



## Tomte (Sweden)

Christmas begins in Sweden with the Saint Lucia ceremony. Before dawn on the morning of 13 December, the youngest daughter from each family puts on a white robe with a red sash. She wears a crown of evergreens with tall-lighted candles attached to it. She wakes her parents, and serves them with coffee and Lucia buns. The other children accompany her. The boys dressed as star boys in long white shirts and pointed hats.

The custom goes back to Lucia, a Christian virgin martyred for her beliefs at Syracuse in the fourth century. The Saint Lucia ceremony is fairly recent, but it represents the traditional thanksgiving for the return of the sun. Often she is followed by star boys, who wear pointed hats, and carry star wands.

Candle-lit processions to Church feature Scandinavian Christmases, where, in the home, it is mother who always lights the candles on Christmas Eve.

Christmas trees are usually found in Swedish homes two days before Christmas. Decoration may include candles, apples, Swedish flags, small gnomes wearing red tasseled caps, straw ornaments. The houses may be filled with red tulips and smell like pepparkakor, which is a heart-star, or goat-shaped gingerbread biscuit. Swedish Julafton, or Christmas Eve dinner may be a smorgasbord, or buffet with jultskinka, or Christmas ham, pickled pigs feet, lutfisk, or dried codfish, and many different kinds of sweets. Risgryngrot a special rice porridge, has hidden in it an almond which as tradition has it the person who finds the almond in his or her bowl will marry in the coming year.

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After Christmas Eve dinner, a friend or family member dresses up as tomte or Christmas gnome. The tomte, unlike Santa Claus is supposed to live under the floorboards of the house or barn and ride a straw goat. The make-believe tomte, wearing a white beard and dressed in red robes, distributes gifts from his sack. Many are given with funny rhyme that hints at the contents.

