



Weihnachten in Deutschland

Christmas in Germany



1

Nikolaustag = *Saint Nicolas Day*

The first “Christmas” oriented celebration in Germany comes in early December: on the morning of the 6th of December, Saint Nicolas is said to visit houses and leave small presents to children who have been good.



On the evening of December 5th, children in Germany leave their shoes outside their door for the night. (They usually polish their shoes first, or use special shoes for this occasion.) After the children have gone to bed, Saint Nicolas comes and leaves small presents for them in their shoes. The presents can be candy, fruit and nuts, small toys, or school supplies.

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Nikolausbesuch = *The Visit of St. Nicolas*

In the southern areas of Germany, and more so in Austria, Saint Nicolas actually comes in person to the houses. He visits the children directly on the evening of December 5th, and the children are supposed to recite a small poem or song for Nicolas, then be praised or scolded for their good or bad behavior, before getting a small present. Before the 20th century, children could be whipped with a switch (tree branch) if they were particularly naughty; these days it is only used to tease or threaten.



Knecht Ruprecht = *Knave Ruprecht*

When Saint Nicolas visits children directly, he often comes with helpers or assistants. In the northern parts of Germany, the helper is fairly tame: he is usually called Knecht Ruprecht and is dressed as either a farmer or a sooty-faced monk, wearing a dark robe and a heavy black beard. He will be tasked with threatening the naughty children, possibly swiping at them with a switch or hitting them with a bag of ashes or soot. For the good children, he will give small bags of nuts, fruit or candy, after asking if they've been well-behaved all year.



Krampus

In Austria and in southern Bavaria near the Alps, Saint Nicolas arrives with imps or devil-like figures called “Krampus”. There can be one or many (up to 12) Krampus figures who accompany Saint Nicolas when he visits the children. The Krampus figure is a goat-like devil, usually in an elaborate costume of black or white fur, with horns and pounding on drums; sometimes the Krampus figures carry braziers of hot coals to symbolize Hellfire.

Krampus is meant to scare young children and threaten them into being well-behaved. In earlier centuries, the Krampus figure would sometimes kidnap particularly naughty children, throwing them into a sack or basket and carrying them off (they were later returned or picked up by their parents); these days the Krampus figures mimic or act out threatening gestures but don't actually harm any children.



Krampus



Krampuslauf = *Parade of Krampus*

In Graz and other towns in Austria, there are annual parades of Krampus figures around the end of November. Here is one example from a few years ago.



There are many more Krampus videos on YouTube!

Search on "Krampuslauf" or "Perchtenlauf" for some great scenes!



Adventszeit = *Advent Time*

The four weeks before Christmas Eve are known as Advent in both English and German. During the Adventszeit, German families prepare for Christmas by decorating their houses, lighting candles and going to church services, as well as baking cookies and shopping for presents. In religious families, Advent is a time that begins with reflection and prayer, and each week becomes increasingly festive and joyous as Christmas Eve and Christmas Day draw nearer.



Adventskalender = Advent Calendar

The *Adventskalender* is a German tradition. Usually they are made of cardboard, and have 25 small windows or doors to open: one for each day leading up to Christmas Day. Inside the door can be either pictures, poems, or even small pieces of chocolate or tiny toys.



In many towns in Germany and Austria, there are 'living' advent calendars: large town buildings decorate their windows with numbers and are opened to reveal pictures each day. In town squares and Christmas markets there are often large life-size advent calendars as well.



Adventskranz = Advent Wreath

Many German families have an Advent Wreath (Adventskranz) on display during the weeks before Christmas. Traditionally, there are four large candles on the wreath: on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, the first candle is lit. The third Sunday before Christmas, the second candle is lit. When all four candles are burning, then it is nearly Christmas.



der Weihnachtsmarkt = Christmas Market

In nearly every town in Germany, Christmas time brings a festive marketplace in the center of town, called either der Weihnachtsmarkt (*Christmas Market*) or der Christkindlmarkt (*Christ-Child Market*).



At the *Weihnachtsmarkt*, many booths are set up to sell all sorts of goods: candies, cookies and sausages, traditional handicrafts such as carved wooden figures, toys or special Christmas decorations, knitted wear like scarves and hats, and any number of other Christmas presents and handmade items. The *Weihnachtsmärkte* are well-attended and nearly every German visits them during the weeks leading up to Christmas.



