

# From Japan to Iraq, Estonia to Finland: Valentine's Traditions From Around The World

What would you do if your beloved gave you a wooden spoon on Valentine's Day?

Although you might be confused if you're used to chocolates in a heart-shaped box, if you happen to have grown up in Wales, that would be perfectly normal. Young men there typically present "love spoons" to their paramours, a tradition inspired by Welsh sailors creating homemade gifts for their sweethearts while at sea. The "love spoon" exchange, along with many other global Valentine's Day traditions, shows that old-fashioned romance isn't dead.

Countries around the world have one-of-a-kind customs that range from Estonia's "love bus" rides for singles to mass weddings in the Philippines. While the actual practices can vary in date and target audience (some traditions specifically celebrate the singles among us!), citizens of many countries set aside time to commemorate some sort of commitment. In some places, the difference in approach to the day is even more stark, as public displays of love and affection are outright banned on February 14.

## **South Korea**

Like in Japan, many women in South Korea spend Valentine's Day showering men with gifts, and also like in Japan, it's the men who do the giving on White Day, March 14. But South Korea takes things a step further with a third holiday. On April 14, known as Black Day, single friends gather to eat noodles and celebrate their (lack of) relationship status. The holiday takes its name from the noodle dish, which includes white noodles in a black bean sauce. Black Day celebrations are spirited and fun, but somber in origin — the black food symbolizes sorrow, according to Smithsonian magazine.

## **Japan**

Japanese women don't wait for men to make the first move, at least on Valentine's Day. For one day of the year, Japanese women traditionally give men gifts and affection, instead of the other way around. One particularly popular gift is chocolate — homemade honmei-choco for the object of your desire or store-bought giri-choco as a non-romantic sign of affection for friends and coworkers — explains the Japan National Tourism Organization. The nation's men return the favor on March 14, known as White Day, when guys give women white chocolate or other white gifts.

## **Iraq**

Exchanging over-the-top gifts for Valentine's Day may seem like a Western tradition, but Iraqis also celebrate February 14 in style. In Iraq, huge teddy bears, red roses, and traditional Valentine's Day cards are common. Al Arabiya explains that on Valentine's Day, all of Baghdad appears to be overtaken by the color red. That said, conservative Muslims don't celebrate the day and view it as a Western holiday.

## **Slovenia**

In Slovenia, February 14 is considered a great day for working in the fields, according to many reports. St. Valentine is one of the patron saints of spring, so what better time to get out on the farm or vineyard after the long winter and start working on the future harvest? All isn't lost for lovers, though. Roughly a month later, Slovenians traditionally celebrate St. Gregory's Day, March 12, as a romantic holiday.

## **Saudi Arabia**

Valentine's Day is officially banned in Saudi Arabia. In the days before February 14, it's illegal to sell roses and love-themed greeting cards in the desert kingdom, where conservative Muslims believe the holiday promotes alcohol consumption and premarital sex, BBC News explains. If you happen to be there, you're likely to encounter officers from Saudi Arabia's Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, especially if you engage in any public displays of affection (those are also punishable by law, according to the International Business Times. One shop owner in Saudi Arabia told WorldPost that there's a sort of underground market for red roses; customers place the orders over the phone, and the secret gifts are hidden in the back of the store, in case police inspect the retailer. Saudi Arabia isn't the only country to clamp down on Valentine's Day. Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia have enacted similar bans.

## **Estonia & Finland**

All aboard the love bus! While Estonia celebrates Friend's Day on February 14, the country also has an interesting tradition for single people. Those not romantically attached on Valentine's Day can take a ride on the love bus — yes, it's really called that — in the hopes of meeting someone special, EuroNews reports. And even if you don't meet your match aboard the bus, taking the ride with your other pals is your Friend's Day consolation prize. In Finland, February 14 is also known as Friend's Day — a holiday traditionally celebrated with your entire squad, not just your significant other. Cards and gifts are still in order, but for everybody. Even if Friend's Day sounds a lot like a kinder name for Singles Awareness Day, there are still plenty of people in the Nordic country, where public displays of affection are rare, who

celebrate their romantic relationships on February 14: it's a popular day to get engaged, and stores are full of heart-shaped Valentine's Day paraphernalia.

### **Philippines**

How would you feel about sharing your wedding day with another couple? We think of brides and grooms as loving the spotlight, but that's not necessarily the case on Valentine's Day in the Philippines, where couples line up for mass weddings on February 14th. On Valentine's Day in 2013, 200 couples married in one ceremony in Quezon City, for example, and a total 4,000 couples were married throughout the country Xinhua reports.

### **Brazil**

Brazil celebrates its version of Valentine's Day, Dia dos Namorados, in June. The holiday on June 12 is timed to coincide with St. Anthony's Day on June 13. St. Anthony of Padua died on June 13, 1231 and is considered by some to be the patron saint of marriage. Dia dos Namorados, which roughly translates to "Lovers' Day," or "Boyfriends' /Girlfriends' Day," is celebrated with gifts and decorations similar to those traditionally found on Valentine's Day. Celebrating in June also leaves more time in February for Carnival, the raucous annual festival timed to coincide with the beginning of Lent.

### **Wales**

So it's not technically a Valentine's Day tradition, but rather than professing their love on February 14, the Welsh celebrate St. Dwynwen's Day on January 25. Wales Online explains that St. Dwynwen is the "Welsh patron saint of lovers" and men traditionally give women hand-carved wooden spoons as a romantic gesture. The custom is thought to have originated when Welsh sailors carved designs into wooden spoons while at sea to bring back to the women at home.

### **United Kingdom**

The aura of mystery is alive and well on Valentine's Day in the U.K. In a tradition dating back to the Victorian era, Brits traditionally send anonymous valentines to their romantic interests. The Telegraph explains that the Victorians believed signing your name on the card was considered bad luck. The U.K. also claims responsibility for starting the practice of giving roses on Valentine's Day, since that flower was traditionally seen as the favorite of Venus, the Roman goddess of love, The Telegraph notes. (Denmark also has a similar tradition of sending anonymous cards to mark the holiday.)