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Christmas in Sweden

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# Christmas in Sweden



Christmas in Sweden, as in many other countries, is a mixture of old and new, religious and secular, native and foreign. Christmas traditions do not only include Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, but the festivities related to Christmas stretch from the beginning of December to the beginning of January.

## Advent

In Sweden, the warming up for Christmas starts at the beginning of December with Advent. This part of the Swedish Christmas traditions is fairly new and did not become wide spread until the 1920's.

Advent means arrival and signifies in the Christian belief, the "count down" for the birth of Jesus. Candles play an important role in the Advent tradition. The warm, living light provides a contrast to the cold weather and the short days. One of the Advent traditions is the Advent candlestick holder. The candlestick has four candleholders and is often decorated with moss, and lingonberry leaves. The first candle is lit the first Sunday in Advent (the fourth Sunday before Christmas) and allowed to burn a quarter of its



Photo: Hans Neläuter

length. The second Sunday in December, the second and the first candle are lit, and so on until the fourth Sunday, when all the candles are lit. By then, the first candle is almost burned down and the fourth has just been started, so the four candles creates a nice stair formation, recalling its German source of inspiration: the "Advent trees".

The "Advent Star" and the stepped electrical candlestick are other Advent traditions that last throughout Christmas, bringing light and warmth to the dark winter landscape. The original version of the "Advent Star", made out of red paper, was introduced in the 1930s. Since then, many different shapes of "Advent Stars" made of different materials such as straw, wood shavings, and metal can be found. Today, every Swedish home has at least one "Advent Star" and one electrical candlestick decorating the windows in the dark winter nights.

"Julkalender", or the Christmas Calendar, is another advent tradition, which also originates from the 1930's Germany. Every child in Sweden has at least one hanging on the wall. It has twenty-four tiny little doors, one for each day from December 1st through December 24th. Each day the children open up a door to find a surprise such as a picture, piece of chocolate or even a small gift.

## Sankta Lucia

Half way into December the Lucia arrives. In the early morning of the thirteenth of December you can see Lucia and her procession in every school,

hospital and home. Lucia wears a white full-length gown, with a red ribbon around her waist and a wreath of lingonberry sprigs on her head. The wreath has holders for candles which, when lit, creates the effect of a halo. Her "entourage" is also dressed in white full-length gowns, with glitter in the hair and a candle in the hand. Together they form a choir with a repertoire of Christmas songs and carols, which they deliver often accompanied with warm coffee and saffron-flavored buns called "Lussekatte".



## Christmas

In the Nordic countries Christmas Eve represents the culmination of the Christmas festivities. By the 24th of December all the candles in the "Advent candlestick" are lit and there are no more little doors on the "advent calendar" waiting to be opened. By this day, the homes are decked out with all kinds of ornaments; candlesticks, red table clothes, wall hangings, angels, and "Jultomtar". The ginger snaps are baked and some of them are decorated with frosting and hang in windows or in the branches of the Christmas tree. Perhaps even a gingerbread house has been built and decorated with frosting, candies and powder sugar on the roof imitating snow. Homes are decorated with winter greenery such as lingonberry and pine sprigs, for example, as a wreath for the front door. Interiors are filled with red and white Christmas flowers such as poinsettias and begonias and the Christmas tree is decorated. It is now the time to eat the Christmas food and to distribute the Christmas gifts.

## Christmas Food

Each and every home has their own family specialties, but there is usually some standard items found on every Swedish Christmas table. The meal usually starts with a smorgasbord with various kinds of pickled herring, liver paté and smoked sausage. Special Christmas items include boiled pork sausage, pork brawn, cold roast spare ribs and the pride of any Christmas table, the "Christmas ham". The Christmas ham is a complete piece of ham that has been boiled or roasted in the oven, then given a golden crust made of egg and breadcrumbs, flavored with mustard. The smorgasbord also includes some hot dishes such as fried meatballs and "Janson's temptation".

