

Sinterklaas

During my exchange in The Netherlands, I had the pleasure of experiencing a Dutch winter holiday that occurs in early December. As a fact, 'Sinterklaas' is a traditional winter holiday figure in Dutch-speaking parts of Europe. More interestingly, Sinterklaas is the bases of the holiday figure of 'Santa Claus' in North America. Just as there is a story behind Santa Claus, there is also a story behind this Dutch winter figure. Moreover, like Santa Claus, children are the ones that look forward to this celebration the most because it involves a lot of presents.

Sinterklaas traditionally arrives in The Netherlands each year in mid-November by boat from Spain. This figure is an elderly man with white long hair and beard dressed in red. He carries a book with him and it is told that this book tells whether each individual child has been good or naughty during the past year. Coming along with him are his horse and servants known as 'Zwarte Piet'. These are usually adolescents with their faces painted black, wearing a curly black wig and dressed in colorful dresses. During this day of arrival, Dutch families will bring their children to the harbor and watch the 'arrival' of Sinterklaas on a boat. This is usually accompanied by songs and cheers. The story is told that Sinterklaas and his Zwarte Piet carry a bag that contains candy for nice children, and a chimney sweep's stick for spanking naughty children. Traditionally, in the weeks between the arrival of Sinterklaas and the 5th of December, children put a carrot in their shoes and place it next to the chimney before they go to bed. They leave the shoe with a carrot in it for 'Sinterklaas' horse'. The next day, they will find some candy or a small present in their shoes.



The story of Sinterklaas and his 'big book' is a good way to persuade children to behave themselves or else "no sweets or presents for you". Children are gullible enough to believe that the real Sinterklaas exists, when parents are the real culprits behind presents they receive. Nevertheless, this festivity is also enjoyed by adults and adolescents who are too old to believe in such fairy tales. During Sinterklaas, families get together and celebrate with delicious treats set on the table. Traditional treats include hot chocolate, mandarin oranges, letter-shaped pastry filled with almond paste or chocolate letter, chocolate coins, kruidnoten (gingerbread biscuits) and a figurine of Sinterklaas made of chocolate and wrapped in colored aluminium foil. Even though it is usually a family celebration, but it is still a reason to celebrate nevertheless! Hanging out with international and Dutch friends, watching the arrival of Sinterklaas, and tasting Dutch delicacies made especially for this occasion is definitely recommended!

