

YOUR BEST  
2012  
YEAR EVER!

# HAPPILY EVER AFTER

From around the world, here are 12 festivals and traditions that offer important lessons for 2012 and beyond

## Take life less seriously

### CARNAVAL ● BRAZIL

What if there was an entire week when your culture asked you to drop everything and simply celebrate being alive? Brazil's annual Carnival, starting on February 17 this year, is such a party. Business as usual is shut down, the entire social order is flipped on its head, and everybody is reminded that the things that really matter in life can't be measured on spreadsheets. Blending African beats, Native

American-inspired costumes and Bacchanalian traditions with roots in ancient Europe, Carnival is a euphoric celebration of Brazil's diversity and openness to creative self-expression.

## Let go of the little things

### LOY KRATHONG ● THAILAND

Held in Northern Thailand and usually falling in November, *Loy Krathong* sees thousands of candle-fuelled paper lanterns drift away into the night sky, creating a warm amber glow as these

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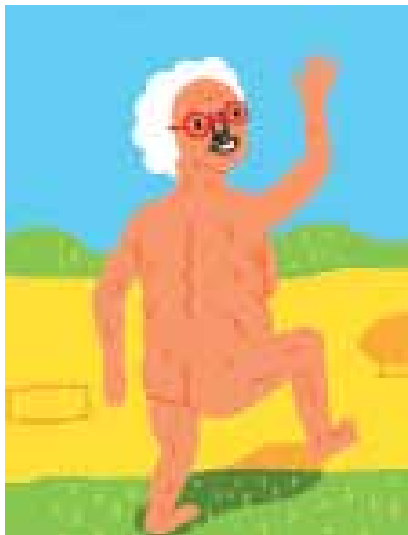


symbols of worry and anxiety are let go. As the lanterns float away, a surprisingly gentle, undoubtedly happy celebration takes place below. It's a simple act, but making these little burdens disappear into the air, perhaps combined with the beauty of their departure, has a powerful effect.

## Learn to love your body

### NAKED SAUNAS ● FINLAND

Scandinavian Europe is famous for valuing physical liberty. Feeling comfortable with nudity – even for those with less than model-perfect bodies – is built into the culture. Finland, in particular, is renowned for its communal saunas, followed by icy splash downs or snow leaps, followed by more saunas ... all without a stitch on. The young, the old, the willowy, the wobbly ... the important part of this is to stop judging others' appearance. And to see the beauty in old faces, plump bodies, eccentric features.



## Reconnect with your community

### LA PASSEGGIATA ● ITALY

The perfect antidote to a feeling of isolation is *la passeggiata*, or evening stroll, an age-old ritual celebrated throughout Italy. It's a fail-safe way to ensure those face-to-face meetings that create true community. As late afternoon passes into early evening, Italians of all ages throng the pavements and squares in every village, town and city, walking, talking, sharing a drink or gelato. Whatever your style, the passeggiata reminds you that you're part of something bigger, that your community is there for you.

## Share nature's bounty

### INATI ● TOKELAU

The tiny coral atolls of Tokelau, one of the most isolated archipelagos in the world and a 20-hour boat ride from nearest neighbour Samoa, can only function when its minuscule population works together, with those who have helping those who have not.

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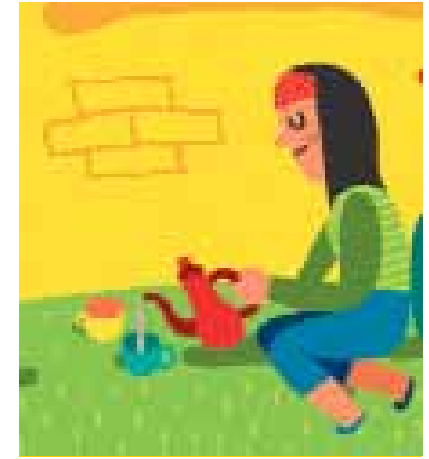
Despite increasing influences from the cash-based Western world, the system of *inati* (sharing) is still practised. Every day, the fresh catch is laid out on the beach and the village *taupulega* (council) dishes it out according to who needs it most. Giving away something you value helps you appreciate how lucky you are.

## Open your mind

### ZAZEN ● JAPAN

We spend so much of our time with our heads in the past or the future, we almost forget that our physical selves are forever locked in the present. Too often there is a disconnection between the living, breathing, feeling body and the eternally wandering, worrying mind.

*Zazen* means “sitting meditation” and seeks to bring the body and mind back in line. This practice is the key-stone of *Zen*, a school of Buddhism that emphasises the experiential over creeds. All you really need to know off the bat is how to sit – legs comfortably crossed with your back straight – and to breathe deeply and mindfully. By concentrating fully on the act of breathing, the mind is naturally drawn to the present.