Glühwein = mulled wine

At the *Weihnachtsmarkt*, but also at home or in stores, a common wintertime drink is Glühwein, or 'glowing wine'. *Glühwein* is hot red wine mulled with spices like cinnamon and cloves, often served with a hint of citrus. Most (but not all) of the alcohol evaporates in the heat, and the drink is popular on the cold snowy days when wandering the Christmas Markets outside. It's similar to our hot apple cider, but heavier and slightly more glow-inducing due to the spices and alcohol.



die Krippe, das Krippenspiel = *nativity scene*

Most German Christmas markets or town squares, along with many churches, feature a nativity scene: a manger displaying the Biblical account of Jesus' birth. In some cases, there are live animals and real people putting on short 'plays' (*das Krippenspiel*) to tell the story; in other cases there are merely statues and displays (*die Krippe*) with no interaction.



Weihnachtsbeleuchtung = *Christmas lights*



Many town buildings and plazas are decorated with lights for Christmas time. Some houses also put up Christmas lights, although they tend to be less extravagant than American displays.



Germans almost always use white lights for Christmas displays; colored lights are usually seen as garish or American, and most Germans prefer the small white lights instead.

Weihnachtspyramide = Christmas Pyramid

One of the typical German Christmas decorations, either at home or in large form at public markets, is the Weihnachtspyramide, the Christmas pyramid. The pyramid is made of wood or metal, with four to eight candles in a circle at the bottom. When the candles are lit, the heat convection currents make the top portion turn slowly around, often ringing little chimes as it moves.

At Christmas markets or in town squares, there are often very large Weihnachtspyramiden on display; since they are so large, they have to be electrically powered. But the small tabletop versions are completely candle-powered and date back to at least the 1700s.



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Nussknacker = Nutcracker

The Nussknacker figures date back to the 1400s in Germany, and are considered to be a symbol of good luck. The nut is placed in the mouth, while a lever on the back provides enough torque force to crack the nut.

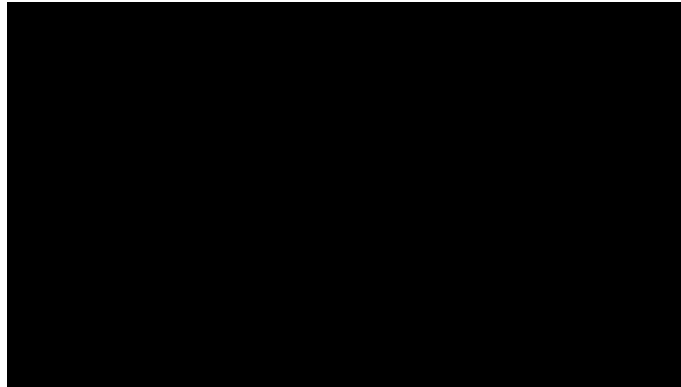
The most famous nutcracker figures come from the Erzgebirge, the Ore Mountains in Thüringen in central-Eastern Germany.



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Räuchermann = *Smoker Man*

The Räuchermann, or 'smoker man' is an incense smoker often seen at Christmas time at the Weihnachtsmarkt. Like the Nussknacker, it originates from the Erzgebirge (Ore Mountains) in Thüringen, but is now found all over Germany. A cone of incense is placed inside the figurine, and when lit, the smoke comes out through the open mouth.



Faltstern = *Folded Star*



A common Christmas decoration is the Faltstern, which comes in many different shapes and designs. Made of paper, they can be very large. The largest is a 31-foot diameter paper star. Children often make them as holiday crafts in smaller sizes.



The custom dates back to at least the early 1800s in Germany. Depending on the exact shape and design, they may be called Herrnhuter Stern (Moravian star) or Annaberger Faltstern (Annaberger folded star) or other similar terms.



Schwibbogen = Candle Arch

Another common decoration at Christmas in Germany is the Schwibbogen or Schwebebogen, a 'floating arc' candle holder. Traditionally made from a single carved piece of wood, they can hold several candles in an arch form, with figurines in the wood underneath. They are often placed in windows at Christmastime.