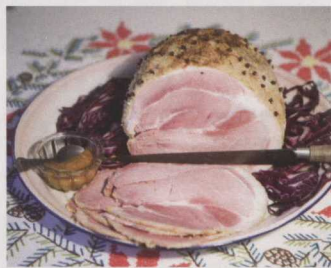


Photo: Ann Lindberg. © Ann Lindberg  
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Many people do not know why pork makes up such a large portion of the food at a Swedish Christmas table. The historical reason is that, for a long time Christmas was the only time of the year when people could eat fresh meat. For long, salt pork was the meat ration of the Swedes all year around. Pigs were slaughtered in the autumn when they were the fattest, and the pork had to be preserved so it would last until the following autumn. However, one or two "Christmas pigs" were usually held from the autumn butchering, and saved for December, so fresh meat could be enjoyed during Christmas. Although this custom is irrelevant today, Christmas would not be the same for many Swedes without the ham, brawn and pork sausage.

In tradition-loving homes, the smorgasbord is followed by "lutfisk", a dried fish that is alternately soaked in water and lye to make it round and tender again. This is a relic of the medieval Christmas fast, a meatless fortnight at a

time of the year when fresh fish was hard to find. The Reformation, which meant the end of the fast, made "lutfisk" redundant, but today, 450 years later, the lutfisk is still a part of our Christmas table.

The Christmas dinner ends with boiled rice pudding, or rice porridge, served for example, with warm milk and cinnamon. In the old days, porridge was the principal Christmas dish in many homes because it was easy to make in large quantities. Today, various rituals accompany the rice pudding. For example, before serving oneself a portion of porridge a "porridge rhyme" has to be said out loud. Also an almond can be placed into the porridge while it is cooking. Whoever finds it can make a wish that will come true.

## Jultomten

"Jultomten" is the Swedish version of St. Nicolas, who in most European countries gives the children their Christmas gifts. Before "Jultomten" came to Sweden, the Christmas Goat performed the task of handing out gifts, but in the 1870s St. Nicolas became so well known in Sweden, through the influence of German Christmas decorations, that he could no longer be resisted. St. Nicolas quickly removed the Christmas goat from the Swedish traditions. In Sweden, he acquired a new name, borrowed from a figure of Swedish rural superstition. Tomten - the brownie or lubber fiend - was a dwarfish guardian of the farm, not associated with Christmas, except for a bowl of rice porridge, which would be put out in the barn for him on Christmas. A well-known Swedish artist, Jenny Nystrom, created thousands of Christmas pictures from the 1880s and onwards, giving "Jultomten" a Swedish appearance. Her vision of "Jultomten" quickly became the paramount symbol of the Swedish Christmas. There is one difference between the Swedish "Jultomten" and his Continental colleagues; whereas the latter, are mainly to be found at shopping malls and department stores, in Sweden an adult member of the family or a "hired" neighbor dresses up as "Jultomten" and tries to make himself or herself unrecognizable to the children and may with a sack over his or her shoulder, bang on the door and ask the customary opening question; "Are there any well behaved children here?"

## The Christmas Goat

The Christmas goat, which had the role of distributing the gifts before "Jultomten's" arrival, is one of Sweden's oldest Christmas symbols with roots in the Middle Ages. As "Jultomten" gained in popularity the goat's role was slowly reduced to a purely decorative one. Today, in many Swedish homes you can see a goat made out of straw placed at the foot of the Christmas tree.



## Julklappen

"Julklappen" (direct translation: "The Christmas Knock") is the Swedish word for Christmas gift. This name came about long before "Jultomten" came into the picture. The name originates from a tradition where, on Christmas night, one would tiptoe up to the door of the recipient's house, knock hard and throw a present inside, preferably without being recognized, and quickly disappearing into the night. The "Christmas Knock" would often have an ironic, malicious rhyming dedication on its wrapper. This kind of poetry lives on in the "Christmas rhymes", nowadays usually more comical than defamatory, which during the last weeks leading up to Christmas transforms the Swedes into a nation of rhyming poets. ♦

**Text:** Mikaela Nagler