

## **Cultural & Religious Festivals Calendar**

This list includes festivals and holy days important to all communities, encompassing the Baha'i, Buddhist, Chinese, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Japanese, Jewish, Muslim, Rastafarian, Shinto and Sikh cultures and faiths. It is not a conclusive list.

*\*NB: all dates are shown using the Gregorian (Western) calendar. This is as accurate as possible, however some dates may vary because they are determined by the lunar calendar.*

### **January**

#### **1 – Hogmanay/New Year's Day**

A day widely observed, as is New Year's Eve the preceding night, throughout the UK, and more especially in Scotland where ceilidhs and 'first footing' are common. It is customary to make New Year's Resolutions at this time.

#### **1-3 – Ganjitsu (Japanese)**

New year's day celebrations are sometimes extended for up to three days during which businesses are closed, families are together, decorations are put up and the first visit of the year is paid to the Shinto shrines (places of worship and the dwellings of the kami, the Shinto gods).

#### **5 – Birthday of Guru Gobind Singh (Sikh)**

Guru Gobind Singh is the tenth guru, who instituted the Five Ks and established the Order of the Khalsa on Vaisaki. The main feature will be an 'akhand path', an unbroken reading of the Guru Granth Sahib, which will normally last for 48 hours.

#### **6 – Epiphany (Christian)**

The celebration of the coming of the magi wise men to the baby Jesus – the twelfth day of Christmas. It is particularly important in the Orthodox church where the baptism of Jesus and the first miracle at Cana are remembered.

#### **10 – Eid-al-Adha, Festival of Sacrifice (Muslim)**

This major festival marks (al-Eid al-Kabeer) the end of the Hajj (Pilgrimage to Makkah) on the tenth day of the twelfth month of Dhul-Hijja. The Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam.

Pilgrims sacrifice animals at the village of Mina on their way back to Makkah from Mount Arafat (where they have spent the first day of the festival) in commemoration of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael. However it is celebrated by all Muslims, not just those who are on the pilgrimage.

#### **14 – Makar Sankrant/Lohri (Hindu)**

Lohri is the name of the festival of the Panjab. This is an unusual festival in that it is based on the solar calendar, whereas most other Indian festivals follow the lunar

calendar.

It falls at a time when the Sun enters the Zodiac sign of Makar (Capricorn) and when the day and night are of equal duration. Days become longer from this point on so it is a time for celebration and a day for almsgiving and patching up quarrels.

Tamils eat a rice dish called pongal. For Punjabi families (including some Sikhs), Lohri is celebrated following the birth of a son. A fire is lit and peanuts and sesame sweets are eaten around it. Food eaten includes rice mixed with sugar, pancakes and halva. Cornmeal chapatis and mustard leaf constitute the traditional meal.

### **16 – Shinran Memorial Day (Buddhist)**

Shinran was the founder of Jodo Shin-Shu, one of the founders of Pure Land Buddhism.

### **25 – Burns' Night**

Burns' Night is a night of celebration that marks the anniversary of the birth of Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns, born on 25 January 1759 in Alloway, Ayrshire.

### **29 – Chinese New Year, Yuan Tan (Chinese)**

The traditional Chinese lunar year begins at sunset on the day of the second New Moon following the winter solstice. Chinese New Year celebrations last two weeks and end with Teng Chieh. The Chinese Lunar New Year is said to be one of the longest chronological records in history, dating from over 4,000 years ago, when the Emperor Huang Ti introduced the first cycle of the zodiac.

### **30 – Al Hijri, Islamic New Year (Muslim)**

Al-Hijra, the Islamic New Year, is the first day of the month of Muharram. It marks the Hijra (or Hegira) in 622 CE when the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) moved from Mecca to Medina, and set up the first Islamic state. There is no specific religious ritual required on this day, but Muslims will think about the general meaning of Hijra, and regard this as a good time for "New Year Resolutions".

## **February**

### **9 – Ashura (Muslim)**

Ashura (the tenth day of Muharram, the first month of the Muslim calendar) has been a day of fasting since the days of the early Muslim community. It marks two historical events: the day Nuh (Noah) left the Ark, and the day that Musa (Moses) was saved from the Egyptians by Allah. Shi'a Muslims, in particular, use the day to commemorate the martyrdom of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet (pbuh) Mohammed in 680 CE. On this day in Karbala, in Iraq, Imam Hussain, sacrificed his life and the lives of many of his family members and friends, in order to save the teachings of Islam from distortion and destruction.