## Appreciate the finer things in life

### BUNA CEREMONY ● ETHIOPIA

Food and drink are one of life's simple but remarkable pleasures. The Ethiopian buna (coffee) ceremony is a 3000-year-old ritual that stimulates all the senses and is often considered a healing experience.

It is performed by a woman wearing a traditional white dress, who carefully arranges the coffee-making implements on top of freshly cut ceremonial grasses while attendees are enveloped in the scent of incense. First the green coffee beans are washed and roasted until they begin to crackle, pop and change colour. A wonderful aroma wafts from the beans as the host grinds them and brews the coffee. Once brewed, the coffee is gracefully poured from a long-spouted *jebena* (coffee pot). Etiquette requires guests to consume three cups: the third cup, or *baraka*, invokes a blessing.



## Get it off your chest

**STAMMTISCH ● GERMANY**

In Germany, friends, colleagues and interested strangers get together regularly at *Stammtisches* to chat, laugh, spark connections and to receive a fresh perspective on the subjects that interest them. Historically, these informal gatherings were only open to the town's elite, who would share local news over drinks at a reserved table at the local restaurant or pub. Since the 1940s, *Stammtisches* have become a way for groups with common passions or hobbies to meet up and talk. The people you meet seldom stay strangers for long.

## Celebrate achievements

**CROP OVER ● BARBADOS**

With our apparently time-poor lifestyles, it can be easy to lose any notion of what all our hard work is for.

The Crop Over festival in Barbados is one of the island nation's premier cultural festivals, encompassing all manner of entertainment and heritage events including calypso music, food and drink, parades and parties. The festivities culminate in the Grand Kadooment, a spectacular procession of costumed revellers dancing through the streets.

The festival's origins date back to the 1780s, when plantation workers celebrated the end of the sugar-cane harvest with a procession of carts bringing in the last loads of the crop, an occasion to celebrate and enjoy the fruits of their labour.



## Silence is golden

**NYEPI ● BALI**

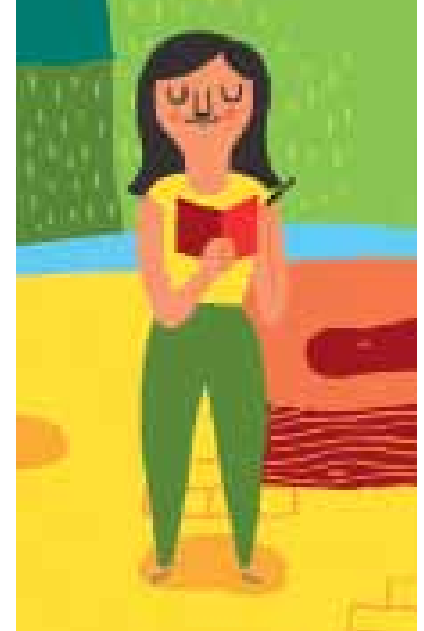
The Balinese religious calendar sets aside the first day of the New Year (March 23 this year) for silence and contemplation, to purify and allow for new beginnings. After a night of processions and music, when *Nyepi* dawns after the spring equinox, all activity ceases. No-one works, no vehicles may be used, no planes take off or land at the airport, no electric appliances are operated and everyone, including tourists, must stay off the streets. The story goes that evil spirits will be fooled into thinking that Bali has been abandoned and will leave the island unharmed for another year. But the true spiritual value of the day is a time to reflect, to liberate the mind from worldly distractions and emerge refreshed.

## The gift of family

**RAKSHA BANDHAN ● INDIA**

Hindus in India celebrate the brother-sister bond in this festival. On this joyful day, girls say prayers for their brothers, prepare special foods and ceremoniously tie a *rakhi*, a bracelet made of cotton or silk, on each brother's right wrist. This symbolises affection, love and protection from harm. In turn, girls are given gifts from their brothers, who bless their sisters and promise to look out for them in the year ahead. For those without brothers and sisters, other relatives can be honoured.

The practice begins in childhood and continues for life.



## Write it down

**SHINTO EMA ● JAPAN**

In Shinto temples throughout Japan, small wooden plaques called *ema* are provided for people to write down their desires and hopes. They are often decorated with pictures of sacred animals. Supplicants might ask for success in exams, a safe journey, a good outcome to a bad situation, or a new car. As each *ema* is completed, it is hung with the others on the temple for the *kami* (gods) to read.

Expressing your innermost desires in concrete terms helps make them achievable. It narrows them down to a set of clear goals, acting as landmarks in the map of your future. Then you can start directing your first steps towards the place you want to go. ■