

# A winter's tale



**The meaning of Christmas** Re-learn the history behind the holiday

In ancient farming societies, December was a time when the work was done and the winter solstice on the 21st gave everyone the longest night on which to party. Centuries later, several holidays are still being celebrated this month all around the world – here's a look at four:

## Hanukkah, 21-29 December

In 168 BC, a small group of Jewish villagers defeated a mighty Greek army that had been persecuting them. To celebrate, they lit an oil lamp called a *menorah*. Even though they only had enough oil to light the lamp for one day, it burned for eight.

### Something you might not know...

There's no need to worry about a spell-check when it comes to composing your Chanukkah cards; there are 17 acceptable ways to spell Khannuka. As the Hebrew pronunciation does not exist in modern English, they have come up with a wide range of spellings that provide an equivalent.

## Christmas, 25 December

It would be hard to be in the dark about this holiday when Orchard Road glows like one giant stream of neon every year. But beyond great sales, schmaltzy music and years spent trying to spot a fat, red-suited guy putting a strain on flying reindeer, there's the small matter of Christmas commemorating the birth of Christ.

### Something you might not know...

The Christian Bible fails to source Christ's birth certificate and makes no reference to a specific date of birth. It is widely believed this date was chosen to co-opt Saturnalia, a hedonistic ancient Roman festival where slaves were allowed to rule society for a month. Perhaps because of its rollicking roots, the no-fun Puritan Oliver Cromwell outlawed Christmas in 1645.



## Kwanzaa, 26 December-1 January

Kwanzaa is a non-religious African-American holiday primarily celebrated in the United States.

Similar to Hanukkah, on every night of the celebration, a candle is lit on

the *kinara*, or candelabra. Each light represents a principle of Kwanzaa, including *umoja* (unity), *kuumba* (creativity) and *imani* (faith), and is meant to bring important values of African culture to its descendants in America.

### Something you might not know...

While most holidays have ancient roots, this is a relative newcomer to the festive scene. Founded in 1966 by American professor Dr Maulana Karenga, it was created as an annual event to celebrate differences during the American civil rights movement.

## Boxing Day, 26 December

Although the exact origins of this holiday are obscure, we are certain it has nothing to do with throwing punches in the ring. One theory is that servants who had to work on Christmas Day were sent home with a box of goodies on the 26th, which they had off. Another is that this was the day when alms boxes in churches were opened and the cash distributed to the poor.

### Something you might not know...

Today, the 26th is a bank holiday in the UK and the Commonwealth countries of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and aside from bargain-hunting in the malls, people dole out gifts of money to doormen, mail carriers and others who've rendered good service throughout the year. To an outsider though, Boxing Day might refer to the combative attitude of shoppers taking advantage of spectacular post-Christmas sales.

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Around Town