Every year in London, Shi'a Muslims gather for a mourning procession and speeches at Marble Arch. The procession attracts up to 3000 men, women and children from many different ethnic backgrounds.

#### **14 – St Valentine's Day (Christian)**

There are varying opinions as to the origin of Valentine's Day. Some experts state that it originated from Saint Valentine, a Roman who was martyred for refusing to give up Christianity. He died on 14 February 269 A D, the same day that had been devoted to love lotteries. Legend also says that St Valentine left a farewell note for the jailer's daughter, who had become his friend, and signed it "From Your Valentine". Other aspects of the story say that St Valentine served as a priest at the temple during the reign of Emperor Claudius. Claudius then had Valentine jailed for defying him. In 496 A.D. Pope Gelasius set aside 14 February to honour St Valentine. The day has become a time for exchanging love messages and St Valentine became the patron saint of lovers. Nowadays, it's marked by sending cards, poems and simple gifts such as flowers or chocolates.

#### **26 – Parinirvana Day (Buddhist)**

This day marks the death of the Buddha and is also known as Nirvana Day. The Buddha's death came when he was eighty years old and had spent forty years teaching after his Enlightenment. He died in a state of meditation and attained nirvana, a release from the cycle of death and rebirth. Buddhists celebrate his death because they believe that having attained enlightenment, he achieved freedom from physical existence and its sufferings.

Buddhists celebrate by meditating or by going to Buddhist temples or monasteries. The day is used as an opportunity to reflect on the fact of one's own future death and on friends or relations who have recently passed away.

#### **28 – Shrove Tuesday (Christian)**

Shrove Tuesday is the first day of Lent. It's a day of penitence, to clean the soul, and a day of celebration as the last chance to feast before Lent begins. During the Middle Ages, people used to confess their sins on Shrove Tuesday so that they were forgiven before the season of Lent began. Now commonly referred to as Pancake Day, pancakes are eaten on this day because they contain fat, butter and eggs which were forbidden during Lent.

#### **29 – Ash Wednesday (Christian)**

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent for Western Christian churches. It's a day of penitence to clean the soul before the Lent fast.

### **March**

#### **1 – Sangha Day (Buddhist)**

Also known as Magha Puja, this is the second most important Buddhist festival. It is a celebration in honour of the Sangha, or the Buddhist community. It is a chance for people to reaffirm their commitment to Buddhist practices and traditions.

It commemorates the occasion when 1,250 disciples of Buddha came spontaneously to the Bamboo Grove on the full moon of Magha (February in the western calendar) to hear Buddha preach at Veluvana Vihara. Buddha predicted his death and recited a summary of his teachings and a code of discipline which Buddhist monks are expected to recite every fortnight.

Sangha Day is a traditional time for exchanging gifts and has become a prominent festival among Western Buddhists even though it is less well known in the East.

Celebrations vary, but can include chanting, meditation, the lighting of oil lamps and the reaffirmation of people's commitment to Buddhist practice.

### **1 – St David's Day (Christian)**

This marks the celebration of Saint David, the patron saint of Wales or Dewi Sant as he's called in the Welsh language. St David was an early crusader for Christianity in Wales and is supposed to have died on 1 March, 589 AD.

St David's Day has been a national festival in Wales since the 18th century when many will wear either a daffodil or a leek, both symbols of Wales. The other Welsh symbol, Y Ddraig Goch (the Red Dragon, the Welsh national flag), will be flown on many more buildings than usual.

The day is celebrated by concerts around the country and in many Welsh primary schools the day begins with a religious service. Children dress in traditional Welsh costumes, take part in traditional dances, sing folk songs and recite poems in Welsh.

### **14 – Purim (Jewish)**

The most entertaining of Jewish festivals, Purim celebrates the saving of the Jewish community in Persia. The story is told in the Book of Esther (known as the Megillah, meaning scroll) and is read twice in the synagogue on this day.

The name of Haman (the villain in the story of Purim) is drowned out by noise (rattles, stamping of feet, booing etc) by the congregation whenever his name is read out.

It is customary to hold carnival-like celebrations and beauty contests, and perform plays and parodies. The synagogue is crowded with men, women, and children.

