

A young boy with short dark hair is lying on his stomach in a nest of straw. He is wearing a dark blue sweater and has his hands clasped near his chin, looking thoughtfully to the right. Above him is a copper-colored metal table with a glass top. On the table, there is a white plate with two cookies (one chocolate, one plain) and a glass of milk. The background is a Christmas tree decorated with lights and ornaments. The text "Holiday Traditions" is overlaid in white with a black outline.

# Holiday Traditions

# Decorate Your Community

**W**hen it comes to starting a new Christmas tradition this year, think about beautifying the area around you with festive decorations. Could your downtown use a bit more red and green? Are there senior citizen centers in the area in need of some Christmas spirit?

There are many ways you can get involved and have a hand in decorating your community. The more people you involve, the bigger impact you can have on spreading holiday joy through the use of beautiful decorations.

## START A GROUP

Are you an active member of your church or community nonprofit? Do you run a business or are you a youth sports coach? If so, you likely have the manpower to start a decorations committee focused on transforming various buildings throughout your area.

Recruit your organizational members, employers or players to donate their time to the cause. You'll likely find that with a little direction and incentive, you can convince a large majority of people to help.

If you aren't part of any local groups, check with your local organizations or faith leaders to see if your help is needed. Pitch the idea of decorating specific buildings or areas around town and see what they think. Your ideas could be the springboard to the most community-centered Christmas celebration your area has ever seen.

## BE EFFICIENT, CREATIVE

When the time comes to start decorating, have a plan in place to make sure things go smoothly. Coordinate with your other volunteers, giving them specific duties and goals. You should also be in close contact with the organization you're decorating for to find out if there are certain designs, colors or themes they would like to see.

Creativity is the key to pulling off



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great decorations. Does your downtown area have light posts along a town square or circle? Talk with your committee or city officials about hanging colorful wreaths on the posts to set the

Christmas mood.

Ask about setting up a nativity scene in a prominent place on the square to remind people about the true reason for the season.

There are many creative ways to showcase Christmas decorations. You just have to have a strong eye for design and the initiative to make your ideas happen.



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# Homemade Cookies

**B**aking and eating cookies is part of many family traditions across the country. There's nothing like pulling a warm batch of chewy cookies fresh from the oven and enjoying them with family over a cold glass of milk.

This Christmas, start your own family tradition by baking cookies for yourself and those around you. From gingerbread and chocolate chip to cinnamon swirl and macadamia nut, the options are endless.

## SUGAR COOKIE RECIPE

Here is a recipe for the perfect

sugar cookies, courtesy of Food Network and world-renowned chef Alton Brown.

### Ingredients

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 3/4 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup unsalted butter, softened
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 egg, beaten

- 1 tablespoon milk
- Powdered sugar, for rolling out dough

Sift together flour, baking powder and salt. Set aside. Place butter and sugar in large bowl of electric stand mixer and beat until light in color. Add egg and milk and beat to combine. Put mixer on low speed, gradually

add flour, and beat until mixture pulls away from the side of the bowl. Divide the dough in half, wrap in waxed paper and refrigerate for 2 hours. Preheat oven to 375 degrees Fahrenheit.

Sprinkle surface where you will roll out dough with powdered sugar. Remove 1 wrapped pack of dough at a time from refrigerator, sprinkle rolling pin with powdered sugar and roll out dough to 1/4-inch thick. Move the dough around and check underneath frequently to make sure it is not sticking. If dough has warmed during rolling,

place cold cookie sheet on top for 10 minutes to chill.

Cut into desired shapes, place at least 1-inch apart on greased baking sheet, parchment, or silicone baking mat and bake for 7 to 9 minutes or until cookies are just beginning to turn brown around the edges, rotating cookie sheet halfway through baking time. Let sit on baking sheet for 2 minutes after removal from oven and then move to complete cooling on wire rack.

Serve as is or ice as desired. Store in airtight container for up to 1 week.

# Donate Your Time

**G**ifts and financial donations are certainly welcome this time of year by your local community organizations and charitable non-profits, but nothing may be more valuable than your time. Volunteering is a great Christmas tradition for families to start. Doing so helps set strong examples for young people, teaching them lessons in humanity, good will, compassion and selflessness.

