

Holidays & festivals



Czech Republic

New Year's Day 1 January.

This day also **marks the beginning** of the independent Czech Republic. The Czech Republic came into existence on 1 January 1993 after the separation of Czechoslovakia into two countries – the Czech and Slovak Republics - on 31 December 1992.

Reality: It's the day after the New Year celebration so most Czechs try to recover from their **hangover**. Those Christians who are **sober** attend **mass** to give thanks for the previous year.

Easter

Easter Sunday and Easter Monday (dates vary every year)

Easter is the most important **Christian holiday**, celebrating the **resurrection** of Jesus Christ. Jesus was **crucified** on the cross on Good Friday and came back to life on Easter Sunday. In the Czech Republic Easter is a mixture of Christian and **pagan** traditions. On the morning of Easter Monday, boys and men whip girls and women on their bottoms with a **pleated willow stick** decorated with colourful **ribbons** to make sure they stay healthy for the rest of the year. As a reward girls and women give them hand-painted or chocolate eggs. The egg symbolises fertility and new life. Some families buy or bake a **lamb cake**.

Reality: Children get a lot of sweets and adult men are often offered a shot of alcohol.

May Day, International Workers' Day/

Labour Day 1 May.

Labour Day is celebrated to remember a **strike** by American workers in Chicago that took place on 1 May 1886. The strikers were demanding an 8-hour working day. It is celebrated in many countries as *International Workers' Day* or *Labour Day*. In Czechoslovakia before **the Velvet Revolution** this day was 'joyfully' celebrated by all workers. It was mandatory to participate in the **parade** under the communist regime.

Reality: Nowadays it is a public holiday. May has become a day of love when lovers kiss under a **cherry blossom** or, if in Prague, go and pay tribute to K. H. Mácha, the poet of those in love.

Liberation Day 8 May.

This day celebrates the end of the *Second World War* (WWII) in Europe. Soviet **troops** captured Berlin, which led to Germany's **unconditional surrender** on 8 May 1945. In some parts of the world, however, WWII continued. The US army was still fighting with Japan. Prague was **liberated** in the morning on 8 May 1945 by the Soviet Army.

Reality: Ceremonial acts take place; the Czech president, political representatives and WWII veterans commemorate the end of the war by placing flower **wreaths** at memorials of the victims of WWII.

Saints Cyril and Methodius Day 5 July

This is a public holiday to remember Cyril (Constantine) and Methodius, two **Byzantine** Greek brothers who came to **Great Moravia** in 863 to spread Christianity. They influenced the cultural life and development of **Slavs** because they used the old **Slavic language** during masses and created the **Glagolitic alphabet**.

Reality: Religious celebrations take place, as well as masses and **processions** remembering the two brothers that brought Christianity to Central Europe.

Jan Hus Day 6 July

This public holiday celebrates the religious reformer Jan Hus was **burned at the stake** in Kostnice on 6 July in 1415. Jan Hus was a **priest** and **reformer** who accused Catholic representatives of **unholy behaviour**. Eventually, he was sentenced to **death by burning** for spreading his revolutionary criticism.

St. Wenceslas Day (the Day of Czech Statehood)

28 September

On this public holiday we celebrate the main patron of the Czech Republic. Wenceslas was one of the early **Premyslid dukes of Bohemia**. He was born in 907, the son of Bořivoj I and Drahomíra. In 921 Wenceslas became the duke of Bohemia and ruled until his death on 28 September, 935 when he was murdered by his younger brother Boleslav I. He is the first Czech ruler to **suffer a martyr's death** and many legends were created afterwards.

Independent Czechoslovak State Day 28 October

On this day the Czechoslovak state **declared independence** at the end of the *First World War* (WWI) in 1918. Until that time the Czech and Slovak countries had been part of the **Austro-Hungarian Empire**. The first president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, worked from exile on the formation and later the **recognition** of Czechoslovakia as an independent state.

Reality: On this day the president of the republic gives honours to people who did special **deeds**.

Fight for Freedom and Democracy Day

17 November

Important **milestones** from our history. In 1939, the **Nazis invaded** Czechoslovakia and proclaimed it the **Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia**. Czech students demonstrated against the occupation and the demonstration was brutally **suppressed**. In reaction, Czech universities were closed by the Nazis on 17 November. In 1989 the **Velvet Revolution** started as a student demonstration against the communist regime. This day commemorates the struggle and fight for freedom.