Some wear their best Sabbath clothes, but many dress up in colourful costumes and masks. Hamantashen (cakes filled with poppy seeds, meaning Haman's pockets), are eaten at Purim.

### **17 – St Patrick's Day (Christian)**

This day marks the celebration of St Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, who lived in Ireland in the 4th century. St Patrick was in fact British but when he was a child, raiders from Ireland came and took him from Britain.

After his escape from being held hostage in Ireland, he became a priest and returned there to spread the word of Christianity. His symbol is the shamrock which he used to explain the concept of the Trinity – sprigs of which are worn on this day. A widely

celebrated day worldwide, parades are held in Dublin and in many countries around the globe.

## **25 – Holi (Hindu)**

Holi is one of the most colourful and exuberant of Hindu festivals. It is the spring festival, associated with Krishna, when people throw coloured powder and water at each other, dance, sing, light bonfires and make offerings of food.

Holi also celebrates creation and renewal in the same way as the Christian festival of Easter. The distinctions of caste, class, age, and gender are suspended during this time. Many of the customs of Holi represent its fertility origins.

The throwing of coloured dyes is linked with Krishna and his antics with milkmaids. The festival features gender rivalry, with contests between men and women, and public flirting. Holi is seen by some as the Hindu festival that is nearest in spirit to St Valentine's Day.

## **April**

### **5 – Ch'ing Ming (Chinese)**

The Festival of Pure Brightness takes place in spring when the ice and snow have gone and plants are beginning to grow again. It is also the first time in the year when family graves are visited. Families make a great effort to be together and go to the graves to respect the dead.

After cleaning and tending the graves, offerings are made to the spirits. Quite often 'Bank of Hell' money will be burnt at the same time.

This money distracts the evil spirits who will, given half a chance, intercept the goods and take them for themselves. While the evil spirits are chasing the Hell money, the valuable goods pass safely to the dead.

Many families have picnics by the graves to join their ancestors in feasting. Ch'ing Ming is often marked by kite flying, a favourite Chinese passion.

### **12-20 – Passover (Jewish)**

Passover is one of the most important religious festivals in the Jewish calendar and lasts eight days. Jews celebrate the Feast of Passover (Pesach in Hebrew) to commemorate the liberation of the Children of Israel who were led out of Egypt by Moses. The story of Passover is told in the Book of Exodus.

Before the festival, homes are spring cleaned to ensure no trace of leaven (yeast) is left. At the start of the festival, a Sedar meal is held in the family home, when the story of the deliverance from Egypt is recounted. Matzah (unleavened bread) and other unleavened foods, coconut pyramids and matza balls are eaten.

## **14 – Vaisakhi (Sikh)**

This festival is the most important date in the Sikh calendar. It is both the Sikh New Year festival and the anniversary of the founding of the Order of the Khalsa by the 10th Guru, Guru Gobind Singh.

In 1699, the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh, chose Vaisakhi (an already long-established harvest festival in the Punjab), as the occasion to transform the Sikhs into a family of soldier saints, known as the Khalsa Panth.

In the UK, a decorated flag is placed on the front of the Gurdwara, or temple, to signify the start of the festival. Most Sikhs, which means seekers of truth, are baptised during the festival.

## **16 – Easter Day (Christian)**

Easter is the most important festival in the Christian calendar, at the very heart of Christianity, commemorating the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

On Good Friday (14 April), Jesus Christ was crucified. His body was taken down from the cross, and buried in a cave. A large stone was put in front of the entrance, so that no-one could steal the body. On the following Sunday, some women visited the grave and found that the stone had been moved and the tomb was empty. Jesus himself was seen that day, and for days afterwards by many people. His followers realised that God had raised Jesus from the dead.

Easter eggs, representing the birth of new life (the resurrection) are given, churches are filled with flowers and special hymns are sung. But not all Easter customs are Christian, some, such as the Easter Bunny, and the name Easter are actually Pagan in origin.

## **21 – Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (Muslim)**

Milad un Nabi is celebrated on the 12th of Rabi-ul-Awwal, the third month of the Muslim calendar. This date is important to Muslims because the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is regarded as a great blessing for the whole of humanity. Muslim parents will tell stories of the Prophet's life to their children.

