



The Twelve Day of Christmas – Ireland Style

December 24th - Christmas Eve

The Christmas tree was only imported quite recently into Ireland - but Christmas Eve was the time when candles were lit. After sundown several candles, one for each member of the household, were put into the windows. Either as a modernized pagan tradition or "to guide the Holy Family". The largest candle was known as *coinneal mór na Nollag* ("the great Christmas candle"). Then it was off to church ... And a drink with the neighbors afterwards.

December 25th - Christmas Day

If you are in search of peace and quiet, this is your day - Ireland is virtually dead to the world on Christmas Day. The day is spent with close family, barricaded into the home, eating Brussels sprouts and watching the annual re-run of "The Sound of Music" on RTÉ. Only around 11 AM do the streets become crowded, with even the unbelievers heading for mass. Maybe the most boring day of the Irish year for visitors. Head for natural attractions, everything else is closed.

December 26th - St. Stephen's Day (or Boxing Day)

The day of the "Wren Boys" - except in northern Ulster disguised young men go around, reciting nonsensical poems, begging for treats and carrying a dead wren (these days generally in effigy). Similar traditional activities, though at a slightly more sophisticated level, are connected with the mummers. They are active in Ulster, Dublin and Wexford, keeping folk theatre alive.

December 27th -The Sales

This is the day shops go into overdrive - the post-Christmas sales start and queues begin to form as early as seven o'clock in Dublin. Avoid Brown-Thomas, Arnott's and Clery's around opening time ... unless you want to be amongst the mob hunting for the best bargains. By the way, December 27th is also the feast day of John the Evangelist.

December 28th - Feast of the Holy Innocents

On this day Herod apparently ordered the slaughter of all first-born - making "childermas" one of the unluckiest day in folk custom. Don't start any business ventures or journeys, to be sure don't start anything. The "boy bishops" were de-throned on this day. But this medieval tradition has died long ago, in today's Ireland you find no young adult taking over a bishop's throne over the Christmas period.

December 29th

December 30th

There are no specific traditions connected to these days - today they are used for shopping (mostly stocking up on alcohol) or taking the kids to the zoo, also a time-honored tradition, especially in Dublin.



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December 31st - New Year's Eve

Ireland doesn't do New Year's Eve in a style to rival New York's Times Square, London's Trafalgar Square or Edinburgh's Hogmanay - parties and celebrations are a scattered affair. And very alcohol-fuelled. If you are visiting over this period it might be a good idea to pre-book one of the organized festivities. Unless you want to join the masses trying to get a pint at the pub.

January 1st - New Year's Day

"All is quiet on New Year's Day" ... U2 were right - the morning starts off with a deathly quiet. Mainly due to the revels of the night before. Nobody remembers that this is the "Feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord Jesus Christ". As in Roman times this was also was the feast of Janus, the two-faced god of doors and openings. Why not visit the ancient Janus-like figures on Boa Island. You'll be most likely the only person there.

January 2nd - Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus

January 3rd

January 4th

These are days generally used to visit more distant friends and relations, mopping up the left-overs so to say. There is no set agenda.

January 5th - Twelfth Night Eve and Twelfth Night

Twelfth Night was traditionally the time when Christmas proper ended - hence the "Twelve Days of Christmas" (starting on December 25th). It was a night of feasting, merriment and also practical jokes. These days school starts again around this time, marking the end of the "Christmas holiday" for everyone. The last wild party will, however, more than likely be thrown on a convenient weekend, not necessarily on 12th night.

January 6th - Epiphany

This day is the Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord Jesus Christ, traditionally connected to the Adoration of the Magi, or Old Christmas Day (according to the Gregorian Calendar and still observed by some orthodox churches). In Ireland it is better known as *Nollaig mBan* - Little Christmas or "Women's Christmas". This was the day when women were cherished, could put their feet up and (after twelve or more days of slaving away to keep the menfolk happy) and enjoy. An almost forgotten tradition.

Handsel Monday

We must not forget the Irish tradition of Handsel Monday, the first Monday in January - when children would get small gifts, called (you guessed it) "handsels".