

Christmas Customs in Greece

Christmas boat

According to Christmas traditions in Greece, the patron saint of the holiday is Saint Nicolas, who is also the protector of sailors. For this reason, you will often see, mainly in the islands, boats decorated with many sparkling lights, rather than the traditional Christmas trees. The Christmas season in Greece begins on December 6th, which is Saint Nicolas Day, and ends on January 6th, which is the Feast of the Epiphany (Theophania).

In 1833, King Otto of Bavaria decorated the first Christmas tree in Greece and from then on, the Christmas tree was to be seen, standing alongside a decorated boat.

As the years passed and European Christmas became more familiar to Greeks, through travel, television, cinema and magazines and of course, commercialism, the pretty little boats took a back seat to the Christmas tree. Today almost everywhere in Greece people decorate their houses and yards with the Christmas tree.

The story goes like this; long, long ago, many Greeks work on ships and women of the Greek islands, during the dark winter months of ferocious, stormy and dangerous seas, spent their days fretting over fathers, husbands and sons who were battling with the waves, praying for their safe return. On spotting their loved one's ships returning to harbor, the women would joyfully rush home to celebrate by decorating small wooden boats.

The boats were arranged on the floor, or next to the fire, with their bows pointing inwards, symbolizing the homeward journey.



Thessaloniki, Greece's capital of the North, was the first large city, in 1999, to display a huge decorated boat at Christmas in **Aristotelous Square**, decked out in blue and white twinkling lights, the colours of the Greek flag.



Syntagma Square, in front of the Greek parliament building.



Greek carol singers (kalanda) with the Grek Christmas boat; the karavaki