

FOOD + HOME/HOLIDAYS

Welcoming Back the Light: Fun Ways to Celebrate the Winter Solstice

Family-friendly ways to celebrate the return of the sun

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Christmas is arguably the biggest holiday of the year in modern-day America. But long before there was Christmas, cultures around the world celebrated the winter solstice on the shortest day of winter (Dec. 21 this year). There is still value in pausing to honor the natural world and mark the passage of the seasons with a holiday that is noncommercial and – for most people – secular. But it can be hard to make time for yet another winter holiday. Fortunately, solstice celebrations don't have to be elaborate, and many solstice traditions dovetail nicely with other winter holidays. And if you're really stretched thin, there are a lot of family-friendly solstice events to enjoy as a break from shopping.

What is winter solstice?

Solstice (<https://www.weather.gov/cle/Seasons>) is an astronomical term that refers to the two days of the year when the Earth's tilt results in the greatest disparity between the length of the day and the night. Here in Seattle, thanks to the Fremont neighborhood's annual celebration, we are much more familiar with the summer solstice, when we experience the longest day of the year. At the winter solstice, the southern hemisphere is tilted towards the sun and we in the north experience our longest night of the year. Both days have historically been celebrations dedicated to the sun. While the summer solstice celebrates the abundance of sunshine, the winter solstice celebrates the return of the sun. After the longest night of the year on the winter solstice, we see a few more minutes of sunlight every day until the summer solstice.

Celebrating winter solstice

Around the world, winter solstice is often associated with gift-giving and feasting. The precise rituals of pre-Christian European pagans were lost centuries ago, so modern Wiccans and Ásatrú have developed their own solstice rituals to celebrate the passage through the darkest days of winter and return to the brighter days of spring. But you don't have to be a pagan to benefit from pausing to acknowledge the progression of the seasons.

We can see vestiges of ancient winter solstice celebrations (<https://historycollection.com/16-pagan-christmas-traditions-that-people-mistakenly-credit-to-christianity/>), in the traditions of modern religious holidays like Christmas and Hanukkah. The old Norse solstice holiday loaned its name to the Christmas season; Yule also started the tradition of decking the halls with greenery. The Roman solstice holiday of Saturnalia (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-unexpected-pagan-origins-of-popular-christmas-traditions/>) is sometimes credited as the origin of the Christmas tree. With a little mindfulness, many Christmas traditions can do double duty for the solstice.

A quiet evening spent at home with the family lit only by candlelight is a nourishing pause from the merry bustle. Making a ceremony out of lighting a fire in the fireplace is another way to celebrate the light (the original Yule log was a literal log, not a dessert). You can hang mistletoe as a sign of peace rather than romance, and decorating with natural materials instead of tinsel is another way to honor the natural world. Many holiday crafts, such as making pomanders (the round oranges represent the sun) or paper lanterns, are also ways to draw attention to the solstice. Reading solstice-themed picture books like Susan Cooper's "The Shortest Day" (<https://www.amazon.com/Shortest-Day-Susan-Cooper/dp/0763686980?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20>) (or one of several others with the same title) and "Winter: A Solstice Story" (<https://www.amazon.com/Winter-Solstice-Story-Kelsey-Gross/dp/1665908130/?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20>)" at bedtime is a relaxing way to teach kids about natural cycles and old traditions.



Local winter solstice celebrations

If you just want someone else to do the planning, there are many winter solstice events around the Seattle area where all you have to do is show up. Join one of these celebrations and keep an eye on the [ParentMap calendar](https://www.parentmap.com/calendar) (<https://www.parentmap.com/calendar>) to find more.