The Prophet Muhammad is deemed to be the chief of all the Prophets sent on earth and it is to him that the Holy Qur'an was revealed.

In some large cities in the Muslim world, the day is marked with processions and flag waving, and the streets and mosques are decorated with lights. As well as telling stories about the Prophet's life, salutations and songs in his praise are recited.

Some Muslims donate to charity. Families gather together, feasts are arranged and food is served to guests and the poor. In the UK, Muslims celebrate this at the mosque.

## **23 – St George's Day**

This marks the celebration of St George, the patron saint of England. He's popularly identified with England and English ideals of honour, bravery and gallantry – but actually he wasn't English at all. His particular significance to England is not clear since he lived and died in the Middle East in the 3rd century, but it is possible that his popularity grew after the Crusades, when his red cross on a white background was adopted as their symbol.

The earliest known British reference to St George occurs in an account by St.

Adamnan, the 7th century Abbot of Iona. He's believed to have heard the story from Arcuif, a French bishop who had travelled to Jerusalem and other holy places in Palestine.

The saint is also mentioned in the writings of the Venerable Bede. He is not only patron saint of England but also of Aragon, Catalonia, Georgia, Lithuania, Palestine, Portugal, Germany, Greece, Moscow, Istanbul, Genoa and Venice (second to St Mark).

## **May**

### **6 – Wesak, Buddha Day (Buddhist)**

Also known as Vesakha Puja, this is the most important of Buddhist festivals. Wesak is the celebration of Buddha's birth and enlightenment, and for some Buddhists, also marks death. It is a chance to remember the story of how the Buddha gained Enlightenment, and to reflect on what it might mean for individual Buddhists to move towards Enlightenment themselves.

Buddha literally means one who is awake and has been enlightened. In celebration, houses are cleaned and decorated with colourful garlands and lanterns, made of paper and wood and Wesak cards are sent to friends and family.

Buddhists will visit their local temple for services and teaching and will give offerings to the monks of food, candles and flowers. Chanting and praying are an important part of Wesak.

The 'Bathing the Buddha' ceremony takes place, where water is poured over the shoulders of the Buddha, serving as a reminder to purify the mind from greed, hatred and ignorance. Chinese Buddhists celebrate with traditional dancing dragons.

## **June**

### **2-3 – Feast of Weeks, Shavuot (Jewish)**

Shavuot celebrates the revelation of the Torah (the five books of Moses) on Mount Sinai and the start of the wheat harvest and the end of the barley harvest. It is considered a highly important historical event and takes place seven weeks (50 days) after the first day of the spring festival of Passover ([link to Passover](#)). Prayers are said on Shavuot (especially at dawn) to thank God for the Torah and his law. Some people also spend the first night of Shavuot studying the Torah. Synagogues are decorated with flowers and plants (to remember the flowers on Mount Sinai) and dairy foods (such as blitzes and cheesecake) are eaten.

It is believed that once the rules about the preparation of meat were revealed in the Torah, the people of Sinai were reluctant to eat meat until they fully understood the rules.

### **4 – Pentecost (Christian)**

This is an important festival in the Christian calendar. It is regarded as the 'birthday' of the Christian church, since this is the day when the disciples of Jesus first

proclaimed the gospel after the Holy Spirit first descended on them. It is named after the Jewish harvest festival day Shavuot.

Traditionally a time of baptism, the name Whit Sunday, or White Sunday, derives from the custom of wearing white while being baptized. Ministers in church often wear robes with red in the design as a symbol of the flames in which the Holy Spirit came to earth.

### **11 – Dragon Boat Festival (Chinese)**

This festival is celebrated in China, Hong Kong South East Asia, as well as in some British cities, with a dragon boat race and the eating of rice dumplings wrapped up in lotus leaves. This celebrates the suicide by drowning of the poet and statesman Ch'u Yuan in 279 BCE.

Originally, the purpose of the boats was to frighten away the fish with the noise of drums and the rice dumplings were used to feed the fish so that they would not eat the dead body of Ch'u Yuan.

### **16 – Martyrdom of the Guru Arjan (Sikh)**

Arjan was the fifth guru of the Sikhs, who dedicated his life to interfaith understanding. He was executed on the orders of the Moghul Emperor Jehangir, for refusing to pay a fine arising from a charge of treason.

