

Christmas Traditions Old and New

Hello and welcome to As It Is from VOA Learning English.

I'm Mario Ritter. People around the world are celebrating Christmas day. Christians mark the birth of Jesus Christ on this holiday. There are many traditions surrounding Christmas, both ancient and modern. First, we hear about Christmas in two very different places: Middleburg, a small town in the state of Virginia and Xitan, China, which has come to be known as "Christmas village."

Christmas in Middleburg, Virginia

Christmas in the United States is traditionally a time of gift-giving and family gatherings. But there are also performances, trees with lights and, of course, Santa Clause, the big man in a red suit. Small towns across the country have their own traditions. June Simms has this report by VOA's Arash Arabasadi about a town in Virginia.

Middleburg is a town in an area known for its horses. Visitors can see horses pulling carriages with bells as people sing traditional Christmas songs.

"On the fifth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me..."

For more than 50 years, Middleburg has organized a yearly Christmas parade.

Hunting on horseback is another tradition. Men and women ride horses through the woods and fields. They follow hunting dogs as they search for a wild fox. But first, these hunters ride in the yearly parade, wearing their bright red hunting clothes and hats.

"Before we strike off here, I want to thank all of you for being here, and wish you all a very, Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year from the Middleburg Hunt."

John Hale of Middleburg says many city people visit his town.

"We have a lot of people from an urban area that come visit, but it incorporates a lot of the old traditions."

The nighttime hay ride is one such tradition. Small groups gather under the moonlight on an open wagon filled with hay. The passengers sing as farm horses pull the wagon slowly across the fields. There are some newer traditions, too. Like motorcycle events and even Mexican cowboys.

Trey Matheu works at the nearby Salamander Resort & Spa. He says a visit to Middleburg is a chance to slow down for a day.

“We live in a very fast-paced world. Middleburg is a little bit different.”

He says Middleburg can be a calming, peaceful place without tension.

“Middleburg is an opportunity to take a step back, to take a deep breath, and understand that even though life is moving on at a very fast pace, there’s really an opportunity ... where you’re allowed to step off for a little bit.”

Parade organizers say more than 13,000 people attend even in below-freezing weather. But if you ask, you will hear many different reasons why people come to watch the parade.

“I come here because I’m from a small town. I like how everybody comes together.”

“I live right down that street; right there. And that’s my dog.”

Dogs are not the only ones getting special treatment on this day. Horses do, too. At the Salamander Resort Sheryl Jordan carefully prepares horses for the parade.

“They got baths this morning. They got their long, shaggy hair trimmed off of their face, because certainly before we take our babies out into the public eye we want them looking their best.”

Middleburg looks its best at Christmastime. That may be why so many people return each year.

I’m June Simms

Xitan: China's Christmas Village

Christmas is a major event worldwide. In China, for example, there is a "Christmas Village," with many signs of the holiday. This year, however, there is no public celebration of the holiday.

The village of Xitan, in Zhejiang province, has no snow. It looks far different than the colder, snow-covered lands of Northern Europe and North America.

But last year, the village shipped around \$100 million in colorful ornaments and decorations to places as far away as Europe, the United States and Brazil.

Wang Lianming is the head of one of Xitan's earliest Christmas decoration companies, Ruian D-Bright Arts and Crafts. He is also the local Communist Party chief. He says that although overseas buyers are still the village's main customers, that is changing.

He says that Christmas was once a completely foreign holiday. But, in recent years, he says, celebrations of Christmas have grown and so has sales of ornaments.

Before D-Bright started producing hand-made Christmas ornaments, they made Disco Balls. They still do. Like many other factories here, the company is expanding to make products for other Western holidays, even Halloween.

In Xitan, there are 40 larger factories and about 200 smaller workshops. Some employees travel from far away to work in the village.

Xitan is home to a large number of Christians. But some people there say that it is their skills with arts and crafts, not their religious beliefs, which have made ornaments such an important industry.

Christmas has been celebrated more openly in the past. In a Youtube video from 2011, police broke up one holiday event when some people said it had turned too religious in nature. Local Christians say officials cancelled an approved event.

Village Communist Party Chief Wang Lianming says the celebration was stopped because of religious issues. He adds that it is not right to turn a cultural event into a religious one.

The event was meant to be a celebration of how Xitan became well-known, says Wang, and its ability to create and find business opportunities.

Thanks to VOA's Bill Ide for this report.

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