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Weihnachtsbaum / Tannenbaum = Christmas Tree



Germans traditionally decorate their Christmas tree only on December 24th during the day, as preparations for Christmas Eve. Prior to Christmas Eve, the tree may be in the house without decorations, or it may still be outside and waiting to be brought in. Increasingly, many German families have begun decorating their trees earlier in December. The Christmas tree appears to have originated in Germany, although its origins are unclear.



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Weihnachtsbaum / Tannenbaum = Christmas Tree

The traditional method of decorating Christmas trees is to use actual burning candles, placed on small clip holders so they stay upright: Germans only leave the candles burning on Christmas Eve, when they are gathered around the tree. (A bucket of water or fire extinguisher is also always placed near the tree!) More modern decorations are white electric lights; colored tree lights are fairly uncommon in Germany.



In addition to candles or lights, Germans often use baked ornaments (pretzels or woven bread), woven straw decorations, carved wooden figurines, and of course some glass and colorful ball ornaments such as are seen worldwide.



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24. Dezember = Heiligabend oder Heiliger Abend

Germans celebrate their largest holiday on Christmas Eve, the 24th of December. They gather for a simple late afternoon meal (often sausage and potato salad). Some families attend church services in the early evening, or the family stays at home.

Commonly, German children are supposed to be 'locked out' of the living room until a bell is rung, on the evening of December 24th: the bell means that the gifts have mysteriously been delivered. The children then enter to see the decorated tree for the first time, and all of the presents under it. The family then often sings some Christmas carols before opening the presents.

The German word for the exchanging and opening of presents is "die Bescherung".



Weihnachtsgurke = Christmas Pickle

This is not an authentic German tradition, but it is celebrated by many German-American families. It appears to have been brought to the USA by German settlers in the 1800s, but very few people in Germany today have ever heard of it. I've heard that it is being re-imported into Germany, since it had disappeared as a custom but American German families have re-introduced it.



In this German-American tradition, a pickle or pickle-shaped ornament is hung on the Christmas tree amongst all the other decorations. Whichever child finds the pickle first (it can be well-hidden since it is green) will receive an extra present as a reward.

der Weihnachtsmann = Santa Claus

In the northern sections of Germany, primarily Lutheran areas, presents are believed to be delivered by der Weihnachtsmann, the equivalent of the American Santa Claus. (Sankt Nikolaus is not the same as Santa Claus, because Sankt Nikolaus comes on December 5th and is dressed in traditional bishop's robes, carrying a staff.) In most cases, der Weihnachtsmann is assumed to have come through an open window, although the American idea of coming down a chimney has entered into some German family customs.

In some families, a relative dressed up as der Weihnachtsmann actually comes to the house, much like the Sankt Nikolaus tradition: he asks the children to recite a poem or song, then gives out the presents. The Weihnachtsmann leaves and the relative comes back to join in the opening of the presents.



das Christkind = *the Christ Child*

In the southern sections of Germany, primarily Catholic areas, presents are believed to be delivered by the Christ Child, *das Christkind*. In contrast to the Biblical idea of the infant Jesus, the German Christkind is believed to be a teenage or older female angel, dressed all in gold with angel wings, and flowing curly blond hair. Usually the Christkind is believed to have come through an open window to deliver the presents and decorate the tree; the small bell is rung when it leaves the room.

Fun fact: the English term "Kris Kringle" for a bringer of presents at Christmas time actually derives from "Christkindl" in Bavarian/Austrian form.



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25. Dezember = Weihnachten

December 25th is Christmas Day, but the presents have already been opened. For the midday meal, the family prepares a great feast. The most common meals are either goose (Gans), lamb (Lamm) or pork roast (Schweinebraten); along the northern coast it is traditional to have preserved jellied carp, like the Swedish *lutefisk*.

Later on Christmas Day is a time to visit family and friends. Many families arrange a schedule of visits, walking or driving from one house to the other to spend time with friends and relatives in a relaxing and cordial atmosphere.



26. Dezember = der zweite Weihnachtstag

In some families, the visiting and feasting celebrations continue on into the second day of Christmas, although this is not as common due to work and life schedules.