Arjan made the first compilation of the Sikh scriptures called the Adi Granth and supervised the completion of the temple in Amritsar. Sikhs commemorate his martyrdom with a gurburb.

Gurburbs are celebrated with an akhand path, a complete and continuous reading of Sikh scripture that takes two days and finishes on the day of the festival. Sikhs dress up in new or smart clothes and join together for special services.

In India, and in some parts of Britain, the Sikh scripture will be paraded around the locality in a procession led by the Sikh flag, accompanied by five Sikhs representing the first five members of the Khalsa (the Panj Piaras or Five Beloved Ones).

### **27 – Rathayatra (Hindu)**

Rathayatra means the Festival of the Chariots and is major festival for Lord Krishna and his devotees. Rathayatra has been held for hundreds of years at Jagannatha Puri in Orissa, on India's East coast.

There, millions of pilgrims come to the festival, where processions of thousands of devotees push huge carts called 'rathas' supporting images of Krishna. He is known by the name of Jagannath (Lord of the Universe) from which the term juggernaut comes in English.

At the end of the procession, there is a large gathering with feasting, stalls and spiritual entertainment including chanting of 'Hare Krishna' and dances in ecstasy. The festival is celebrated in Britain (mainly by the International Society of Krishna Consciousness) with a procession through London.

## **July**

### **21 – Dharma Day (Buddhist)**

Dharma Day marks the beginning of the Buddha's teaching. The word Dharma means truth and is the term used for the Path to Enlightenment, the Buddhist teaching. Soon after his Enlightenment, Buddha went to find his former disciples and share his experience with them.

This event could be seen as the start of the Buddhist religion and is what Dharma day celebrates. Dharma Day is now seen as a chance to express gratitude that the Buddha, and other enlightened teachers, have shared their knowledge with others. It is usually celebrated with readings from the Buddhist scriptures and is an opportunity to reflect deeply on their content.

### **23 – Birthday of Haile Selassie I (Rastafarian)**

This is one of the holiest days of the Rastafarian year. Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, known to his devotees as the King of Kings and the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, is revered as the incarnation of God by Rastafarians throughout the world.

Rastafarians take their name from the Emperor, who was also known as Ras (Prince) Tafari. He was born on 23 July 1892 and died in 1975.

The Rastafarian belief is also a way of life and has strong links with the Jewish and Christian faiths. Study of the Bible is important, in particular the Old Testament.

## **August**

### **12-15 – O-Bon (Buddhist)**

This is the Japanese festival – meaning Festival of the Souls – when the spirits of the departed are welcomed back home with feasting and dancing. The gates of Hell are opened and the ghosts may visit the world for fifteen days. Food offerings are made during this time to relieve the sufferings of these ghosts.

On the fifteenth day, people visit cemeteries to make offerings to the departed ancestors. Fires are lit to illuminate their arrival and departure.

### **15 – Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Christian)**

This celebrates the 'taking up' of Mary, body and soul, to heaven. Most catholic communities mark this with processions, fetes and church services. On this day, the Dormition (the falling asleep of the Blessed virgin Mary, her death) is kept by Orthodox Christians.

### **26 – Birthday of Krishna (Hindu)**

This is a widely celebrated two-day festival, known as Janamashtami marking the birth of Krishna. Krishna is perceived by most Hindus to be an avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu, who is regarded as the highest avatar.

It is believed that all other deities are manifestations of him. Krishna is considered to be a warrior, hero, teacher and philosopher by Hindus.

For the 48-hour period, Hindus are likely to forego sleep and instead sing bhajans, traditional Hindu songs. Some Hindus choose to fast for the first day of Janamashtami.

Those unable to fast will take fruit and milk. It is believed that Krishna was born at midnight and it is at this time that the true festivities commence. In the temples, Krishna is welcomed by singing and dancing.

In some homes and temples, an image of the newborn Krishna is put in a cradle and special sweets are given out. Holy mantras are also chanted to venerate Krishna. Food is prepared from milk and curds said to have been favoured by Krishna.

## **September**

### **7 – Birthday of Ganesh (Hindu)**

Hindus all over the world celebrate the birthday of Lord Ganesh (Ganesh Chaturthi), the god of fortune, the elephant headed son of Lord Shiva and Parvati, often called Ganupati, Ekadanta, Vinayaka or Heramba.