Christmas 24 December

Christmas officially starts with **Advent**, which is the period beginning four Sundays before Christmas. Czechs either buy or make their own **advent wreath with four candles** and light one candle every Sunday. Czech children have chocolate advent calendars. **St. Nicholas Eve** is on 5 December. Groups disguised as St. Nicolas, angels and devils go to children's houses and if a child has been good all year, they get sweets, and if not, **coal**. Czech Christmas is celebrated on the evening of 24 December. Czech people have bread on their table and Christmas cookies. Those who **fast** before Christmas dinner might see a **golden pig**. Most Czechs have breaded and fried carp, potato salad and pea or fish soup for Christmas dinner. After dinner they patiently wait for the 'baby Jesus' to bring them presents. Most people keep their Christmas tree and decorations up until 6 January, which is the **Day of Three Kings**: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar.

The UK

St. Valentine's Day 14 February

A day celebrating love. People exchange Valentine cards, chocolates or other gifts with their partners. Originally, this day commemorated the Roman priest Valentine who provided aid and comfort to the **persecuted** Christians before he was put to death.

St. David's Day 1 March

the patron saint of Wales

St. Patrick's Day 17 March

the patron saint of Ireland

This is a public holiday in Ireland. A **shamrock** is the symbol of Ireland and is used in decorations on the day alongside green colour. People in the US also like to celebrate this day by throwing parties and drinking.

All Fools' Day 1 April

This day is named after the **custom** of playing practical jokes and tricks on people and then you can shout 'April Fool!'.

St. George's Day 23 April

the patron saint of England

May Day 1 May

Political parties of the left hold processions and public meetings.

Easter

Easter marks the end of **Lent**, traditionally the period of **fasting**. Easter celebrations take place on Easter Sunday in the UK. Easter eggs, dyed, decorated or made of **confectionery**, symbolising new life, are usually hidden in a garden, by the **Easter Bunny** of course, and children have to find them. This is called the **Easter egg hunt**. People eat **hot cross buns**, which are spiced sweet buns often made with fruit and marked with a cross on the top, and have a **roast** (e.g. vegetables, potatoes, Yorkshire pudding, gravy and meat). Many Scottish families participate in an **egg rolling contest**. After they're boiled and painted, the decorated eggs are taken to a hill where they are rolled down.

The Queen's Official Birthday

The Saturday after 9 June

Although the Queen's birthday is in April, the birthdays of UK monarchs have been celebrated in June since 1748 (as King George II's birthday fell in late autumn and the weather wasn't suitable for a large, public celebration). There are various ceremonies associated with the day, such as the ceremony of **Trooping the Colour**, which is a ceremonial mounting of the guard in the presence of the sovereign at the **Horse Guards Parade** in London.

Halloween 31 October

Children celebrate Halloween by dressing up in costumes with masks over their faces. Carrying baskets or bags they go to their friends' and neighbours' houses and knock on the door or ring the bell. When people answer the door, children say "Trick or treat". People usually give children sweets or money. In Scotland, children don't go trick-or-treating but **guising**. A favourite custom is to make a **jack-o'-lantern** from a **pumpkin** which is carved out and in which eyes, a nose and a mouth are cut and then a candle is lit inside.

Guy Fawkes Day 5 November

The anniversary of the **Gunpowder plot** in 1605 is celebrated with **bonfires**, **fireworks** and the burning of guys – effigies of Guy Fawkes, an English conspirator who, with other Catholics, attempted to **blow up** James I and the Parliament. The plan was revealed and the conspirator **executed**.

Remembrance Day 11 November

There's a ceremony at the **Cenotaph** in Whitehall, London, in which a two-minute silence **honours** those killed in the two world wars. Artificial **poppies** are sold and worn around this day to remember those who have given their lives **in battle**. The reason for this is because they are the flowers which grew on the **battlefields** after WWI ended. By buying a poppy from a charity, people support veterans and members of the **British Armed Forces**, their families and dependants

St. Andrew's Day 30 November

the patron saint of Scotland

Christmas 25 December

Before children go to bed on Christmas Eve (24th), they **hang up** Christmas **stockings** at the end of their beds or on the **fireplace** and believe that **Father Christmas** rides through the air on a **sledge** drawn by **reindeer** and comes down the **chimney** and fills up the stockings with presents. Larger presents are found at the foot of their beds or under the Christmas tree, which is decorated with **fairy lights** and **ornaments**. People make **mince pies** and a **Christmas cake** in the run up to Christmas. The next day is called **Christmas Day**. In the morning children **unwrap** their presents and at midday **Christmas dinner** is served. Many families have **roast turkey with chestnut stuffing and roast potatoes and vegetables**. On Christmas Day the monarch addresses the nation on the radio and TV.

