

# HIGH DAYS and holidays

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The year has flown by once again and the festive season is upon us. The last quarter of the year is packed with important holy days, feast days and festivals. From September onwards, every mainstream religious group celebrates special days - Jews celebrate Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), which is followed by Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) shortly thereafter; Muslims begin the fast for the month of Ramadan, which culminates in Eid al-Fitr; Hindu's celebrate Divali; while Christians look forward to celebrating Christmas.

I thought that it might be interesting to look at the origins of these and other days, which are celebrated throughout the year.

## Christian holy and feast days

Easter is the most significant annual Christian feast day, with Christmas following a close second. So you can imagine my consternation, when researching the origins of these feast days, finding that both have their roots in pagan festivals. The name Easter is derived from the Anglo-Saxon pagan goddess of spring, Eostre or Easte. Even the seemingly innocuous Easter bunny and Easter eggs are pagan symbols, representing fertility and rebirth.

Christmas has links to the festival of Saturn, Saturnalia, celebrated in ancient Rome, at the end of the harvest, as well as Mithra, the god of the sun. The Mithraic winter festival coincides with the celebration of the winter solstice. The Romans decorated pine trees with images of Bacchus for the festival of Saturnalia. Mistletoe was hung over the doorway by the druids to appease the woodland spirits. Even Santa's reindeer were inherited from the Nordic god Odin.

You might find some of these web sites of interest: [www.shagtown.com/days/easter.html](http://www.shagtown.com/days/easter.html) - it will help you to determine the date on which Easter will fall;

[www.holidayorigins.com/html/easter.html](http://www.holidayorigins.com/html/easter.html) - supplies information on the origins of the name and links to traditions associated with Easter;

[http://landscaping.about.com/cs/pests/a/easter\\_rabbit\\_p.htm](http://landscaping.about.com/cs/pests/a/easter_rabbit_p.htm) - information about the origins of the Easter bunny and Easter eggs;

<http://altrigion.about.com/library/weekly/aa040702a.htm> - more information about the pagan origins of the Easter bunny and Easter eggs;

[www.shagtown.com/days/Christmas.html](http://www.shagtown.com/days/Christmas.html) - trace Christmas traditions back to its pagan roots;

[www.mysteriousbritain.co.uk/festivals/Christmas/html](http://www.mysteriousbritain.co.uk/festivals/Christmas/html) - more information about the link between the celebration of the winter solstice and Christmas;

[www.holidayorigins.com/Christmas.html](http://www.holidayorigins.com/Christmas.html) - links to Santa Claus, carols, Christmas cards, Christmas, trees, et cetera;

[www.tartans.com/articles/celtchristmas.html](http://www.tartans.com/articles/celtchristmas.html) - read about the Celtic origins of Christmas, with links to holly and mistletoe;

[www.holiday-central.net/Christmas/](http://www.holiday-central.net/Christmas/) - various links to the origins of Christmas, Santa Claus and Christmas stockings;

[www.historychannel.com/exhibits/holidays/christmas/world.html](http://www.historychannel.com/exhibits/holidays/christmas/world.html) - links to Christmas traditions, Santa Claus and Christmas trees;

[www.ccg.org/english/s/p235.html](http://www.ccg.org/english/s/p235.html) - an article published by the Christian Churches of God that goes into great detail about the various pagan-Christian connections to Easter and Christmas.

## Jewish holy days and feast days

There are a number of important Jewish holy days and feasts. The dates on which these days are celebrated, are determined by the solar calendar.

Pesach (Passover) commemorates the story found in Exodus 12, describing the exodus of the Jews from Egypt. The Passover meal, or Seder, is particularly rich in traditions and customs. The format of the meal, food eaten and traditions followed at the Seder, have been carried down for centuries.

September/October has a number of important feast days and holy days. Rosh Hashanah, (the Jewish New Year), is followed by Yom Kippur, (the Day of Atonement) and Sukkoth, (the Feast of Tabernacles). Although Rosh Hashanah is

referred to as the Jewish New Year, it is not the first month of the Jewish calendar. In fact, Passover is celebrated in the first month of the Jewish calendar. Rosh Hashanah is just one of four symbolic New Year celebrations as laid down in the Talmud. Yom Kippur is regarded as the holiest day of the Jewish year. It is a day of fasting and prayer. One of the traditions associated with Sukkoth, is the erection of a booth decorated with fruit.

November/December sees the celebration of Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication, which commemorates the reclaiming of the temple after the defeat of the Syrian king Antiochus IV. The Menorah candelabra with nine receptacles for candles, and the lighting of a candle each day of the festival, plays an important part in the celebrations.

To read more about these and other Jewish holidays, access these web sites:

[www.shagtown.com/days/j2.html](http://www.shagtown.com/days/j2.html) - for information on the Hebrew calendar;

[www.holidayorigins.com](http://www.holidayorigins.com) - select the links to the various Jewish holidays (Purim, Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkoth and Hanukkah).

[www.everythingjewish.com](http://www.everythingjewish.com) - select the link to Origins.