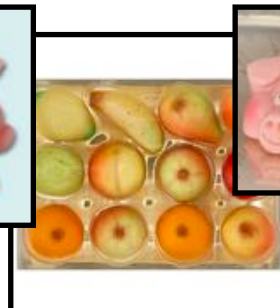
Germans leave their trees decorated, but without lit candles, until the sixth of January. Traditionally the trees are taken down on January 6th, the Catholic holiday of Epiphany.



Marzipan

One of the most popular German candies at Christmas, but indeed all year round, is *Marzipan*. Marzipan is made of almond meal mixed with honey or sugar to form various shapes of candy. Sometimes flavors of almond oil, hazelnut oil or other spices are added for flavor; the candies can be covered in chocolate or simply glazed with icing to keep their form.

The most common shape of marzipan in Germany is the marzipan pig, which is a symbol of good luck and often given at the New Year to wish 'good luck' in the coming year. But any forms can be made: clovers, flowers, animals, fruit, and so on.



Stollen



Stollen, sometimes called *Christstollen* or *Weihnachtsstollen*, is a heavy cake-bread most commonly made at Christmas time. It comes in many varieties; many are flavored with dried nuts, raisins, fruit or marzipan, or include rum or other spices for added flavor. In Germany, *Stollen* are almost always coated in white powdered sugar. It is made like bread, with yeast for rising, but is very dense and sweet. The *Stollen* dates back to at least the 1400s in Germany; the first recorded mention was in Dresden.

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Lebkuchen = German 'Gingerbread'

Lebkuchen can be translated to Gingerbread, but it's quite different from the crunchy gingerbread cookies we're familiar with. In Germany, Lebkuchen is a soft bread-like cake product, made from flour, potash (not yeast) and honey or molasses along with many different spices. Some *Lebkuchen* are quite spicy, others are plainer and sweeter. Many store-bought *Lebkuchen* are packaged on top of communion wafers ("*Oblate*") which is a custom dating back to monks in the Middle Ages; they are often covered in chocolate or icing sugar.



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Spekulatius

Although they originated in Holland and Belgium, Spekulatius cookies are among the top Christmas cookies found in Germany. They are very thin, crunchy and slightly spicy, and always have a stamped image on the front. They are made of wheat or almond flour, baking powder, butter and spices. Although they can be found in Holland year-round, in Germany they are only available around Christmastime.



Weihnachtsplätzchen

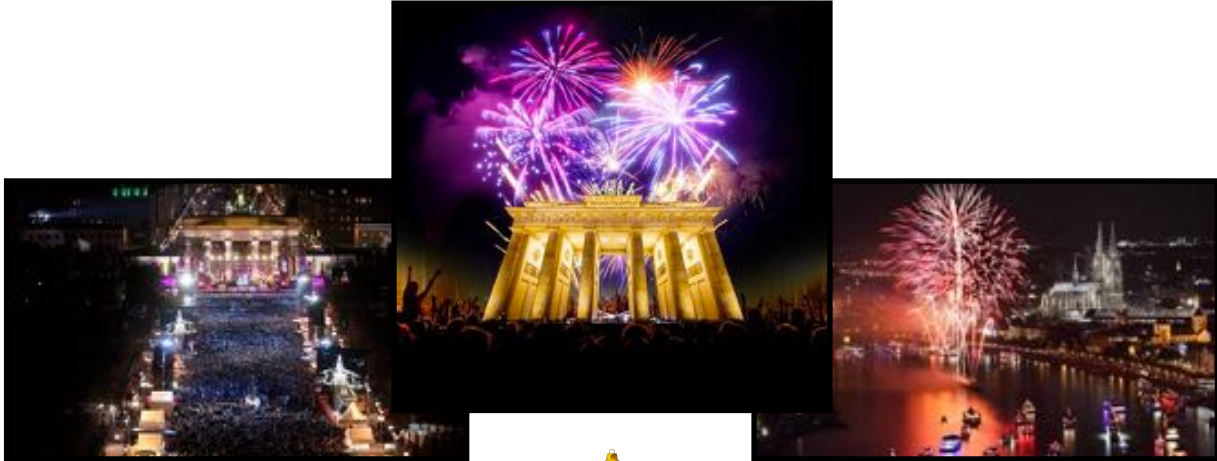
Plätzchen are simply Christmas cookies of nearly any variety. Traditionally they are formed with cookie cutters or by dough spritzers, and come in a huge variety of shapes, sizes, spices and flavors.

