TIDINGS OF COMFORT AND...WHAT?! SURPRISING FESTIVE TRADITIONS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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FARMERS BELIEVED THAT ADDING A DEFECATING FIGURE TO A NATIVITY SCENE SYMBOLISED FERTILISATION AND GOOD HARVESTS FOR THE COMING YEAR. IN OTHER WORDS, HE'S NOT BEING RUDE; HE'S DOING VITAL AGRICULTURAL WORK.

The festive season is often described as magical, but it can be easy to think it's one-size fits all, stockings, Santa and two much stuffing.

Not at all.

Around the world, communities mark the magic of the festive season with rituals that are poignant, ancient, and – to a non-local eye – downright bizarre. Some date back to pagan or folkloric customs, some take advantage of seasonal produce or good weather, others are just joyfully bizarre.

Here are some of the most delightfully odd traditions to brighten your holiday season.

Catalonia's Cheeky Caganers (As soon as the nativity set goes up)

Catalonia in North Easterm Spain has never been shy about adding a dash of irreverence to its Christmas traditions. The caganer - a small figurine depicted in the act of relieving himself - is the region at its cheekiest. Yep, he's taking a poop next to Baby Jesus.

The tradition dates back to at least the 18th century, when farmers believed that adding a defecating figure to a nativity scene symbolised fertilisation and good harvests for the coming year. In other words, he's not being rude; he's doing vital agricultural work.

Historically, the caganer was dressed as a traditional Catalan peasant, but modern versions now include celebrities, politicians, and footballers, meaning you can enjoy the sight of the Pope, Lionel Messi, or assorted world leaders contributing "nutrients" to the manger. Several shops in Barcelona are dedicated solely to the sale of the figures. Tourists love buying them, the recipients of such gifts are perhaps a little more ambivalent.

Despite periodic pearl clutching by officials to tidy things up by removing the figure from public displays, public outcry always brings him back.

THEIR CREATIONS WERE SUCH A HIT THAT THE MAYOR DECLARED IT AN OFFICIAL ANNUAL FESTIVAL IN 1897, CEMENTING THE RADISH'S UNLIKELY RISE TO ARTISTIC STARDOM.

Iceland's Yule Lads (December)

Iceland's Christmas season is enlivened by the arrival of the Yule Lads, a gang of 13 mischievous brothers who descend from the mountains one by one in the days leading up to Christmas. Rooted in Icelandic folklore, their earliest versions were terrifying child-scaring trolls, so alarming, in fact, that the government banned parents from using them to frighten children in the 18th century...perhaps the earliest example of the 'nanny state gone mad;.

Over time, they softened into a more mischievous, Santa-adjacent crew, each with a wonderfully literal name such as Door-Slammer, Sausage-Swiper, Spoon-Licker, and the slightly more sinister Window-Peeper. Icelandic children leave shoes by the window for the brothers to fill; well-behaved kids receive sweets or gifts, while mischief-makers find a solitary rotting potato.

The Lads are the offspring of fearsome mountain trolls Grýla and Leppalúði and share their home with the Yule Cat - a giant creature said to devour anyone who doesn't receive new clothes for Christmas. It's a system that keeps both children and knitters motivated as the festive season approaches.

Mexico's Night of the Radishes (23 December)

Every 23 December, the city of Oaxaca bursts into an extraordinary display of vegetable-based creativity during La Noche de Rábanos, the Night of the Radishes. The tradition began in the late 19th century when farmers carved radishes into decorative shapes to attract customers at the Christmas market. Their creations were such a hit that the mayor declared it an official annual festival in 1897, cementing the radish's unlikely rise to artistic stardom.

Today, artisans spend weeks cultivating oversized radishes, some weighing several kilo, before transforming them into intricate scenes featuring nativity tableaux, folkloric dancers, fantastical beasts, and political satire.

The carvings wilt quickly under the lights, giving the event a fleeting, almost theatrical quality; spectators rush through the displays to see everything before the sculptures collapse into pinkish heaps of mulch.

The festival includes competitions, music, and food stalls, turning one humble vegetable into the unchallenged star of the holiday season. One up on your hastily carved Halloween pumpkin anyway.

Venezuela's Christmas Roller Skating (Nine days to Christmas Eve)

In Caracas, Christmas begins with wheels rather than sleigh bells. During the nine days leading up to Christmas Eve, residents traditionally roller skate to the early morning Misa de Aguinaldo, a joyful holiday mass held before dawn.

