Danish Christmas traditions [1]

Denmark is a country steeped in Christmas traditions, from the well-known to the quirky. Here's a quick overview of some of the more well-practiced customs.

Advent wreath

The Danes' Christmas begins with the Advent wreath. The wreath has four candles, each of which is lit every one of the four Sundays leading up to Christmas Eve the 24th of December. Traditionally the Advent wreath is made out of fine spruce twigs and cuttings, often decorated with red berries and spruce cones, white candles and red ribbons for attaching the wreath to the ceiling.

The calendar candle

Another December tradition is the calender candle. This candle is, just like a tape measure, provided with 24 markings, normally decorated with motives of fir and little pixies with red cheeks, wearing red hats and dancing merrily in yellow clogs. In most families the candles are lit every day from December 1st as a soothing factor in a hectic period, quite often at the breakfast table. Frequently it is the childrens' duty to blow out the candle before it burns down too far into the next date!

Present calendars

All Danish kids get one or more Advent calenders - or Christmas calenders as they are called in Denmark. The two big television channels each year produce a special new Christmas series divided into 24 episodes to keep the children's excitement in a high gear. The more fortunate children also get a gift calender consisting of 24 small presents, one for each day before Christmas, individually bought and wrapped by their parents.

Christmas seals

The world famous Danish Christmas Seals celebrate their 104 anniversary this year. That makes them the worlds oldest of their kind and it is probably only to be expected that the country which originally invented the postal system also created the Christmas seal.

Since its debut in 1904 the seals have been copied in many countries around the world. They are designed each year by specially invited artists and produced by the Julemærkefonden charity. Among the most famous designers is the Danish Queen Margrethe II, who at many occasions has proved to posses extraordinary artistic skills.

The Christmas seals are used on letters and postcards, just like stamps, but they are not obligatory. They are sold only around Christmas time and the revenue is distributed to needy children.

It is not unusual for Danes to write a lot of Christmas cards to friends and family and most of them are provided with the Christmas seals. The cards are never printed in advance in the Hallmark fashion but handwritten like in the good old days.

Lucia night

According to the Catholic Church Lucia is the saint of light (lux = light in Latin). She is celebrated on the night between the 12th and the 13th of December, especially in schools, retirement homes, hospitals and other institutions all over Denmark, with small girl processions and traditional singing. Legend has it that Lucia, in order to keep her hands free, wore a wreath with candles on her head so that she could (illegally) feed the poor Christians on the hide in the catacombs of ancient Rome.

Further reading

Check out how Danes celebrate Christmas Eve [2]

Read about the Danish Christmas tree [3]