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Magician with a Mission

Arctic Express

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Study Guide

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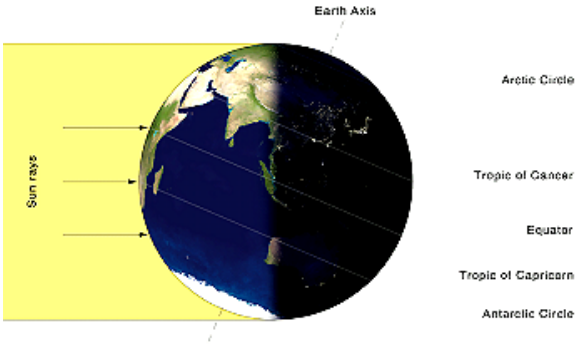
Artists on Tour

The Winter Solstice

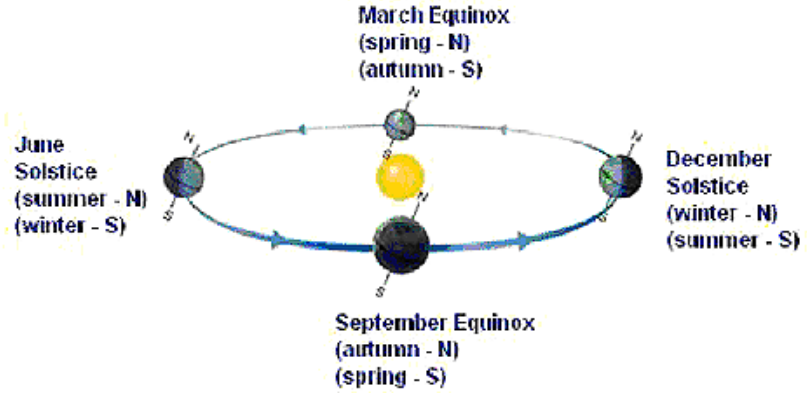
The Winter Solstice is on the shortest day or longest night of the year. This astronomical event occurs sometime between December 20 and 23 each year in the Northern Hemisphere and between June 20 and 23 in the Southern Hemisphere. This marks the astronomical beginning of winter when the sun is at its greatest distance from the equatorial plane.



What Causes the Seasons?

The Earth is actually nearer the sun in January than it is in June — by three million miles. This is pretty much irrelevant when you consider that the earth is about 150 million miles away from the sun. What causes the seasons is something completely different. As you can see in the illustration above, the Earth leans slightly on its axis like a spinning top frozen in an off-kilter position. Astronomers have even pinpointed the precise angle of the tilt — 23 degrees and 27 minutes. This planetary pose is what causes all the variety of our climate since it determines how many hours and minutes each hemisphere receives precious sunlight. In the illustration above, you can see that the Southern Hemisphere gets most of the direct sunlight in this position, so the Northern Hemisphere is experiencing winter. As the earth moves through its orbit around the sun which takes a full year, the tilted axis remains the same but different parts of the earth get more or less sunlight and thus experience different seasons throughout the year.

The worldwide interpretation of the Winter Solstice varies from culture to culture, but most hold a recognition of rebirth involving festivals, gatherings, rituals or other celebrations. Many cultures celebrate (or celebrated) a holiday near the winter solstice.



You can learn more about the Winter Solstice by researching these websites:

- http://scienceworld.wolfram.com/astronomy/WinterSolstice.html
- www.circlesanctuary.org/pholidays/SolsticePlanningGuide.html
- www.candlegrove.com/solstice.html

Holiday Celebrations

Chanukah

Chanukah is the Jewish festival of lights that commemorates the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after the Maccabees defeated the Syrians. Every Jewish house of workship has a N'er Tamid, a lamp that is lit and never extinguished to represent eternal light. When the Maccabees went to light the N'er Tamid for the rededication of the Temple they only had enough oil to light the lamp for one day. But a miracle occurred and the lamp stayed lit for eight days. Chanukah, which means "rededication," is celebrated for eight days on the 25th of the Hebrew month of Kislev, the same day the Temple was rededicated.