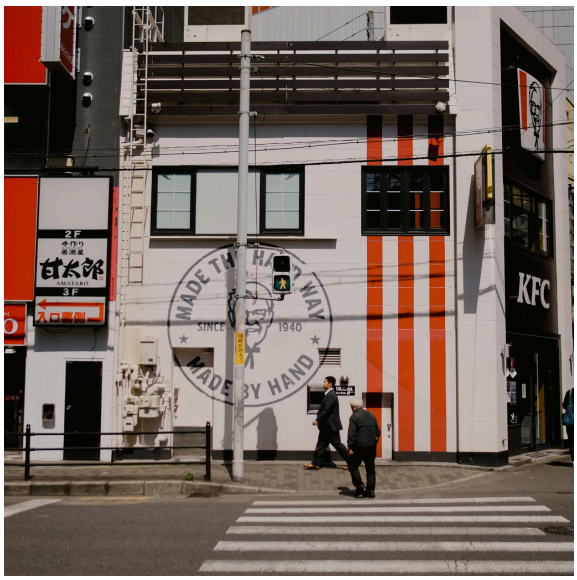
The exact origins are fuzzy, but it likely developed in the mid-20th century as a warm-weather alternative to more wintry holiday customs – trying this on any icy European cobbled street is not recommended.

Roller skating quickly became a beloved neighbourhood tradition, and city authorities began closing streets to traffic to allow safe pre-dawn skating. Children sometimes tie one end of a string to their toe and hang the other out of an open window; passing skaters give it a gentle tug to wake them for church - a chaotic yet charming alarm clock.

The atmosphere is festive and communal, with music, fireworks, and street food filling the early morning hours as anticipation builds to the big day.

Czechia's Shoe-Tossing (Christmas Eve)

In the Czech Republic, Christmas Eve doubles as an annual moment of romantic curiosity, particularly for single women keen to foresee their marital prospects. The custom, which has existed since at least the 19th century, involves standing with one's back to the door and throwing a shoe over the shoulder.



MANY TEMPLES ALLOW VISITORS TO TAKE PART, PRODUCING A SLOW, MEDITATIVE RHYTHM THAT FEELS A LIFETIME FROM CHAMPAGNE COUNTDOWNS AND NOISY FIREWORKS.

If the shoe lands with its toe pointing toward the door, it means marriage may be imminent; if the heel points inward, the woman is likely to remain single - or keeping her options open - for another year.

Although the ritual isn't taken entirely seriously today, it remains a beloved bit of seasonal entertainment. Families often combine it with other folk forms of fortune-telling, such as cutting apples to read the future in the seed pattern or floating walnut shells to represent household members.

The shoe toss, however, remains the most dramatic, especially when siblings or cousins hover nearby with suspiciously enthusiastic suggestions about how to improve one's throwing technique. Presumably a precursor to awkward Christmas lunch conversations.

Japan's Bell-Ringing (New Year's Eve)

Japan welcomes the new year with a serene and deeply symbolic ritual known as Joya no Kane, the ringing of Buddhist temple bells 108 times.

The number corresponds to the 108 earthly desires believed in Buddhism to cause human suffering. Each resonant strike symbolically purifies one desire, helping people enter the new year spiritually refreshed. The ritual dates back to at least the 13th century, and today it takes place at temples of all sizes, from Kyoto's grand Zen monasteries to small rural shrines.

Many temples allow visitors to take part, producing a slow, meditative rhythm that feels a lifetime from champagne countdowns and noisy fireworks.

After the final toll rings just after midnight, many people visit shrines for hatsumōde, the year's first prayer for health, safety, and good fortune. The combination of reflection and renewal gives New Year's Eve in Japan a uniquely contemplative atmosphere, like a collective deep breath to begin the year on the right foot.

It's not all serious though, the Japanese Christmas Eve tradition remains...KFC.

Austria's Lucky New Year Pigs

In Austria, the new year begins with an endearing porky flourish thanks to Glücksschweinchen, tiny pigs made from marzipan, chocolate, or ceramic and gifted to loved ones as symbols of prosperity.

Pigs have been associated with good fortune in Germanic cultures for centuries: in medieval Europe, owning pigs indicated wealth, food security, and the potential for a growing herd. By the 19th century, giving someone a pig, whether real or edible, had become a gesture of affection and a wish for abundance in the coming year.

Today, shop windows fill with mini pigs sporting the good-luck symbols of clover, horseshoes, or chimney-sweep hats from late December.

It's one of the most playful ways to wish someone a prosperous new year without resorting to cliches. The tradition remains hugely popular across the country, proving that sometimes the simplest symbols (especially when made of marzipan) are the most enduring.

Denmark's Plate-Smashing (New Year's Eve)

In Denmark, New Year arrives with both affection and an enthusiastic clatter. For centuries, Danes have smashed old dishes on the doorsteps of friends and neighbours as a sign of goodwill and loyalty. The roots of the custom lie in ancient Germanic practices where broken pottery was thought to banish evil spirits and usher in good luck.

Over the year, Danish households quietly set aside their chipped or unwanted plates, saving the finale on 31 December. On New Year's morning, a doorstep covered in broken crockery is a sign of popularity, not vandalism. Some families proudly gather the shards into a bucket as proof of their strong social ties.

While the tradition has softened in urban areas, sometimes replaced with symbolic gestures or smaller breakable items, many communities still carry it out with gusto. It's a wonderfully cathartic way of demonstrating affection: nothing says "I value our friendship" quite like hurling a plate at their front door.