

# Japan

Christmas was introduced in Japan by the Christian missionaries. Christmas is known as more of a time to spread happiness rather than as a religious celebration. Christmas Eve is often celebrated more than Christmas Day. On Christmas Eve couples spend time together and exchange presents. In many ways it resembles Valentines Day celebrations in the USA.



Christmas decorations in Japan consist of trees hung with tinsel and lights, and decorated with small toys, dolls, paper ornaments, gold paper fans and lanterns, wind chimes and small candles. One of the most popular ornaments is the **origami swan**.

A Buddhist monk named **Hotei-oshō** brings children gifts much like Santa. He is thought to be an old man who carries a huge sack. He brings presents to each house and leaves them for the children. Japanese children also recognize the familiar sight of Santa and call him "**Santa Kurohsu**."



Parties are often held for the children, with games and dancing. Japanese **Christmas Cake** is a sponge cake decorated with trees,



flowers and a figure of Santa Claus. Fried chicken is often the traditional meal of Christmas day. It is the busiest time of year for restaurants because people place orders at their local fast food restaurants in advance!

Although Christmas cards exist in Japan, most people send traditional New Year's postcards called **Nengajyo**. Some people send hundreds of them.

**O Shogatsu** (the Japanese New Year) is the period when families get together, have a special meal, pray and send greetings cards. New Year is celebrated over five days from December 31st until January 4th.



Days before the New Year families put up decorations, especially **Kadomatsu** which are made from bamboo, pine branches and strips of white folded paper. On New Year's Eve the houses are cleaned thoroughly from top to bottom, and are decorated. Just before midnight, people watch **temple ceremonies** on TV to view a huge gong struck 108 times to wipe away the 108 sins of the past year.

On New Year's Day, everything has been made clean and neat and people dress themselves in their finest clothes. Then the father of the household marches through the house, followed by the family, and drives the evil spirits out. He throws dried beans into every corner bidding the evil spirits withdraw and good luck

enter. Then everybody gets busy preparing New Year's food. A typical New Year food is **Mochi**. These are small balls which are eaten with different kinds of sweet or salty sauces and toppings.



After New Year's breakfast, people get dressed up in their kimonos to go to the shrine or to the temple to pray for good luck and good health in the New Year. This is the first temple visit of the year and is very important. After praying, people visit the temple market. All around the temple grounds, there are booths and little shops set up where you can buy traditional foods, cotton candy, balloons, toys and temple souvenirs.



**Daruma** can also be purchased at the temple market. These are papier-mache figures that come in many sizes and that have two big white eye spots. Daruma are used for making New Year's resolutions. With a magic marker, the buyer blackens in one of the eyes while making a resolution. If, during the year, they accomplish their wish, they can blacken the other eye to show they succeeded. At the end of the year, people return used darumas to the temple for a special burning and buy new ones.

Probably the most important holiday tradition for Japanese children is **O-toshidama**. These are little envelopes containing money that children get from their parents and other relatives. Children are expected to be good all year in order to get O-toshidama. In Japanese "Happy/Merry Christmas" is "**Meri Kurisumasu.**"

#### Resources:

Australia Media Pty. Santa's Net. "Christmas in Japan". <http://www.santas.net/japanesechristmas.htm>

Casey, Sarah Marie. Why Christmas? "Christmas in Japan". <http://whychristmas.com/cultures/japan.shtml>

Iskounen, Achur. ZuZu. "Christmas in Japan". <http://www.zuzu.org/japan.html>

The-North-Pole. Christmas Around the World. "Christmas in Japan". <http://www.the-north-pole.com/around/japan.html>