He is known as the Remover of Obstacles and is prayed to particularly when people are beginning a new enterprise or starting a new business.

Ganesh is also known as the patron god of travelling. In places such as Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra (India), the festival is celebrated for ten days and is a joyous event, regarded as a public occasion. In other places it is simply celebrated at home and hymns are sung and offerings made to Ganesh. Sweets are also distributed because according to Hindu legend, Ganesh favoured him.

### **8 – Lailat-ul-Bara'h (Muslim)**

Translated as the Night of Forgiveness, this takes place on the 14th of Sha'ban, the eighth month of the Muslim calendar, two weeks before Ramadan begins. This is the time when Muslims seek forgiveness for their sins and many believe that on this night your destiny is fixed for the year ahead.

The night is spent praying and asking god for forgiveness either at the mosque or at home. In some parts of the world, Muslims visit the graves of relatives and the giving of charity is also traditional. In some places firework displays mark the night.

### **11 – Ethiopian New Year's Day (Rastafarian)**

New Year's Day in Ethiopia is known as Enkutatash meaning the 'gift of jewels'. It celebrates the time when the Queen of Sheba returned from visiting King Solomon in Jerusalem, her chiefs welcomed her by replenishing her treasury with 'inku' or jewels. This spring festival has been celebrated since early times and as the rains come to their abrupt end, dancing and singing can be heard at every village in the countryside.

Today's Enkutatash is also the season for exchanging formal new year greetings and cards, in lieu of the traditional bouquet of flowers. Rastafarians have a four-year cycle, each year named after an apostle. This is the beginning of the year of John.

## **16-23 – Rosh Hashanah (Jewish)**

Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah commemorates the creation of the world (5,766 years ago). It begins ten days of repentance and self-examination during which God sits in judgment on every individual.

Much time is spent in the synagogue, when there are special services which emphasise God's kingship. One of the synagogue rituals for Rosh Hashanah is the blowing of the Shofar, a ram's horn trumpet. A hundred notes are traditionally sounded in a special rhythm.

Apples dipped in honey are eaten in the hope of a 'sweet' new year. Jews greet each other with 'Leshanah Tovah Tikatev' ('may you be inscribed for a good new year').

## **23-22 October – Ramadan (Muslim)**

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar and the holiest of the four holy months. It begins with the sighting of the new moon and starts a month of fasting (abstaining from food, drink, smoking, and marital relations) during the hours of daylight.

Fasting (sawm) is one of the five pillars of Islam.

The month of Ramadan is a time for spiritual reflection, prayer, doing good deeds and spending time with family and friends. The fasting is intended to help teach Muslims self-discipline, self-restraint and generosity. It also reminds them of the suffering of the poor, who may rarely get to eat well.

It is common to have one meal (known as the Suhoor), just before sunrise and another (known as the Iftar), directly after sunset. This meal will commonly consist of dates, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad.

## **28 – Confucius' Birthday (Chinese)**

Confucius (551-479 BC) is China's most renowned and influential thinker, a man whose original philosophy has grown into a religion and who is venerated across China today.

The birthday of Confucius is celebrated with a dawn ceremony (dating back nearly 3,000 years) at Confucian temples around China. The ceremony includes a ritual dance, costumes, music and other rites.

Confucius held the radical view that all who possessed the depth and desire to learn, not just the aristocracy, deserved the opportunity for formal education. For this reason, his birthday is also celebrated as Teacher's Day.

## **October**

### **2 – Yom Kippur (Jewish)**

The Day of Atonement is the holiest day of the year in the Jewish calendar. It marks the last day of the ten days of repentance with fasting and prayer, called the Sabbath of Sabbath's in the bible.

Fasting lasts 25 hours, Jews spend the eve and most of the day in prayer asking for forgiveness for past wrongdoing and resolving to improve in the future. During this time the Book of Jonah is read from the bible. On this special day Jews also abstain from washing, wearing perfume and leather shoes, and having sexual relations.

The most important part of Yom Kippur is the time spent in the synagogue. Even Jews who are not particularly religious will want to attend synagogue, the only day of the year with five services.

The first service, in the evening, begins with the 'Kol Nidre' prayer. To emphasise the special nature of the service the men in the synagogue will put on their prayer shawls, which are not normally used in an evening service.