Boxing Day 26 December

This public holiday is called after the custom in earlier times of giving those who deliver the post, milk, newspaper or collect rubbish small sums of money. Today some people **give money to charity**. Lots of people go visiting their friends and family on this day.

New Year's Eve and Hogmanay 31 December

On New Year's Eve, people stay up until **midnight** to **see the old year out** and **drink a toast** to the new year. In big cities, people gather at squares and celebrate the coming of the new year with drinking, singing and dancing. There are fireworks too. In Scotland, people call this day Hogmanay. At midnight people cross arms and link hands for a traditional song **Auld Lang Syne**. **First footing** is a common custom in Scotland. It's considered lucky if a dark-haired man is the first to set foot in the house after midnight on New Year's Eve, bringing a coin, a piece of bread and coal as a symbol of plenty in the coming year.

The US

Martin Luther Kings Jr. Day

the third Monday in January.

On this day, people commemorate the life and achievements of **Martin Luther King Jr.**, the great civil rights leader who was assassinated in 1986. King's birthday is celebrated as a national holiday.

Presidents' Day third Monday in February.

This **federal holiday**, meaning that federal employees get the day off and federal offices are closed, is popularly recognised as honouring the US presidents **George Washington** and **Abraham Lincoln**. The day is sometimes understood as a celebration of the birthdays and lives of all US presidents.

Easter

As in many other countries, the Easter Bunny hides colourful eggs and **candy** for the children in the USA. After the egg hunt, the famous **Easter Egg Roll** begins, where children all simultaneously roll an egg down a hill, hoping that their egg will win the race. Many Americans go to church at Easter. As on most holidays in the USA, there is also quite a lot of eating. Whether employees get a day off on Easter depends entirely on the employer. Also, most school children in the United States do not have an **Easter break**.

Memorial Day 31 May.

Memorial Day was first called **Decoration Day** and was celebrated on 30 May. It was established to honour those who died during the **American Civil War** (1861-1865), then subsequently those who lost their lives in all American wars.

Independence Day 4 July.

This day is the leading American national celebration because it commemorates the day the US **proclaimed** its freedom from Britain with the **Declaration of Independence** in 1776. Very early in its development the holiday was an occasion for fanfare, parades, fireworks, patriotic music and speeches celebrating American freedom and American life. People usually have a **barbecue**.

Indigenous People's Day

the second Monday in October

This is a holiday that celebrates and honours **Native American people** and commemorates their histories and cultures. It's an official city and state holiday in various localities. It began as a **counter-celebration** held on the same day – **Columbus Day**, which honours the Italian explorer **Christopher Columbus**. Many reject celebrating Columbus Day because they view it as a **sanitisation** or **covering-up** of Christopher Columbus' actions such as **enslaving** Native Americans.

Veterans Day 11 November

This day was first named **Armistice Day** and marked the end of WWI (1914-1918). Later the name of the holiday was changed and its significance expanded to honour the **US armed forces**.

Halloween 31 October

Immigrants from Scotland and Ireland brought the holiday to the United States. American children also go trick-or-treating.

Thanksgiving the last Thursday in November

Thanksgiving is one of the most important festivals specific to the US. It commemorates **Pilgrims** sharing a **harvest feast** with Native Americans. Americans have a **turkey** accompanied by **pumpkins, squashes** and **cranberries**. Since many Americans enjoy a four-day holiday, family members often travel long distances to see their **relatives**. Some Americans also contribute time and food to those in need and the **homeless**.

Christmas 25 December

Until the 19th century Christmas in the US wasn't celebrated with all the aspects of the modern holiday (e.g. exchanging gifts or putting up a Christmas tree). American children receive gifts from Santa Claus.

Other celebrations in the Czech Republic, US and UK

Ramadan

begins and ends with the appearance of the crescent moon

It is celebrated on the 9th month of the Muslim calendar and it is the holy month of **fasting**. Because the Muslim calendar year is shorter than the Gregorian calendar year, Ramadan begins 10–12 days earlier each year.

Hanukkah usually in November or December

Hanukkah, which means “dedication” in Hebrew, begins on the 25th of Kislev on the Hebrew calendar. Often called the **Festival of Lights**, the holiday is celebrated with the lighting of the **menorah**, traditional foods, games and gifts.

Chinese New Year between 21 January and 20 February

The festival celebrates the beginning of a new year on the traditional **lunisolar** Chinese calendar. The first day of Chinese New Year begins on the **new moon**.

Kwanzaa from December 26 to January 1

Kwanzaa is an **annual** celebration of African-American culture, culminating in a communal **feast** called Karamu, usually held on the 6th day.