as “**Presepe Napoletano**” (meaning Neapolitan Cribs). The first crib

scene in Naples is thought to go back to 1025 and was in the Church of S. Maria del presepe (Saint Mary of the Crib), before St. Francis of Assisi had made cribs very popular!

Having nativity cribs in your own home became popular in the 16th century and it's still popular today (before that only churches and monasteries had cribs). Nativity cribs are traditionally put out on the 8th

December. But the figure of the baby Jesus isn't put into the crib until the evening/night of December 24th!



In Rome, cannon are fired from Castel St. Angelo of Christmas Eve to announce the beginning of the holiday season. A 24-hour fast ends with an elaborate Christmas feast which includes a traditional dish of eel along with a light and fruity Milanese cake called **panettone**, as well as chocolates. Each child draws

one small gift from the **Urn of Fate**. By twilight, candles are lighted around the family nativity, the Presepio, prayers are said, and children recite poems.

At noon, on Christmas Day, the **pope** gives his blessing to crowds gathered in the huge Vatican square. People come from all over the world to see the pope and participate in Christmas Mass.



Christmas lunch is **Tortellini in Brodo** which is filled pasta parcels in broth, also served is **cappone** which is boiled or roasted capon.



In Italy, the children hang their stockings at the fireplace the night before **Epiphany**, January 6, for their presents. According to tradition, the presents are delivered by a kind ugly witch called **La Befana** (which means Epiphany) on a broomstick. It is a legend that said she was told by the three kings that the baby Jesus was born; she was busy and delayed visiting the baby. She missed the Star and lost her way. She has been flying around ever since, leaving presents at every house with children in case He is there. She slides down chimneys, and fills stockings and shoes with good things for good children and it is said leaves coal for children who are not so good. She is depicted in various ways: as a fairy queen, a crone, or a witch.

In Italian, you would say “**Buone Feste Natalizie**” for “Merry Christmas.”

**Resources:**

Australian Media. Santa’s Net. “Christmas in Italy”. <http://www.santas.net/italianchristmas.htm>

The North Pole. Christmas Around the World. “Christmas in Italy”.. <http://www.the-north-pole.com/around/italy.html>

Why Christmas? “Christmas inItaly”. <http://whychristmas.com/cultures/italy.shtml>