

## U.S. HOLIDAYS AND CELEBRATIONS

The federal government has designated several days each year as national holidays. On these days, governmental offices and most businesses, banks and schools are closed. Most stores are closed on Christmas, New Year's Day and Thanksgiving. Special commemorative days, such as Mardi Gras, Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day and Halloween are not legal holidays, but are celebrated with special customs. The following are some of the holidays many Americans celebrate.

- **New Year's Day** (January 1) — the celebration of the arrival of the New Year. It is customary to make a New Year's resolution, which is a promise to quit a bad habit or to do something good during the coming year.
- **Chinese New Year** (date varies) - Of all the traditional Chinese festivals, the New Year was perhaps the most elaborate, colorful, and important. This is a time for the Chinese to congratulate each other and themselves on having passed through another year, a time to finish out the old, and to welcome in the New Year.
- **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day** (January 15) — official holiday since 1986 honoring the American civil rights leader who sought to secure equal rights for all Americans and won the Nobel Peace Prize.
- **President's Day** (February) — a holiday honoring two of America's most beloved presidents, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.
- **Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday)** — a holiday that is not celebrated widely throughout the US, but is New Orleans' biggest celebration. The Mardi Gras season begins 12 days after Christmas and continues for several weeks. Mardi Gras day is always the day before Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent, and is a day for parties, parades, balls and celebrations of all kinds.
- **Saint Valentine's Day** (February 14) — not a holiday, but a special day for the celebration of friendships and love. It is customary to send cards, candy and flowers to one's spouse or close friends.
- **Saint Patrick's Day** (March 17) — not a holiday, but an occasion to honor the patron saint of Ireland and America's Irish heritage. Some people wear a green article of clothing on this day, and restaurants may serve green food and drinks.
- **Easter** (March or April) — a religious holiday observed by Christians, celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In addition, this celebration is a special occasion for children.
- **Memorial Day** (last Monday of May) — a day to honor Americans who died in military service to their country.
- **Independence Day** (July 4) — a holiday to celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. Americans celebrate this occasion by having picnics, parades and parties. In the evening, there is usually a free public fireworks display on the Mississippi River.
- **Labor Day** (first Monday of September) — a day to honor the workers of America. Picnics in public parks are popular on this day.

- **Halloween** (October 31) — not a holiday, but a festival of Scottish-Irish origin. Traditional activities include attending parties while dressed in costumes, carving pumpkins, and telling ghost stories. In the evening, children go from door to door for “trick or treat”; you are expected to give them candy (the treat) or they may play a “trick” on you.
- **Diwali** is a five day Hindu festival. Diwali means "rows of lighted lamps" and the celebration is often referred to as the Festival of Lights. During this time, homes are thoroughly cleaned and windows are opened to welcome Lakshmi, goddess of wealth. Candles and lamps are lit as a greeting to Lasksmi. Gifts are exchanged and festive meals are prepared during Diwali. The celebration means as much to Hindus as Christmas does to Christians.
- **Ramadan** — Ramadan is the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. It is during this month that Muslims observe the Fast of Ramadan. Lasting for the entire month, Muslims fast during the daylight hours and in the evening eat small meals and visit with friends and family. It is a time of worship and contemplation, a time to strengthen family and community ties. At the end of Ramadan is a huge feast and party called Eid-al-Fitr.
- **Chanukah** — the eight-day Festival of Lights commemorates the Maccabees' victory over the oppressive Syrian king, and the miracle that occurred after the Jews regained their temple. The victors found enough purified oil to keep the temple's candles burning for only one day. But the oil lasted for eight days, allowing them to purify more.
- **Thanksgiving** (fourth Thursday of November) — a traditional holiday that began when the first American settlers, the Pilgrims, gave thanks for a bountiful harvest. Americans celebrate this day by preparing a special meal which usually includes turkey and dressing, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie.
- **Kwanzaa** (December 26 to January 1) - Kwanzaa (Quansa) is a holiday celebrated by many African-Americans. Unlike most holidays, Kwanza has neither religious nor political origins. Rather, it was the invention of one man, Dr. Maulana Karenga of Los Angeles, who saw it as a way for African-Americans to reaffirm their ancestors and their culture. The celebration focuses on traditional African values of family, community responsibility, commerce and self-improvement.
- **Christmas** (December 25) — a Christian holiday which celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ. Through time, this has become a more secular holiday. Traditional activities include singing Christmas carols, decorating Christmas trees, sending cards and giving gifts. Children are told that Santa Claus will bring them gifts if they have been good.