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Holiday traditions aren't all cheery. Some are weird or a bit scary.

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Watching a parade of hairy, horned monsters, eating dinner in the middle of the night and trying to talk with a family pet might seem like strange ways to celebrate the holidays. But these activities are popular traditions in other parts of the world.

- Creepy characters

On Dec. 5 at bedtime, children in German-speaking countries leave out a shoe in the hope that a kindly, bearded man named Saint Nicholas will fill it with cookies, chocolates and small gifts. Unlike the Santa Claus we know in the United States, Saint Nicholas has an odd companion: a fearsome half-goat character with pointy horns and a menacing expression. According to legend, this creepy creature - called Knecht Ruprecht in most of Germany and Krampus in Bavaria and Austria - punishes children who misbehave.

Though Krampus and Knecht Ruprecht look frightening, many people find them entertaining. "They might try to scare you, because they mean it to be fun," said Nicole Warner, a German-language teacher in Wisconsin. Adults and kids alike enjoy watching parades featuring the costumed characters, who wave sticks, rattle bells and interact playfully with spectators.

In Switzerland, Saint Nicholas has a sidekick called Schmutzli, which translates roughly to "the dirty one." Don't be alarmed by his scruffy beard and face marked with soot: Schmutzli mostly just gives out candy. "Schmutzli is Santa's helper," Warner said.

Italy's La Befana looks a bit scary, too, but she also delivers treats to children. On the evening of Jan. 5, the old woman zooms around on her broomstick, filling stockings with sweets and sometimes "carbone" (coal in Italian). The coal is actually rock candy, said Diana Garvin, an assistant professor of Italian at the University of Oregon.

- Midnight festivities

While you might be tucked into bed well before midnight on Christmas Eve, many children in Peru and other Spanish-speaking countries attend a late-evening Mass called Misa de Gallo (Mass of the Rooster), says Cecilia McIsaac, director of the Spanish Language Center of Newton, Mass. The Mass got its name from folklore, which says the rooster crowed at midnight only on the night Jesus was born. After the service, families gather for dinner and to exchange gifts, often celebrating into the early-morning hours, McIsaac said.

Children in Poland might stay up late for a different reason: to see whether their pets gain the power of speech. My Polish mother used to tell me the animals could talk at midnight on Christmas Eve, and more than once, I tried chatting with my guinea pigs and cat as the clock struck 12. The idea of talking pets may have originated from stories about how Jesus was born in a manger, surrounded by farm animals.

- Good-luck symbols

In Italy, people try to bring about good fortune by making sure their New Year's Eve outfit includes one specific item: "You wear red underpants for success and good luck," said Garvin.

In northeast Spain, no Christmas Nativity scene is complete without a special figurine: It depicts a traditionally dressed Catalan peasant crouching with his trousers pulled down. While this "pooping figure" might seem undignified - especially in a setting featuring

the newborn Jesus - it's considered a symbol of prosperity and success because the man is thought to be fertilizing the ground.

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LEARN MORE

Watch a Krampus parade in Salzburg, Austria, at bit.ly/KrampusInAustria.

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