

From Darkness Into Light: The Winter Solstice Across Cultures

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Dec. 21 will mark the shortest day and longest night of 2021 for the Northern hemisphere. On the winter solstice, the Earth's axis is tilted as far away from the sun as possible, resulting in [9 hours and 45 minutes of daylight](#) in Oklahoma. Throughout history, people across the world have marked the shortest day of the year with celebrations, ceremony, and physical monuments.

Winter solstice celebrations have been documented throughout history. The ancient Romans celebrated Saturnalia, a festival honoring their agricultural god Saturn, in mid- December by decorating their homes with wreaths, exchanging presents and feasting. Scandinavians and other Germanic cultures celebrated the solstice with a 12-day festival known as Yule. To hasten the return of the sun, people would burn a large log, known as a Yule log, and feast until it had burned out. The sparks from the Yule log fire were believed to represent calves and piglets that would be born in the new year.

In Mesopotamia, people celebrated Zagmuk, a 12-day new year's feast. On the solstice, their chief god, Marduk, was slain by the goddess of the sea and later resurrected on the first day of spring. Mesopotamians recreated this epic during the Zagmuk festivities by anointing a criminal king for 12 days, then executing him at the end of the festivities.

Many winter solstice celebrations continue across the world. In Japan, people light huge bonfires on Dec. 22 to encourage the sun to return, and eat kobocha squash, also known as Japanese pumpkin, for good luck. The Japanese also enjoy bathing in hot springs full of the citrus fruit yuzu on the solstice. Yuzu is thought to bring good health and prevent colds. It's popular to go see [capybaras taking yuzu baths](#) at local zoos as well.

In modern Scandinavia, Yule traditions have been incorporated into St. Lucia celebrations. A St. Lucia designee is elected, and she leads a procession through town, followed by girls dressed in white wearing lighted wreaths on their heads and singing traditional songs. This festival of lights is meant to bring hope to the townspeople in the darkest time of the year.

Dong Zhi “winter arrives” is the Chinese celebration of the solstice that welcomes the return of the sun and wishes for positive energy for the new year. Families come together to celebrate with tang yuan, colorful glutinous rice balls or meat-filled dumplings.

In Iran, Shab-e Yalda, or “Yalda Night,” people gather to light fires, protect each other from evil and perform charitable acts. This celebration ties back to the ancient Persian sun god Mithra’s triumph over the darkness.

Ancient and modern ceremonies commemorate the solstice in various ways. The Inca honored their sun god, Inti, on the solstice (which occurs in June in Peru) by fasting for 3 days before then offering golden cups of beer to the rising sun. This ceremony was followed by animal sacrifices and a bonfire sparked by using a mirror to focus the sun’s rays.

The Spanish colonizers banned the Inti Raymi celebration in the 16th century, but it continues after being revived in the 20th century with mock sacrifices.

The Hopi people of Arizona celebrate Soyal. The sun chief announces the setting of the sun on the winter solstice, kicking off an all-night ceremony of lighting fires, dancing, and gift giving. The Zuni of New Mexico consider the solstice the beginning of the new year and perform a ceremonial dance known as Shakalo that includes the use of [Kachina](#). These dances persist today but have been closed to the general public since 1990.

Finally, in Vancouver, Canada's Secret Lantern Society hosts a lantern festival on the solstice that includes workshops to build lanterns, processions throughout the city, a light maze and fire performances.

Monuments both ancient and modern continue to record the solstice. Humans have used monuments for this purpose since the Neolithic period. Newgrange in Ireland is aligned to the sunrise on the winter solstice. In contrast, Stonehenge in southern England is aligned to the sunset on the shortest day of the year. The ancient Mississippian cultures of North America built mounds that align with the sunset on the winter solstice.

One such mound can be found in Spiro, Oklahoma, and it is the only prehistoric American Indian archaeological site open to the public in the state.

The Spiro Mounds Archeological Center gives walking tours of the mound starting at 2 p.m. and ending at sunset, allowing visitors to witness the alignment.

Aotearoa Stonehenge in New Zealand is a modern interpretation of the ancient site in the UK. It was completed in 2005 and aligned to the solstices and equinoxes. The "Sun Tunnels" in Utah were completed in 1976 and consists of four concrete cylinders arranged in an open cross design and aligned to display the sun on the horizon during the summer and winter solstices.

The long hours of darkness will soon give way to increased sunlight and eventually spring-no human sacrifices, Yule logs or Neolithic monuments- required. No matter which holidays you and your loved ones celebrate this month, take time this Tuesday, Dec. 21 to appreciate the beginning of winter, just as people have throughout history and across cultures.