Do you have a few extra hours per month you could give to a local nonprofit organization? If so, start this holiday season by donating your time to the cause. Choose a charity or nonprofit you are passionate about and reach out to see how you can help.

Local soup kitchens may need you to round up canned goods and nonperishable food items from your family members and community. Senior citizen centers may request that you simply come spend some quality time with their residents. Foster homes and child advocacy centers may be in need of the same, as well as Christmas presents for the little ones.

The contribution of your time and energy could help make this a highly enjoyable Christmas for those in need, as well as for those running these organizations. Volunteers are always needed, so make the call today.

## YOU ARE NEEDED

Only about 25 percent of Americans volunteer for an organization, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. You can help improve that number by joining a group and convincing others to do the same. Grassroots volunteering efforts are the backbone of



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the country, especially as many human services budgets shrink from state to state.

Your time is more vital than ever to making sure these organizations have the appro-

priate resources to make a difference in the community. Think of your local military organizations, children's hospitals, nursing homes and large-scale holiday event

committees. They all need your creative spirit and hands-on approach to make this Christmas a happy one for their target populations.

So seek out one of the orga-

nizations in your neck of the woods and get started on impacting your community in a positive way. Once you start this tradition, you'll never go back.

# Take a Post-Christmas Trip

Once the presents are gifted and the wrapping paper is cleaned up, it may be time for you to take a post-Christmas trip. The week between Christmas and New Year's Day can actually be a prime travel period for families looking to save a few bucks, as airlines and car rental companies are likely to offer reduced rates due to slower business.

Before planning your perfect post-Christmas trip, consider the basics, such as your budget, how long you want to be away and of course, the location. How does a tropical island vacation sound on the heels of the Christmas season? What a gift! What about taking more of a “staycation” and renting a local cabin for the weekend?

Whatever you decide, there are some things to keep in mind so you can pull off the perfectly planned Christmas trip.

## MAKING A BUDGET

If your wallet was hit hard by the Christmas season, you may be looking at a tighter budget for your holiday trip. On the other hand, if you plan it far enough in advance, you should work on saving a little here and there to make the trip more affordable.

Here are the major items to consider when building a post-Christmas trip budget:

- **Getting there:** Consider your travel costs for things such as airline tickets, car rentals and gas mileage. You may find big off-season price reductions for plane tickets that can help balance your budget.

- **Eating there:** Food costs for both the trip and the destination can add up in a hurry. Will the hotel or cabin have a



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kitchenette? This can be a great way to save some money by cooking your own food rather than eating out for every meal.

- **Playing there:** Once you

reach your destination, how much spending will you be doing on activities, mini-trips and shopping? Add up all of this for an idea of how much to

save.

- **Staying there:** Of course, lodging can take a major bite out of your budget. Many cabin resorts have three- or

four-day minimums, so plan accordingly. Look for deals from local lodging companies or international hotels for ways to save.

# Reconnect with Loved Ones

**A**s families grow, loved ones may become spread across the country due to their career, educational pursuits or general life changes. If you're lucky enough to be near all of your loved ones this Christmas season, hopefully you have your traditions set and are ready to enjoy them together.

For those hoping to reconnect with loved ones living far away, there are many ways to do so this Christmas. This time of year is perfect for re-establishing relationships with family members and starting new traditions together, and there are many ways to make this happen.

## TECHNOLOGY

Technology has closed the gap when it comes to communicating with those living on the other end of the state, country or world. All you need is a reliable Internet connection and a computer to get started.

There are a wide variety of online video chat tools, including Skype, that are both free and effective when it comes to connecting with faraway family members over the Internet. You will need to fill out a free account online with your email address and a password to get started.

Once you have an account, you can invite others in your network to join you on the platform, and you can have live video chats with them from hundreds or thousands of miles away. These online tools are perfect for reconnecting often with loved ones you haven't seen in a while, as well as for keeping relationships strong between grandchildren



and grandparents who may be geographically separated.

