

EASTER IN CORFU, GREECE

For Orthodox Christians Easter is considered the most holy of religious celebrations. The Easter Celebrations on Corfu are considered to be one of the most magnificent in the whole of Greece. Many thousands of tourists, from Greece and further afield come each year to be part of these unique celebrations that are traditional Orthodox religious ceremonies and customs from Corfu's rich history.

EASTER PROGRAM

An important part of the Easter Celebration in Corfu is 'Carnival'. The carnival events are part of the worship of the Ancient Greek Gods and the rites performed to ensure a good harvest and healthy animals in the coming spring. The Venetians enhanced these celebrations which precede the forty days of Lenten fasting. The dates of Carnival are tied to Greek Orthodox Easter. The main Carnival celebrations are on the Friday, Saturday and Sunday before "*Clean Monday*" or *Kathari Deftera*, (the first day of Lent) with parties, parades and traditional events. The final Sunday of the Carnival period is known as "Cheese-eating Sunday" or *Tyrofagos* as no meat products are allowed at this time. Macaroni is often eaten on this day. On Clean Monday only pure (without the shedding of blood) foods are eaten. This practice continues during the following forty days of fasting.

The Holy Week Ceremonies begin on Palm Sunday at 11.00 in the morning with the Litany of the Holy Shrine of St. Spyridon. This is the largest litany and follows the trail of the old Venetian City walls. It is in recognition of the miracle performed by St. Spyridon that saved Corfu from a deadly plague in 1629. In the evening the Mantzaros Philharmonic performs a solemn concert that creates the sad mood of Holy Week.

From Monday until Wednesday the Easter preparations begin with baking, shopping and attending daily church services.

On Holy Thursday the first bell lets everyone know that it is time for Easter Eggs to be dyed red. This is one of the oldest traditions for Greek Orthodox Christians. The egg symbolises the tomb which Jesus arose from and the red colour, associated with life and victory, symbolises the blood of Christ. The tradition of dyeing the eggs on this particular day is in commemoration of the Last Supper, the final meal Jesus shared with his Disciples.

Good Friday

This is a very sad and special day for all Christians and very important in the Corfiot Easter tradition. It is a day of mourning. It begins early when the funeral bell rings. These ceremonies commemorate the descent of Christ from the cross. From 14.00 the Epitaphs, that represent the body of Jesus, are carried through Corfu Town. Every church takes part and follows a strict protocol; they are accompanied by a Philharmonic Band that will play funeral marches. The final Epitaph of Good Friday is at 22.00, from Corfu Cathedral. This is the largest with the three main Philharmonia accompanying the procession. They will play Albinoni's *Adagio*, Verdi's *Marcia Funebre*, Mariani's *Elegia Funebre* and the *Marche Funebre* by Chopin.

Easter Saturday

The day begins at 06.00 in the *Panagia of Kseni*, the Church of the Lady of Strangers, with a representation of the earthquake that followed Christ's Resurrection. The atmosphere is solemn and the church is full. At 09.00 the Epitaph from the Church of St. Spyridon begins. At the same time there is a Litany of St. Spyridon's body. This is in recognition of saving the island from famine and dates from the middle of the 16th century when the procession took place on Good Friday, but 1574 the Venetians forbade this ceremony to take place on Good Friday and it was moved to the following day.

The crowds wait patiently for the First Resurrection.

When the clock strikes 11.00 and the Church bells ring, Corfu's most famous and unique Easter tradition takes place. Lasting only minutes, huge clay pots, filled with water are balanced on the balconies of some of the highest buildings in Corfu Town as the bells ring the pots fall with a mighty crash, in to the square below. At this point the mood changes with the Philharmonia playing more joyful music and people proclaiming to one another *Christos Anesti* (Christ is Risen), the response is *Alithos Anesti* (He has truly Risen).

The roots of this custom are not completely clear. Some say it is connected to a Bible passage, *'Thou, O Lord, raise me up that I may crush them as a potter's vessel'*, others think it is from the Venetians, whose New Years Day tradition of throwing out old things in the hope that they would get new in the coming year and got moved along the calendar or maybe it is much older dating from when the Ancient Greeks worshiped Gods and the noise was to wake up Persephone, Goddess of the Spring. It is a sight that should not be missed, and this custom is re enacted, albeit on a smaller scale, in villages all over the island.

