



A special time full of traditions. Christmas in Austria is the time of year when family members get together for hours of quiet and thoughtful celebration.

Christmas in Austria, Switzerland and Germany - "Waiting for the Christ child"

The Christmas season is now in full swing in Germany, Switzerland and Austria: many houses are decorated with lights, the Christmas markets smell of mulled wine and gingerbread, cookies are being baked, and above all, the children are impatiently awaiting the evening of December 24. The reason: it is on this "**Heiligabend**" (Christmas Eve) that the presents are found lying beneath a Christmas tree decorated with **real candles**, ornaments, stars made of straw, or glittering tinsel. On Christmas Eve (December 24th) the tree is put up and lit for the first time and the whole family gathers to sing Christmas carols. "Silent Night, Holy Night," written and performed for the first time on December 24th, 1818, by Josef Mohr and Franz Gruber in the Austrian village of Oberndorf, is still the favorite Christmas carol.

Presents are placed under the tree and young children believe they were brought to them by the Christ Child (Christkind). The Christmas tradition has it that it is the Christ Child himself (or rather, an eponymous cherubic figure known as the "Christkind") who decorates the Christmas tree on Christmas Eve and brings the children their Christmas presents, and it is to him that their letters and wish lists are addressed in the weeks before Christmas.

The **Christkind** ("Christ Child"), pronounced krisst-kind, is the traditional Christmas giftbringer in regions of Germany, Switzerland, Austria, South Tyrol, Liechtenstein, parts of Hispanic America, in certain areas of southern Brazil. Promulgated by Martin Luther, it was adopted in Catholic areas during the 19th century, while it began to be gradually replaced by the Weihnachtsmann ("Father Christmas", a secularized version of Saint Nicholas) in Protestant regions.

The Christkind is a sprite-like child, usually depicted with blond hair and angelic wings. Martin Luther intended it to be a reference to the incarnation of Jesus as an infant. It is presumed by some to be so, but seems to be rooted in the Alsatian-born myth of a child bringing gifts *to* the baby Jesus. Children never see the Christkind, as parents will always tell them that the Christkind just disappeared before they came.

Since the 1990s, the Christkind is facing increasing competition from the Weihnachtsmann in the American version of Santa Claus, caused by the ad industry which used Santa Claus as an advertising figure. Christkindl or Christkindel are diminutive versions of Christkind.

Advent

During Advent, the final four weeks before Christmas, children above all enjoy the **Advent Calendar**. From December 1 to 24, each day a tiny door is opened, or a small package unwrapped. "The Advent Calendar is a product of the Biedermeier period", explains Esther Gajek, a folklore expert in Regensburg. "Initially, all sorts of possibilities of counting time were carried over to the Advent period - strings were cut off, chalk marks were put on door frames." Today, the Advent Calendar with its tiny surprises is simply a must - in the family, but also among friends. Of importance is both the packaging as well as the contents themselves. Most suited are those tiny items that can best be wrapped up: sweet treats, decorations for Christmas, perfume vials, or toy items. For those things that do not fit into the calendar, there are vouchers. People who cannot or will not craft their own Advent Calendar, ready-made ones can be bought, which more and more chocolate companies offer, for young and old alike.

Der Adventskranz, the Advent wreath, is one of the most widespread Christmas customs in German-speaking Europe. Advent is the four-week period leading up to Christmas. For Catholics and Protestants the Advent season begins on the first Sunday after November



26. On each of the four Advent Sundays leading up to Christmas, a new candle (*die Kerze*) is added to the Advent wreath. Advent wreaths come in many versions (pine, wood, plastic, metal, etc.), but they are always round and feature four (sometimes five) Advent candles.

In some families each Advent Sunday is devoted to lighting a new candle, singing some carols, and reading verses from the Bible. Although the Advent wreath is a very Christian tradition, its origins go back to pagan, pre-Christian times. In the photo you can see that the wreath is now in the fourth week of Advent, with all four candles burning.

Advent, Advent, ein Lichtlein brennt...

Advent, Advent,
ein Lichtlein brennt!
Erst eins, dann zwei, dann drei, dann vier,
dann steht das Christkind vor der Tür!