

Religion and Tradition: focus on Christmas time

As a Roman Catholic country Austria celebrates Christmas. In the weeks from late November to the end of the year deeply-rooted folk traditions come alive in colourful events. It all starts with the Advent season, the period of preparation for the festival in honour of Jesus Christ's birth. On a Sunday four weeks before Christmas Eve, the 24th December, an Advent wreath woven from evergreen twigs and decorated with four candles is placed in almost every family's living room all over the country. Every Sunday leading up to Christmas one more candle on the wreath is lit at dinner time. Many families take the opportunity to sing carols and pray together. Another tradition is the Advent calendar. In most families every day from December 1st until Christmas one more "window" of the Advent calendar is opened. Usually there are sweets in the "windows". Furthermore, a lot of Austrians bake cookies and pastries during Advent time. The most popular ones among Austrians are Vanillekipferl, Spitzbuben (rascals) or ginger bread.

In Austria, December 4th is called "Barbaratag" – St. Barbara's Day. Early in the morning that day, people cut small twigs from cherry trees. They are put in a vase and placed in the house. If the twig blossoms by Christmas Eve, it is seen as a sign for good luck and health in the following year.

On December 6, Saint Nicholas goes from house to house looking for all the good and well-behaved children to give them little sweets like nuts, mandarins or chocolate. Saint Nicholas is accompanied by Krampus, his beast-like helper who punishes nasty children with his rod. Krampus parades have become especially popular on the evening of December 5, where people dress up as Krampus to roam the town, making a lot of noise and scaring spectators.

Christmas markets are a long-standing and typically Austrian tradition. You can drink mulled wine, eat sweet treats like gingerbread or sugar roasted almonds and, of course, you can buy Christmas presents, as usually all kinds of products are offered. Meanwhile almost every small town has its own Christmas market.

In Austria, children believe in the Christkind (Christ Child) which is often pictured as a child with blonde locks, wings and halo. It brings children their Christmas presents, which were wished for by them in a letter addressed to the Christkind. Some families open the window on the evening of December 24th so that the Christkind can fly in. Children who are waiting outside are listening if a bell is ringing – that is the sign that they can enter the room and discover their presents placed under a Christmas tree. The Christmas tree plays a very important role. A traditional tree is decorated with gold and silver ornaments, stars made of straw, sweets and candy wrapped in tinfoil, gilded nuts and decorated ginger bread cookies.

Around 7 p.m. on Christmas Eve the tree is lit for the first time and the whole family gathers to sing Christmas carols. "Silent Night, Holy Night," written in 1818, by two Austrians named Josef Mohr and Franz Gruber, is still the favourite Christmas carol.

Christmas is all about family time. But there is a difference to the past. In former times children did not get as many presents as most children do now. And what's more, people did not define the Advent time as stressful but as harmonious. Nowadays people are more materialistic and less religious, so the presents are in the centre of the whole

festivity. The way most people see Christmas has changed a lot.