## **20 – Anniversary of the Birth of the Bab (Baha'i)**

In 1844, when he was 25 years old, Mirza Ali Muhammad called himself Bab ud-Din, meaning doorway to the Faith. He believed that his mission was to reform Islam and to prepare the way for a successor who would complete his work of reformation. In this sense, many have compared him to John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus.

The Bab's successor identified himself a decade later, in the person of Bahauallah, who founded the Bahai religion. The Bab's birth is one of eleven holy days in the Bahai calendar.

## **21 – Diwali or Deepvali (Sikh, Hindu and Jain)**

The most popular of festivals from south Asia, the festival of lights celebrates the victory of good over evil, light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance. It commemorates the victory of Lord Rama over the demon Ravana and end of over 14 years of exile of Lord Rama.

Diwali extends over five days and involves lights, fireworks and the giving of sweets. Prayers for Goddess Laxmi for prosperity and beginning of financial year are said. In the UK, as in India, the festival is a time for thoroughly spring-cleaning the home and wearing new clothes, decorating buildings with lights and fireworks displays. This is a festival that Sikhs, Hindus and Jains all celebrate, but Sikhs give it a special meaning by celebrating the release of Guru Hargobind from imprisonment at Gwalior.

## **24 – Eid-ul-Fitr (Muslim)**

The Festival of the Breaking of the Fast, this day marks the end of Ramadan, at the start of the first Shawwal, the tenth month of the Muslim calendar.

Known as the Small Festival, this Eid lasts for three days, compared with the four days of the Eid-ul-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice.

Muslims are not only celebrating the end of fasting, but thanking Allah for the help and strength that he gave them throughout the previous month to help them practice self-control.

The first Eid (meaning celebration) was celebrated in 624 CE by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) with his friends and relatives after the victory of the battle of Jang-e-Badar. The day is marked with prayers and festivity and presents for children.

### **30 – Chung Yuan (Chinese, Buddhist)**

Known as the Festival of Hungry Ghosts, it is widely celebrated throughout China. Large paper boats are made and burnt at the temples to help spirits which have no resting place or any descendants, on their journey across the sea of torment to Nirvana.

All shops are closed to leave the street to the ghosts. In the middle of each street, an altar of incense is set every 100 paces with fresh fruits and sacrifices displayed on it. The more incense, the better, for the amount of incense stands for the degree of prosperity of each house. In the temples, monks will sing songs that only the ghosts can understand. This rite is called 'shi ge'r', meaning singing ghost songs.

### **31 – Halloween (Christian)**

Halloween was the ancient pagan ceremony of Samhain, All Hallows Eve or All Saints' Day. This was the night that Druids – or Celtic priests – gave thanks for the harvest and heralded the coming of winter.

It was also a time when this world and the next came together and the Host of the Dead were abroad. Christians turned the season into a service for souls and saints. Ghosts, goblins, witches and fairies were all believed to roam at will, so the Druids lit bonfires to protect the living, disguised themselves to avoid being recognised and attempted to propitiate these other-worldly visitors with food and drink.

Halloween was also a night when young people turned their thoughts to their future. More specifically, they wanted to know whom they would marry and whether fortune awaited them.

Traces of the Roman harvest festival survive in the custom of playing games involving fruit, such as ducking for apples in a tub of water. Of similar origin is the use of hollowed-out pumpkins carved to resemble grotesque faces and lit by candles placed inside.

## **November**

### **15 – Birthday of Guru Nanak (Sikh)**

The founder of the Sikh movement, and the first Sikh guru, Guru Nanak was born in 1469. Sikhs celebrate Gurburbs, festivals associated with the lives of the ten Gurus, one of the most important being the birthday of Guru Nanak and the birthday of Guru Gobind Singh.

Gurburbs are celebrated with an Akhand Path, a complete and continuous reading of Sikh scripture (Adi Granth) that takes two days and finishes on the day of the festival. Sikhs dress up in new or smart clothes and join together for special services.

In India, and in some parts of Britain, the Sikh scripture will be paraded around the locality in a procession led by the Sikh flag, and accompanied by five Sikhs representing the first five members of the Khalsa (the Panj Piaras or Five Beloved Ones).

### **30 – St Andrew's Day (Christian)**

Celebrated by Scots around the globe, St Andrew's Day has been Scotland's national day for more than 1,000 years. Andrew, whose name means 'strong, manly and courageous' was a fisherman by trade until he was called to follow Jesus as one of the original disciples.