[www.historychannel.com/exhibits/holidays/hanukkah/index.html](http://www.historychannel.com/exhibits/holidays/hanukkah/index.html) - the history and traditions of Hanukkah.

## Islamic holy days

The two most important events of the Islamic calendar are the Eid ul-Fitr, which comes after the month-long fast of Ramadan, and the Eid ul-Adha at the end of the Hajj.

The holy month of Ramadan is a special month of the year, when Muslims fast from dawn to sunset every day. The fast ends with the sighting of the new moon and culminates with the celebration of Eid ul-Fitr.

One of the five pillars of Islam, or central religious duties of every Muslim, is to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. This is known as the Hajj. All Muslims around the world join the pilgrims in Mecca in celebrating Eid ul-Adha on the tenth day of the last month of the Islamic calendar. Usually a sheep is sacrificed and the meat distributed to family, friends and the poor.

The following web sites will provide information on these holy days and celebrations:

[www.shagtown.com/days/islam.html](http://www.shagtown.com/days/islam.html) - information on Islam, the Islamic calendar and various religious holy days and holidays.

[www.ummah.org.uk](http://www.ummah.org.uk) - this site contains information on Ramadan, Eid ul-Fitr, the

Hajj and Eid ul-Adha. There are also numerous links to other sites.

## Hindu festivals

In November this year, Hindus celebrated Deepavali or Divali, which celebrates the return of Lord Rama to Ayodhya after his 14-year exile and the triumph of good over evil. To welcome and honor Lakshmi, the goddess of good luck, wealth and benevolence, lamps are lit, houses are decorated with garlands and designs are drawn on the floors in different coloured powders to welcome guests.

Read more about the festival of Divali and other Hindu festivals:

[www.indiatravelite.com/indianfestivals](http://www.indiatravelite.com/indianfestivals) - various festivals arranged by month.

[www.divalimela.com/about-divali/index.html](http://www.divalimela.com/about-divali/index.html) - Divali customs and traditions, recipes and links to other Divali sites.

[http://members.tripod.com/~jennifer\\_polan/divali.html](http://members.tripod.com/~jennifer_polan/divali.html) - the story of Divali.

## Remembering the dead

Many countries, cultures and religions set aside a day to remember the dead. Some of these memorial days are quite solemn, while others use the occasion to celebrate and remember the departed.

All Souls' Day on 2 November, commemorated by Christians, is dedicated to the souls of the departed, especially those in purgatory. Origins link this feast day to an ancient festival of the dead. It was believed that the dead visited the homes of the living and 'soul cakes' were left out for them to eat. In Mexico this feast day is called El Dia de los Muertos, or the Day of the Dead. There is nothing morbid or sad about the celebration and it is the most popular holiday in Mexico. Families get together to honour their ancestors, altars are built and candy in the form of skulls and sugar skeletons are eaten.

Most countries set aside a day to remember those who died in war. November 11 is just such a day. Sometimes called Memorial Day, Remembrance Day or Armistice Day, countries worldwide use this day to honour those who gave their lives in war.

Hiroshima Day, 6 August, is observed to commemorate the dropping of the first atomic bomb. The day is observed with special vigils and peace marches. People fold paper cranes and send them to Sadako's monument in Hiroshima Peace Park.

You can obtain information on the origins and traditions associated with these days on the following web sites:

[www.shagtown.com/days/allsouls/html](http://www.shagtown.com/days/allsouls/html) - All Soul's Day.

[www.cleverclickster.com/mayatime/muertost.htm](http://www.cleverclickster.com/mayatime/muertost.htm) - El Dia de los Muertos.

[www.houstonculture.org/mexico/muerto-sorig.html](http://www.houstonculture.org/mexico/muerto-sorig.html) - origins of El Dia de los Muertos plus links to various aspects of this festival.

[www.sherylfranklin.com/holidays/veterans\\_day.html](http://www.sherylfranklin.com/holidays/veterans_day.html) - Remembrance Day and information on flag etiquette.

[www.kidsdomain.com/kids/links/Salute\\_to\\_Veterans.html](http://www.kidsdomain.com/kids/links/Salute_to_Veterans.html) - links to sites for kids, which have been checked for appropriate content.

[www.betterworldlinks.org/book80/html](http://www.betterworldlinks.org/book80/html) - links to Hiroshima Day and related subjects.

[www.sadako.org/sadakostory.htm](http://www.sadako.org/sadakostory.htm) - the story of Sadako and the 1000 cranes.

## Other holidays

There are various holidays and festivals spread throughout the year. Perhaps you just take them for granted, or perhaps you might like to find out about the origins of these festivals. Listed below are some of the most common holidays and some of the web sites for information on origins and traditions.

### New Years Day

1 January is generally celebrated as the calendar New Year. As we have seen, the date of the New Year can differ between religious groups and even cultures. The Chinese New Year occurs between 21 January and 19 February.

[www.holidayorigins.com](http://www.holidayorigins.com) - follow the links to New Year's Day and Chinese New Year.

<http://jwilstar.com/holidays/newyear.htm> - origins and traditions of New Year.