Plätzchen simply means 'cookie' in parts of Southern Germany and Austria. In Northern Germany, "Kekse" is used for most year-round cookies, and "Plätzchen" refers mostly to Christmas-style cookies.



Silvester = New Year's Eve

Germans celebrate New Year's Eve like many other countries: with grand parties, dances, countdowns to midnight, and fireworks. The German name for New Year's Eve is simply Silvester.



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Sternsinger = Star Singers, Epiphany Singers

At the end of the Christmas season in Southern Germany, particularly in Catholic regions, a curious tradition called "Sternsinger" can be observed. On January 6th -- Epiphany, or the day when the Wise Men came to visit the baby Jesus in the Bible -- groups of children from a church wander the neighborhoods, stopping at houses to sing small songs and give their blessings to the house.



When the Sternsinger bless a house, they place a chalk marking over the front door, with the initials C + M + B surrounded by the year. (For example, 2017 would be "20 C + M + B 17".) The initials are the legendary names of the Three Kings: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar, or possibly also the Latin phrase "Christus Mansionem Benedicat" (Christ bless this house).

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Weihnachtslieder = Christmas Carols

There are dozens of famous Christmas songs in Germany. You can find many on YouTube if you're interested, but here are a small selection of songs you might know.

<i>Alle Jahre wieder</i>	<i>In dulci jubilo</i>	<i>O Tannenbaum</i>
<i>Am Weihnachtsbaum die Lichter brennen</i>	<i>Joseph, lieber Joseph mein</i>	<i>Schneeflöckchen, Weißröckchen</i>
<i>Der Christbaum ist der schönste Baum</i>	<i>Kling, Glöckchen, klingelingeling</i>	<i>Still, still, still</i>
<i>Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen</i>	<i>Kommet, ihr Hirten</i>	<i>Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht</i>
<i>Es ist für uns eine Zeit angekommen</i>	<i>Lasst uns froh und munter sein</i>	<i>Süßer die Glocken nie klingen</i>
<i>Es wird schon gleich dunkel</i>	<i>Leise rieselt der Schnee</i>	<i>Tochter Zion, freue dich</i>
<i>Freu dich, Erd' und Sternenzelt</i>	<i>Morgen, Kinder, wird's was geben</i>	<i>Vom Himmel hoch, da komm' ich her</i>
<i>Fröhliche Weihnacht überall</i>	<i>Morgen kommt der Weihnachtsmann</i>	<i>Was soll das bedeuten</i>
<i>Ich steh' an deiner Krippen hier</i>	<i>O du fröhliche</i>	<i>Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern</i>
<i>Ihr Kinderlein kommet</i>	<i>O Jesulein zart</i>	<i>Zu Bethlehem geboren</i>



Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht

First composed and performed on Christmas Eve in 1818 in a village outside of Salzburg in Austria, *Silent Night* has become possibly the most-sung Christmas song in the world. Legend says that the church organ was broken and that the song had to be performed only on guitar with a singer; that story may be untrue but the original source of the song is definitely the small village church in Austria.



1. Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,
Alles schläft; einsam wacht
Nur das traute heilige Paar.
Holder Knabe im lockigen Haar,
Schlafe in himmlischer Ruh!
Schlafe in himmlischer Ruh!

2. Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,
Hirten erst kundgemacht
Durch der Engel Halleluja,
Tönt es laut von fern und nah:
Christ, der Retter ist da!
Christ, der Retter ist da!

