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New Year, Lasting Traditions

Another new year begins, and all around the world people will be popping champagne, singing “Auld Lang Syne,” and kissing loved ones at the stroke of midnight. But just why, exactly, do we repeat these New Year’s traditions year after year?

Bubbly champagne is the drink of choice on New Year’s. Its invention is often credited to Dom Perignon, the Benedictine monk who oversaw the wine cellars of his abbey in the year 1697. While others saw bubbles as a problematic sign that wine had spoiled, Perignon perfected the production of this new fermented drink known as champagne. From its beginnings in the abbey cellar, champagne was regularly used in religious celebrations such as consecrations and coronations. It then made the natural transition to secular celebrations, most notably at the soirees of the French aristocracy. As champagne became cheaper and more accessible, it became the classiest beverage to offer during the holidays.

Scotland’s national poet Robert Burns penned the words to “Auld Lang Syne” in 1788 and sent them to the Scots Musical Museum, requesting that his lyrics be set to an old Scottish folk tune. The phrase *auld lang syne* roughly translates to “for old times’ sake,” and, fittingly, the nostalgic song is about preserving friendships. The tune was often sung at funerals, farewells, and other group celebrations. It finally made it to America in 1929, when the Guy Lombardo Orchestra played it at a New Year’s celebration in New York’s Roosevelt Hotel.

No New Year’s party is complete without a kiss at the stroke of midnight. In ancient times, the winter darkness was the domain of evil spirits. At New Year’s masquerade balls, scary masks were torn off at midnight, and a kiss was shared as an act of purification to chase away malign spirits. For centuries, New Year’s has been a time of celebration, nostalgia, and hope.

Celebrating January

Braille Literacy Month

Soup Month

Fruitcake Toss Day

January 3

Cuddle Up Day

January 6

Make Your Dream Come True Day

January 13

Popcorn Day

January 19

Martin Luther King Jr. Day

January 21

Australia Day

January 26

Puzzle Day

January 29

Making Sense



In January of 1776, just months before America made its Declaration of Independence from Great Britain, American propagandist Thomas Paine published his pamphlet *Common Sense*. In *Common Sense*, Paine not only set forth a list of compelling reasons for independence but he also was able to transform the colonists’ vision of themselves. Paine argued that England was not the parent country of America and that colonists were not simply aggrieved subjects. Rather, colonists had fled to America from the whole of Europe, seeking peace from violent oppression and self-realization from monstrous tyranny. Many historians believe that Paine’s pamphlet was the glue that united average folk with American political leaders, turning a colonial squabble into a full-fledged war. Paine’s 47-page pamphlet sold 500,000 copies, and although it was published anonymously, Paine’s name would enter history books alongside heroes like Washington and Revere.

January Birthdays

In astrology, those born between January 1–19 are Capricorn’s Goats. Goats are focused on lofty goals; these hardworking and determined souls will prevail with grit and resilience. Those born between January 20–31 are Water Bearers of Aquarius. Water Bearers are deep-thinking intellectuals, unafraid of exploring outlandish ideas. Their strong sense of community makes them good friends and valuable team members.

- Betsy Ross (folk hero) – January 1, 1752
- Zora Neale Hurston (writer) – January 7, 1891
- David Bowie (musician) – January 8, 1947
- Alexander Hamilton (politician) – January 11, 1755
- Faye Dunaway (actress) – January 14, 1941
- A.A. Milne (writer) – January 18, 1882
- Edgar Allan Poe (writer) – January 19, 1809
- Benny Hill (comedian) – January 21, 1924
- Virginia Woolf (writer) – January 25, 1882
- Bessie Coleman (aviator) – January 26, 1892
- Tom Selleck (actor) – January 29, 1945

A Birthday Mystery

Happy birthday to Sherlock Holmes, who is believed to have been born on January 6, 1854. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, never explicitly stated the date of his fictional detective's birth, so how, exactly, have we arrived at this birth date?



The January 6 date was first asserted by Christopher Morley, a literary essayist and Sherlock Holmes superfan. Morley decided on the date after noticing Holmes' penchant for quoting Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night*. He deduced that Holmes' birthday must fall on the twelfth night after Christmas, which is January 6. On that date in 1934, Morley arranged a meeting of the Baker Street Irregulars, a group of Sherlock Holmes fans and scholars who gathered together to enjoy all things Sherlockian over the course of a few days, including lectures, dinners, cocktail parties, and performances. Morley's group has included such esteemed members as Isaac Asimov, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Harry S. Truman. The original Baker Street Irregulars appeared in various Sherlock Holmes stories. They were a band of street kids who aided Holmes in gathering tidbits of information.

Sherlock Holmes scholar William S. Baring-Gould corroborates the January 6 date in a roundabout fashion. He points out that in Doyle's final Sherlock Holmes mystery, *The Valley of Fear*, Holmes awakes very cranky on January 7. Why is he cranky? He must have a hangover. Why a hangover? He was up late celebrating. What was Holmes celebrating? Baring-Gould postulates that it was his birthday. However, many attest that this is all rather shoddy detective work.

Not everyone agrees that Sherlock Holmes' birthday is January 6. Many instead celebrate Holmes' birthday on December 2, the real-life birthday of Dr. Joseph Bell, the surgeon and professor after whom Sir Arthur Conan Doyle modeled his detective. Yet all agree on the year 1854, for in a 1914 tale, Holmes was described as 60 years old. Elementary, my dear.