Other countries have St Andrew as their patron saint – Romania, Greece and Russia. Scotland is one of the few countries to have one of Christ's disciples as their patron saint.

St Andrew's Day has long since been a popular feast day in Scotland. It was a common custom for farm workers and labourers to go 'St Andra'ing', when they would catch rabbits and hares and later on in the day would feast and drink. St Andrew's day is celebrated all over the world with fine Scottish food and a ceilidh. Traditional Scottish foods eaten include Cullen Skink soup, followed by Herring in Oatmeal, Salted Herring, Stovies or Haggis, and rounded off with Cloutie Dumpling or Crannachan.

## **December**

### **8 – Bodhi Day (Buddhist)**

Bodhi Day is the anniversary of Buddha's enlightenment. Not all Buddhists will celebrate the same festival. Bodhi day is celebrated by Pure Land Buddhists, who are mainly found in Japan.

It honours the enlightenment of Siddhartha Gautama, the first Buddha, the teachings of whom the religion of Buddhism was founded. Siddhartha lived in the 6th century BC and was born a prince in the foothills of the Himalayas, in what is now Nepal. As a young man, he was disturbed by the suffering of humanity. After several years, Siddhartha decided to abandon his lifestyle and turned his attention to meditation. According to legend, Siddhartha sat under a fig tree for many days and nights, deep in thought, before finally being 'enlightened' to the human condition. The fig tree under which Siddhartha sat is referred to as the Bodhi Tree, the Tree of Enlightenment.

The tradition of Bodhi Day is mostly practiced in Northern India and Nepal. The traditional Buddhist greeting 'budu saranai' loosely translated means 'may the serenity of the Buddha's be yours'. The day is observed in many ways, usually through prayer, meditation and teachings.

### **25 – Christmas (Christian)**

Christmas is a Christian holy day that celebrates the birth of Jesus, whom Christians believe to be the Son of God.

The Christian focus on the incarnation (God becoming human) has led this to be a major festival in the Christian faith although the over commercialisation and secularisation of Christmas have obscured some of the significance of the festival.

In the early 17th century, a wave of religious reform changed the way Christmas was celebrated in Europe. When Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan forces took over England in 1645, they vowed to rid England of decadence and, as part of their effort, cancelled Christmas. By popular demand, Charles II was restored to the throne and, with him, came the return of the popular holiday.

Christmas carols, plays and evergreens and associated with this time and nativity sets are displayed in many churches and in some homes. Gifts and reminders of the offerings brought to the infant Jesus. Originally these and Christmas boxes were given on 26 December.

Boxing Day, now a UK bank holiday, has origins in the Victorian custom (some suggest it was very much earlier) of presenting small gifts in boxes to tradesman.

### **26-2 January – Hanukkah (Jewish)**

Hanukkah or Chanukah is the Festival of Lights. The word means dedication and commemorates the Jewish people's struggle for religious freedom. Jews believe they are celebrating a miracle as it represents the rededication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem after a three-year war over the Syrians in 165 BCE.

As part of the celebrations, a menorah (candelabra) was lit and although there was only enough oil to light the menorah for a day, it miraculously stayed alight for eight days. It is because of this miracle that Hanukkah is celebrated by lighting a candle each night for eight nights.

Foods cooked in oil (to remember the miracle which happened with the oil) including doughnuts and latkes (potato cakes) are eaten. A game called 'dreidel' is popular with children to commemorate 'the great miracle that happened there'.

Hanukkah is celebrated at roughly the same time as Christmas, but there is no connection between the festivals.

### **31 – Omisoka (Japanese)**

Omisoka is a Japanese festival marking the last day of the year. In order to usher in the new year feeling fresh, families have to finish cleaning their house and making preparations for the new year holidays by omisoka.

As midnight approaches, Buddhist temples around Japan begin ringing out the old year, sounding the temple bell 108 times. This practice is based on a belief that humans have 108 earthly passions they have to overcome in order to attain enlightenment and each ring is thought to drive away one such passion.

At the very end of the day, usually around 11pm, it is common to have 'toshikoshi-soba', a kind of Japanese noodle. It is a tradition to eat soba to see the old year out and the New Year.

### **31 – Hogmanay**

See New Year's Day.