At the same time in Pinia, in the Old Town, the custom of *Mastela* takes place. This is a big barrel, filled with water and decorated with flowers. All those that have passed it in previous days, have thrown some coins in and made a wish. As the celebration of the First Resurrection begins an innocent passer by is chased and thrown into the barrel. As a reward for getting wet he is allowed keep all of the money that is in the barrel!

During the evening the churches begin to fill once again. The Orthodox Resurrection Service takes place in the *Pano Platia* (Upper Square). Thousands of people attend this service. Candles burn from window sills and balconies overlooking the square and every person holds a candle, lit from the Holy flame. At midnight when the Priest proclaims *Christos Anesti* (Christ is Risen) the Resurrection of Christ is celebrated. A massive firework display takes place after which everyone follows the bands through the Old Town greeting each other and singing. In restaurants and homes a meal of *Magiritsa* (meat soup), *Fogatsa* (bread) and *Columbines* (Venetian cakes), is eaten and plenty of wine is drunk as the Easter Celebration begins. The village churches celebrate in the same way with fireworks and the local taverna serves food late in to the night.

Easter Sunday

On Easter Sunday in every church there is a procession of the Icon of the Resurrection of Christ. A procession happens on most days until the following Sunday. In the afternoon visitors to Corfu tend to leave town and head to the villages to meet with family and friends, but in Town at the Naval Base in the New Fortress the tradition of giving *meze* (small dishes of meat, bread and dips) continues. Dancing groups and bands perform in celebration of the Resurrection and the end of Lent and fasting.

Most people associate a spit roasted lamb as the traditional food for such an important day, this was not always so. In Corfu, Easter Sunday lunch was *avgolemono* (egg and lemon soup) and just two or three different meats. The grilled lamb was for the second day's celebration.

In recent times this has changed and spit roasted lamb or goat has become the traditional Easter food, accompanied by *kokoretsi* (a roll of meat made from the sweet breads, heart, lungs and offal of the lamb).

Tsougrisma, is the egg cracking contest that starts on Easter Saturday night after the Resurrection church service. The eggs that were dyed red on Holy Thursday battle against each other. Two people compete by tapping each others egg. The goal is to crack their opponent's egg and all of the other eggs at the table. This is said to symbolise Jesus' resurrection and breaking out of his tomb,

The Orthodox Christians follow a modified Julian calendar which is different from the Gregorian calendar followed by other Christians. As a moveable feast Orthodox Easter often falls at a different time to when the rest of Christianity celebrate Easter.

Throughout Greece, for Orthodox Christians, Easter is celebrated with a week of church services, traditional processions, ceremonies and customs. There are some customs that are unique to a particular region.

The Rocket War of Chios - rival churches fire homemade rockets across town towards each others bell tower the night before Easter. This tradition dates back to the Ottoman Empire.

St. George Festival of Arachova - On the second day of Easter, the icon of St. George is carried through the village as the start of a three day festival in his honour. Traditional costumes are worn and people dance to bag pipes. The residents then compete in an uphill race for the chance to win a living lamb.

The Saitopolemos of Kalamata - This custom dates back to the revolution of 1821. The Kalamatans used a type of firework *a Saitas* to startle the Turkish horses which helped them win the battles. At Easter, men in traditional costuming detonate the *Saitas* while still carrying them.

The Burning of Judas in Metres - Children go door to door on Holy Thursday collecting sticks to use to burn the effigy of Judas Iscariot. On Good Friday they light the effigy and proceed to scatter a handful of ashes on the tombs.

The Easter Dances of Ierissos - In Ierissos, they relive the *Field of the Doomed Youth*. This represents the slaughter of 400 locals by the Ottomans during the revolution. The elders begin dancing and then invite everyone to join in and hold hands in a circle that can extend up to 400 metres. The celebrations end in the traditional *Kageleftos*, where dancers pass under an arch of laurel leaves. At the end of the arch are two young men with raised swords.

As in all cultures, religious ceremonies remain unchanged and customs are passed though the generations. Easter in Greece and particularly on Corfu, bring together many aspects from its rich history. Ancient Greek rites that herald the start of spring combined with Orthodox Christian ceremonies that have been influenced by the Venetians and Catholicism make Easter in Greece unique.