Bye-Bye to Dry

The cold, dry winter air can wreak havoc on sensitive skin and cause chronic dryness. Luckily, January 8 is Winter Skin Relief Day, a day to take some small steps to ease the discomfort of dry skin. Skin lotions and moisturizers are helpful, but dermatologists also recommend taking shorter showers. This may be the number one cause of dry skin. A long, hot shower strips the skin of its natural oils, degrading our best barrier against cold, dry air. Dermatologist Joshua Zeichner recommends showers less than 10 minutes and no hotter than 84 degrees. Many common cleansers and soaps are alkaline, and washing often disrupts the natural acidic pH of our skin. Look for soaps that are pH balanced. These will have a less deleterious effect on the skin. Moisturizer is key. Applying a thick and oily cream while the skin is still damp will improve absorption, but don't apply too much. Dr. Zeichner explains that constant moisturizing may tell the skin that it doesn't need to maintain its own hydration. These small changes to your routine may ease some uncomfortable symptoms of dry skin.

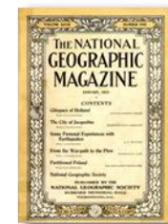
Burst Your Bubble



We wrap up the last Monday in January with Bubble Wrap Day, a day to pop to your heart's content. Why do we get such satisfaction from popping bubble wrap? The answer may lie in the healing power of touch. Psychology professor Kathleen Dillon turned to the ancient Greeks for an answer, and she came up with a "fingering piece" or "worry stone," often a smooth stone carried in a pocket. Rubbing the stone with one's fingers brought about a soothing sense of calm. The same sense of relaxation has been attributed to Catholic rosary beads and the practice of doing needlework. Keeping our fingers busy, it seems, has an intensely calming effect. So, too, does popping bubble wrap. When we are stressed, our muscles tense. Tiny actions such as rubbing stones, tapping fingers, wiggling feet, or popping bubble wrap release nervous energy, and with each burst bubble, more tension is released and the happier we get.

A History of Exploration

On January 13, 1888, an elite group of 33 explorers, scientists, academics, and wealthy financiers met at the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C., with a common goal: "the increase and diffusion of geographical knowledge." Their organization was officially incorporated two weeks later, on January 27, as the National Geographic Society. The Society's first president, Gardiner Greene Hubbard, was not a scientist but a lawyer and philanthropist. He embodied the organization's mission to share scientific knowledge with the layperson and to open up the world to everyone.



It took nine months for National Geographic to publish its first magazine, and it was not meant for a popular audience. It was a scholarly journal filled with short, technical articles mailed to only 165 charter members. Then in 1899, Gilbert H. Grosvenor was hired as the magazine's full-time editor by Society president Alexander Graham Bell. Grosvenor changed the publication from a scholarly journal into a popular magazine full of general interest articles and full-color photography. Its images were so striking and beautiful that circulation grew from just 1,000 to over two million. Grosvenor became known as one of the "fathers" of photojournalism and one of the champions of creating a national parks system in America. Grosvenor's legacy continues today, with the magazine's worldwide circulation at 6.7 million.

The *National Geographic* magazine is certainly the Society's most important and well-known outlet for spreading knowledge, and all revenue from the magazine is used to sponsor new expeditions and research. Indeed, the National Geographic Society has aided some of the world's most fascinating explorations: Robert Peary's journey to the North Pole, Jacques Cousteau's dives to the deepest parts of the seas, Hiram Bingham's uncovering of Machu Picchu, and Jane Goodall's communes with chimpanzees. For over 130 years, it has stood by its original motto, and it continues to make important discoveries, such as an ancient megalopolis hidden in the Amazon jungle and new species of tarantula living in the Andes mountains.

Healthy Skepticism

Once you hear that January 13 is International Skeptics Day, you might want to check the date for yourself, because some people claim that this holiday falls on October 13, while others insist that it always falls on the first Friday the 13th of the year. It turns out that a little skepticism is healthy, even when it comes to science. Skepticism, after all, urges us to corroborate what we learn by seeking supporting facts, whether in the field of science, politics, relationships, or just about anything. Too much skepticism, though, can lead to cynicism and denial, even in the face of overwhelming evidence. Similarly, a lack of skepticism can lead to naivete and being taken advantage of. When psychologists talk about healthy skepticism, they are talking about that "Goldilocks" area—not too much, not too little, but just the right amount. If this sounds plausible to you, perhaps you should consider joining the Skeptics Society, a group emphasizing critical thinking as a means to resist pseudoscience, superstition, and irrational belief. Then again, you might want to do a background check on those folks first.

A Life in Words



Amazing. Stupendous. Astounding. Those are just a few ways to describe Thesaurus Day on January 18. This day commemorates the birth of Peter Mark Roget, who published the world's first thesaurus in 1852. Roget enjoyed making lists as a young boy but then moved on to a life of medicine and science. However, he never forgot his passion for words. In 1840, Roget retired from medicine and spent the rest of his life on his dictionary of synonyms, which he called *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases Classified and Arranged so as to Assist in Literary Composition*. His thesaurus was originally organized not alphabetically, but by concepts like *Space*, *Matter*, *Intellect*, and *Existence*. His handy tome has never been out of print and has sold more than 40 million copies—a countless, innumerable, and multitudinous number.