Christmas

Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, the son of God, who was sent to absolve humans of their sins. Many of the traditions associated with Christmas were adopted from Pagans celebrations already in existence at the time of Christ's birth. Another figure largely associated with Christmas is Santa Claus (aka Saint Nicholas, Kris Kringle, Father Christmas). Saint Nicholas was a real person, a Bishop of Myra (what is now known as Turkey), who was known for his charity and wisdom. According to legend he was from a wealthy family and gave his wealth to the poor. The legend of Saint Nicholas traveled to Europe in the 11th century and a tradition of giving gifts to children and the poor developed. Gift giving is also associated with the gifts given to Christ at his birth by the Three Kings.

Diwali

Diwali is a five day festival of lights celebrated by Hindus. They believe light is a gift from God and a symbol of knowledge. Light reveals the beauty of the world and lighting a lamp symbolizes the destruction, through knowledge, of all negative forces—wickedness, violence, lust, anger, envy, greed, bigotry, fear, injustice, oppression and suffering. Lighting the lamps also symbolizes lighting the lamp of knowledge within us, and each day of the celebration is a day of reflection. Traditionally little clay lamps were lit, but in modern times colored electric lamps are also used.

Kwanzaa

Kwanzaa is an African American and Pan-African holiday, celebrated from December 26 thru January 1, that emphasizes family, community, and culture. Its name and origins come from African harvest celebrations. The Swahili phrase “matunda ya kwanza” means “first fruits,” the first fruits of a harvest. In the United States, Kwanzaa was created by Dr. Maulana Karenga, professor and chair of the Department of Black Studies at California State University, Long Beach, in 1966 during the Civil Rights Movement and when many African Americans wanted to create a stronger community. Kwanzaa stresses seven principles (Nguzo Saba): unity (Umoja), self-determination (Kujichagulia), collective work and responsibility (Ujima), cooperative economics (Ujamaa), purpose (Nia), creativity (Kuumba), faith (Imani). Since Kwanzaa is a cultural holiday and not a religious one, it can be celebrated by members of all religions and combine with any religious holiday.

Swahili is a Pan-African language, used throughout Africa to make communication easier between different groups who don’t have the same language or customs.

Ramadan

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Muslim calendar and is also believed to be the month in which the Holy Quran was relayed to the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims observe that month with a daily fast. At the end of each day, the fast is broken with a prayer and a meal. It is also a time to reflect on one’s faith, a time of workship and contemplation. On the evening of the 27th of the month, Muslims celebrate the Laylat-al-Qadr (the Night of Power). This is when Muhammad received the Holy Quran and also when God determined the course of the world for the next year. The fast is broken on the first day of the Muslim Month of Shawwal with a three day celebration, where friends and family gather for large meals and exchange gifts.

Activities & Discussion

Winter Holiday Celebrations

In the *Arctic Express* program, we learned about different ways people celebrate the Winter Holiday Season. Let's learn a little more about these celebrations.

Put a circle around the way your family celebrates the Winter Holiday Season. Then put a check mark next to a different celebration that you don't know much about but would like to learn more.

Diwali	Kwanza	Christmas
Ramadan	Chanukah	Other: _____

Using books from the library, encyclopedias, the internet, or talk to a classmate who celebrates that holiday, see if you can find the answers to the following questions. Be ready to help your classmates by telling about your family celebrations!

1. What holiday did you choose to learn more about?_____
2. When is this celebration observed?

3. When did people first begin this celebration?

4. What is the purpose of this celebration?

5. What is a story (legend or myth) associated with this celebration? Are there others?

6. What do people do in order to participate in this celebration?

7. What are some of the symbols associated with this celebration? What is the meaning of these symbols?

You can learn more about these holidays by looking at websites like these:

- www.diwalifestival.org
- www.holidays.net/chanukah
- www.holidays.net/ramadan/
- www.holidays.net/christmas
- www.holidays.net/kwanzaa/index.htm
- www.officalkawanzaawebsite.org

Discussion

1. Why do you think we celebrate holidays?

2. What is your favorite holiday? Why?

3. Are there similarities in the celebrations mentioned in Arctic Express?

4. Why do some holidays change dates each year?