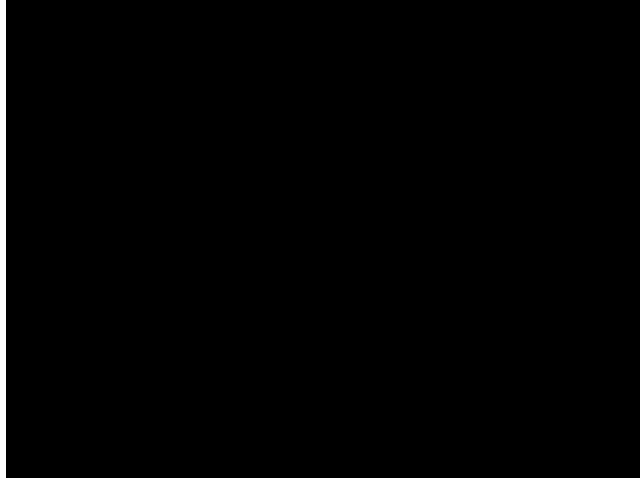
3. Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,
Gottes Sohn, o wie lacht
Lieb aus deinem göttlichen Mund,
Da uns schlägt die rettende Stund'.
Jesus, in deiner Geburt!
Jesus, in deiner Geburt!



O du Fröhliche

O du Fröhliche ("Oh, you joyful Christmas time") was composed in the early 1800s in Weimar, Germany. The tune predates the lyrics, but the German lyrics became well-known and it is one of the more popular German Christmas carols today.

1. O du fröhliche, o du selige,
gnadenbringende Weihnachtszeit!
Welt ging verloren, Christ ist geboren:
Freue, freue dich, o Christenheit!
2. O du fröhliche, o du selige,
gnadenbringende Weihnachtszeit!
Christ ist erschienen, uns zu versöhnen:
Freue, freue dich, o Christenheit!
3. O du fröhliche, o du selige,
gnadenbringende Weihnachtszeit!
Himmlische Heere jauchzen Dir Ehre:
Freue, freue dich, o Christenheit!



Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen

One of the oldest Christmas carols still sung today, "*Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen*" is known in English as "*Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*". It was documented before 1600 in several sources, and is still sung today with slightly 'old-fashioned' German lyrics using several grammatical structures that are no longer in common use.

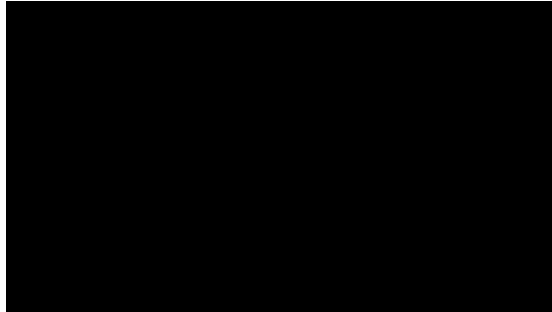


Lasst uns froh und munter sein

This popular song is sung around December 5th, when children are preparing for the visit of Saint Nicolas. "Let us be joyful and cheerful" was written in the 1800s and is still sung by most children in Germany today.

Lasst uns froh und munter sein
und uns recht vom Herzen freuen!
Lustig, lustig, tralalera!
Bald ist Nikolausabend da!

Dann stelle ich den Teller auf,
Nikolaus legt gewiß was drauf.
Lustig, lustig, tralalera!
Bald ist Nikolausabend da!



Wenn ich aufgestanden bin,
laufe ich schnell zum Teller hin.
Lustig, lustig, tralalera!
Bald ist Nikolausabend da!

Nikolaus ist ein guter Mann,
dem man nicht genug danken kann.
Lustig, lustig, tralalera!
Bald ist Nikolausabend da!

Wenn ich schlafe,
dann träume ich,
jetzt bringt Nikolaus was für mich.
Lustig, lustig, tralalera!
Bald ist Nikolausabend da!



Leise rieselt der Schnee

One of the most beloved German Christmas carols, *Leise rieselt der Schnee* ("Softly falls the snow") was written in 1895, although the tune existed for nearly 100 years before.

Leise rieselt der Schnee,
Still und starr ruht der See,
Weihnachtlich glänzet der Wald:
Freue dich, Christkind kommt bald.

In den Herzen ist's warm,
Still schweigt Kummer und Harm,
Sorge des Lebens verhallt:
Freue dich, Christkind kommt bald.

Bald ist die heilige Nacht;
Chor der Engel erwacht;
Horch' nur, wie lieblich es schallt:
Freue dich, Christkind kommt bald.





**Frohe Weihnachten
und einen guten Rutsch ins neue Jahr!**

Merry Christmas and a Good 'Slide' into the New Year!

