

Greece



In Greece, **St. Nicholas** is the patron saint of sailors. According to Greek tradition, his clothes are drenched with brine, his beard drips with seawater, and his face is covered with perspiration because he has been working hard against the waves to reach sinking ships and rescue them from the angry sea. Greek ships never leave port without some sort of St. Nicholas icon on board.

On Christmas Eve, children, especially boys, (while beating drums and musical triangles) go out to sing Christmas carols. They go from house to house and are given dried figs, almonds, walnuts and lots of sweets or sometimes small gifts.

On Christmas Eve, groups of people gather around the holiday table. After 40 days of fasting, the Christmas feast is looked forward to with great

anticipation. On almost every table are cooked pig and loaves of **Christopsomo** or "**Christ Bread**". This bread is made in large sweet loaves of various shapes and the crusts are engraved and decorated in some way that reflects the family's profession. Figs, dried on rooftops are served with the spicy golden Christopsomo bread. As people arrive, they greet one another by saying **Hronia polla** or many happy years. The table filled with food may include such dishes as **kourambiethes**, a Greek nut cookie.



Christmas trees are not commonly used in Greece. In almost every home the main symbol of the season is a shallow wooden bowl with a piece of wire is suspended across the rim. From that hangs a sprig of basil wrapped around a wooden cross. A small amount of water is kept in the bowl to keep the basil alive and fresh. Once a day, a family member, usually the mother, dips the cross and basil into some holy water and uses it to sprinkle water in each room of the house. This ritual is believed to keep the **Killantzaro** (mischievous goblins) away from the house

during the 12 days of Christmas. Priests sometimes go from house to house sprinkling holy water around to get rid of the bad spirits who may be hiding in people's houses.

On Christmas day, very few presents are given to each other. Instead, small gifts are given to hospitals and orphanages. In most Greek homes an evergreen tree is decorated with tinsel and a star placed on top. Gifts are exchanged either on January 1st (**St Basil's Day**) or on January 6th (**Epiphany**), when **Agios Vasilis** (the Greek name for Santa) comes, often arriving on a boat.

In Greek, "**Kala Christougenna**" means "Merry or Happy Christmas."

Resources:

Australian Media. Santa's Net. "Christmas in Greece". <http://www.santas.net/greekchristmas.htm>

Cooper, James. Why Christmas? "Christmas in Greece". <http://whychristmas.com/cultures/greece.shtml>

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