[www.educ.uvic.ca/faculty/mroth.438-CHINA/chinese\\_new\\_year.html](http://www.educ.uvic.ca/faculty/mroth.438-CHINA/chinese_new_year.html) - links to the origin, traditions, taboos and superstitions surrounding the Chinese New Year.

### Valentine's Day

This holiday is celebrated on 14 February with various tokens of affection being sent to loved ones - cards, chocolates, flowers, et cetera. But who was Saint Valentine?

[www.shagtown.com/days/valentine.html](http://www.shagtown.com/days/valentine.html) - origins of Valentine's Day.

[www.holidays.net/amore/](http://www.holidays.net/amore/) - various links to its origins, traditions and recipes.

[www.historychannel.com/exhibits/valentine/history.html](http://www.historychannel.com/exhibits/valentine/history.html) - the history of Valentine's Day.

### St Patrick's Day

Being of Irish decent, I couldn't leave this one out. St Patrick's Day is celebrated on 17 March. It is difficult to separate the facts about St Patrick from the myths and legends. He is supposed to have banished the snakes from Ireland, but whether this is

fact or folklore, is not known. New York, with Irish roots dating back to the immigrants, who came in their droves during the Potato Famine, celebrates St Patrick's Day by holding an annual St Patrick's Day Parade.

[www.holiday-central.net/st\\_patricks\\_day\\_origins.asp](http://www.holiday-central.net/st_patricks_day_origins.asp) - has various interesting links.

[www.st-patricks-day.com/index.asp](http://www.st-patricks-day.com/index.asp) - read about St Patrick and related aspects.

[www.saintpatricksdaysparade.com/NY.newyorkcity.htm](http://www.saintpatricksdaysparade.com/NY.newyorkcity.htm) - St Patrick's Day Parade, New York.

### April Fool's Day

The origin of April Fool's Day is not clear, but may be connected to the changeover from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in 1582. Prior to that date, New Year was celebrated for eight days culminating on 1 April.

<http://jwilstar.com/holidays/aprilfool.htm> - some suggested origins of April Fool's Day.

[www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoax/april-fool/](http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoax/april-fool/) - top 100 April Fool's Day hoaxes of all time.

### The Running of the Bulls

I thought that I'd add this for those of you who like to live dangerously. The Running of the Bulls in Pamplona is part of the Fiesta of San Fermin, which is held in July each year.

[www.runtheplanet.com](http://www.runtheplanet.com) - type in the keyword Pamplona, then scroll down and click on the *Running of the Bulls* link. You will find information about the route and running tips.

[www.sanfermin.com/guia/in\\_encierrol.shtml](http://www.sanfermin.com/guia/in_encierrol.shtml) - origins and history of the Running of the Bulls.

### Halloween

Originally an American holiday, Halloween is becoming more and more popular in South Africa. Celebrated on 31 October, Halloween or All Hallows Eve is synonymous with children dressing up as ghosts, goblins and witches and going door-to-door trick-or-treating.

[www.shagtown.com/days/halloween.html](http://www.shagtown.com/days/halloween.html) - history and customs of Halloween.

[www.halloweenishere.com/history2.html](http://www.halloweenishere.com/history2.html) - history of Halloween, trick-or-treating, Jack-O-Lanterns, masks and pumpkins.

<http://home.att.net/~rlynj/halorigins.htm> - origins of Halloween and links to other interesting sites.

[www.serve.com/sheagermusa/hallow.htm](http://www.serve.com/sheagermusa/hallow.htm) - origins of Halloween with links to many related sites.

### Guy Fawkes

On the night of 5 November, bonfires are set alight, effigies are burned and fireworks



are set off. This commemorates the thwarted conspiracy to blow up the British Houses of Parliament by a group of English Catholics. Before the plot could be carried out, Guy Fawkes was caught in the cellar of the parliament with 36 barrels of gunpowder.

[www.bonfire.org/guy/index.php](http://www.bonfire.org/guy/index.php) - history of the Gunpowder Plot.

[www.guy-fawkes.com/](http://www.guy-fawkes.com/) - history and legends of Guy Fawkes and Bonfire Night.

### **Boxing Day**

Why 26 December is called Boxing Day is not very clear. Various theories are given for the naming of this holiday. Some believe that it originated during the reign of Queen Victoria. Small boxes of gifts and money were given to the servants and merchants. Another theory is that servants were expected to work on Christmas day. As a thank you, the servants were given 26 December as a holiday and received boxes of gifts. Yet another theory is that it was the

day on which the alms boxes were opened and the money distributed to the poor.

[www.snopes.com/holidays/christmas/boxing.asp](http://www.snopes.com/holidays/christmas/boxing.asp) - some theories about the origins of Boxing Day.

[www.homemadesimple.ca/en\\_CA/living/boxing-day.shtml](http://www.homemadesimple.ca/en_CA/living/boxing-day.shtml) - origins and traditions.

I hope that you enjoy accessing these sites and reading about your favourite holiday, as much as I did researching their origins and traditions.

Happy holidays.

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