Night Market and Luminary Walk **(<https://www.piercecountywa.gov/8139/Winter-Solstice-Celebration>),** **Frontier Park, Graham**

Graham's celebration is an indoor/outdoor night market filled with local crafts, a food truck and a magical walk along a candle-lit path where you can make wildlife-friendly ornaments, learn about winter solstice traditions, design your own candle lantern and sample seasonal snacks. *Dec. 16 (admission to the Night Market is free, the Luminary Walk is \$5 per person)*

Seward Solstice Run (<https://nwtrailruns.com/events/seward-solstice-run>), **Seward Park, Seattle**

Whether you run – or dress – competitively (there is a costume contest) or just for fun, this 4.2-mile race gets the whole family moving and out among the trees of Seward Park. There's a 10k version for the very fit. *Dec. 16 (\$36 adult; \$26 youth)*

Solstice With Sasquatch (<https://www.museumofflight.org/exhibits-and-events/calendar-of-events/7889/solstice-with-sasquatch>), **The Museum of Flight, Seattle**

By the time solstice rolls around, your family may be a little tired of hanging out with Santa. So spend a Saturday making art with Sasquatch at the Museum of Flight instead. While you're waiting for the big guy to make his appearance, you can visit the museum, engage in a variety of art activities, and enjoy seasonal music and hot chocolate. *Dec. 16 (Free with museum admission)*

Winter Bonsai Solstice (<https://pacificbonsaimuseum.org/events/a-bonsai-solstice-2023/>), Pacific Bonsai Museum, Federal Way

Celebrate greenery and light with an evening at the bonsai museum. After dark on Dec. 16 the museum's world-renowned bonsai collection will be illuminated with soft holiday lights. After viewing the trees, visitors can shop for goodies at the gift shop and Matt Fimiano's glass art pop-up, sip free hot chocolate and listen to holiday music. Dec. 16 (\$12 suggested donation for adults)

Tales for the Light and Dark of Winter (<https://www.folioseattle.org/event-details/tales-for-the-light-and-dark-of-winter-a-cello-and-storytelling-duo-for-the-winter-solstice>), Folio: The Seattle Athenium, Seattle

Seattle's private library hosts cellist Michelle Dodson and storyteller Merna Ann Hecht for a performance of music and story to celebrate the return of light during the lengthening days of winter. Although families may opt out of the wine reception that follows, children ages nine and up will appreciate this more sophisticated version of story time. Dec. 17 (\$18)

Solstice Walks (<https://bloedelreserve.org/solstice-2023/>), Bloedel Reserve, Bainbridge Island

At its heart, solstice is a nature holiday. So what could be better than a guided walk through the forest by lantern light? Guests meet at the gatehouse at sunset for a 1.5-mile trail walk that takes about an hour. The walks on Dec. 18 and 20 are ideal for families; on Dec. 19 and 21, the walks are silent. Dress for the weather and keep a hot thermos in the car to warm up on your way home. Dec. 18–21 (Advance ticket required; \$25 adult; \$5 child 6–10 years old; children 5 and younger are free)

Winter Solstice Family Storytime (<https://kcls.bibliocommons.com/events/65564ed1eb28943d00781515>), King County Library, Sammamish

Celebrate the longest night on the morning of the shortest day at the King County Library's solstice story time. Children up to age five will enjoy stories, music, movement and rhymes followed by a short play time. Dec. 21 (Free)

Solstice at the Farm (<https://anc.apm.activecommunities.com/redmondparksandrec/activity/search?locale=en-US>), Farrel-McWhirter Barnyard, Redmond

On the longest night of the year, the barnyard is decorated with lights and lanterns for a two-hour celebration that includes music, food, poetry, lantern-making, meeting the farm animals and a luminary walk through the forest at night. Dec. 21 (\$30)

Yuletide on Front (<https://downtownissaquah.com/events/yuletide-on-front/>), Historic Downtown Issaquah

While the full title "Yuletide on Front – Make Music Day Winter Celebrates Winter Solstice" is rather perplexing, the event itself is simple: a full afternoon of indoor and outdoor seasonal festivities for all ages. Expect lots of music, arts and crafts, treats and downtown holiday shopping. Dec. 21 (Free)

More festive fun

[Best Holiday Light Displays Around Seattle, the Eastside and South Sound](https://www.parentmap.com/article/best-holiday-light-displays-seattle)
(<https://www.parentmap.com/article/best-holiday-light-displays-seattle>).

[WildLanterns Dazzles at Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo](https://www.parentmap.com/article/wildlanterns-woodland-park-zoo-seattle-families) (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/wildlanterns-woodland-park-zoo-seattle-families>).

[Holiday Shows and Performances for Seattle Families](https://www.parentmap.com/article/let-holidays-show-your-family-good-time) (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/let-holidays-show-your-family-good-time>).

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About the Author



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