## START A FAMILY BLOG

Online websites and family blogs are picking up steam as a

way to keep relatives connected throughout the year and especially at Christmastime. It's easy to start a free online blog to keep people updated or invite others to post what's

going on their lives.

Blogs have photo-sharing capabilities and are chock full of various tools that allow you to share your content through social media or email. Look

into free blog tools to get started on uploading family-related news, stories and details on upcoming events. This is a great way to strengthen your family as a unit.

# Christmas Eve Traditions

**C**hristmas Eve is one of the most tradition-filled days on the calendar. From wide-eyed children to full-grown adults, it is a special day that fills our bodies with anticipation and excitement. And sugar. Don't forget the sugar.

Cookies and treats aside, it's easy to start a Christmas Eve tradition. You just need a dash of imagination and a pinch of youthful exuberance to make it happen.

Don't forget to include lessons about the true meaning of Christmas if you're looking to involve the kids with your traditions. It's easy to get wrapped up in the presents, decorations and cookies, but teaching children about the meaning of Christmas from a young age can be one of the most important traditions you make for your family.

## HEAD TO CHURCH

Many churches will have special Christmas Eve services to help celebrate the season. Carve out a couple of hours of your day or night to join your church members in doing just that. Teach your children the stories of Christmas and how it has come to be such a big part of our lives.

Spend time together as a family discussing the meaning of Christmas over a nice meal after church. Ask your children questions to pique their interest and test their knowledge. If they're old enough, encourage them to continue researching the topic on their own time — not just at Christmastime.



## NEW PAJAMAS

What's better than a set of new pajamas on Christmas Eve? Watch the holiday spirit envelop you and yours as you settle into your new comfy PJs on the couch for a marathon Christmas movie night.

Find pajamas that are

brightly colored and vibrantly designed in holiday themes.

The more fun and outrageous your holiday pajamas are the better — and try to find matching sets for the family and even family pets to really create some family camaraderie.

## SANTA TIME

Many families have an elder uncle or grandparent play the role of St. Nick on Christmas Eve. Enlist the help of a willing participant and start the tradition in your family.

Make reindeer sounds on the roof to excite the youngsters

and have Santa show up with a full sack of toys. Have Santa take a seat near the tree and have each child come up for their chance to sit on his lap and receive their presents. This can create magical memories for children — and adults — that last for years to come.

# Visit A Tree Farm

If your inner Clark Griswold is alive and well, a trip to the local tree farm may be right up your alley. There's nothing quite like cutting down your own tree and bringing it home to your living room. You can pick your own tree and fill your home with a fresh pine scent.

So find a tree farm near you to support local, sustainable business practices. You won't be disappointed. And neither will the tree farm owner who relies on your support to keep his or her company running.

Read on for tips on planning a trip to your local tree farm, many of which feature fun activities for children and families.

## WHAT TO BRING

Check in with your local tree farm to see if saws are provided. They usually are and for a small fee, the tree farm professionals will cut your tree down for you. If you are allowed to cut it down yourself, this can be a great way to start a fun tradition with those in your family old enough to safely handle a saw. Take turns on the saw for a team effort.

Other things to bring include:

- **Ties & Ropes:** Don't forget that you're not just cutting down your tree, you have to get it home too! Bring the proper tie-down materials to safely transport it.

- **Plastic Wrap or Blanket:** Trees can scratch your car or truck, so sure to bring some plastic wrap or a blanket to serve as a protective layer between it and the tree.

- **Snacks & Drinks:** Many tree farms feature bouncy



houses, hayrides, sleigh rides, Santa visits, petting zoos and other fun activities for the kids. They may or may not have concessions available so it's always smart to pack some

as Plan B.

- **Old Clothes:** Cutting down your own tree isn't exactly clean and tidy. Dress in old clothes and hiking boots if you want to be comfortable

without the worry of ruining your outfit with sap and dirt.

- **Cash:** If you're enlisting the help of a staff member to cut down and carry the tree to your vehicle, it's good prac-

tice to give them a cash tip. This is difficult work after all. You'll also need cash for refreshments and any gift shops that may be on the premises.