

## Holidays in the Hispanic World

- 1 **S**ome holidays are celebrated differently in Latin America and Spain than in the United States. *La Nochebuena*, or Christmas Eve, for example, is when most of the Spanish-speaking world celebrates Christmas. A nativity scene (*un nacimiento* or *un pesebre*) is a common decoration in homes. It may be small—the Dominican Republic is known for its truly miniature figures—or large enough to fill an entire room or patio. But large or small, it is often very elaborate, with hills, trees, roads, little houses, and small mirrors to represent ponds. *El nacimiento* is usually the focal point of the festivities, with family gathered around to sing carols to the accompaniment of a guitar or a bamboo pipe or maracas. Colored paper lanterns, balloons, piñatas, and dancing are often part of the evening celebration.
- 2 Epiphany (*el Día de los Reyes*), on January 6, marks the formal end of the Christmas holidays. Traditionally, it was the day on which children in Spanish-speaking countries received their gifts, because it commemorates the arrival of the Three Kings into Bethlehem with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Today, however, in more and more homes, gifts are opened on Christmas Day or on Christmas Eve.
- 3 In much of Latin America, the weather is warm during the end-of-year holidays (below the equator it is the beginning of summer) and *el Año Nuevo* may be celebrated with fireworks and even barbecues. In Spain, it is the custom to eat twelve grapes at the stroke of midnight, one grape each time the clock chimes.
- 4 *El Día de la Raza*, October 12, celebrates the blending of the Spanish and indigenous cultures that resulted from Columbus's landing in the Americas. It is sometimes called *el Día de la Hispanidad*. In recent years, however, it has become of less importance than specific national holidays. *El Día de la Independencia* is, of course, celebrated on different days in different countries. For example, September 15 is the national holiday of four Central American nations: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Paraguay celebrates its independence from Spain on May 14; Argentina, May 25; Venezuela, July 5; Colombia, July 20; Peru, July 28; Bolivia, August 6; Ecuador, August 10; Mexico, September 16; and Chile and Costa Rica, September 18. The Dominican Republic celebrates its independence from Haiti on February 27; Uruguay, its independence from Brazil on August 25; Panama, its independence from Colombia on November 3. And Spain's national holiday? *El Día de la Hispanidad*—October 12.

## Holidays in the Hispanic World (continued)

- 5 Another major fall holiday is *el Día de los Muertos* (All Souls' Day) on November 2. This holiday is a day of remembrance for all those who have died. It is a very special celebration in Mexico. There are, of course, prayers, religious services, and visits to the cemetery. Families build special altars, called *ofrendas*, in their homes. These *ofrendas* are decorated with flowers and candles, but they are not at all solemn. Photographs of loved ones who have died are displayed among objects that they cherished or used most—a rocking chair, for example, or reading glasses, gardening tools, or cooking utensils. *El Día de los Muertos* is also celebrated by eating a sweetened bread—*el pan de muerto*—which is either shaped like skulls and crosses, or decorated with white sugar candies in the shape of skulls, crosses, coffins, and tombs. For children, there are white masks, tin or wire skeletons attached to strings, and even toy coffins that contain a skeleton that jumps out when a string is pulled.
- 6 In the calendar of the Catholic Church, almost every day is dedicated to one or more saints. A person's "saint's day," or *santo*, is

the day dedicated to the saint who has that person's name (or one derived from it). For example, *el santo* for every José, Josefina, or Josefa is St. Joseph's Day (March 19), and *el santo* for every Pablo, Paulo, Paulina, and Paula is St. Paul's Day (June 29).

Traditionally, part of a person's name was determined by the saint's day on which he or she was born. For example, if a girl whose family planned to name her María Luisa happened to be born on May 30—St. Ferdinand's Day—she would likely be named María Luisa Fernanda to honor that saint. In fact, the traditional Mexican "Happy Birthday" song, *Las mañanitas*, is actually a song for a saint's day.

- 7 This custom is disappearing, however, and a person's birthday and saint's day are often not the same. In many countries, a person's saint's day is considered more important than a birthday. Even non-Catholics may celebrate their *santo*, for no one wants to miss out on his or her special day for a party and a few gifts. So truly every day is *un día de fiesta en el mundo hispano!*



## Practice Test

Answer questions 1–6. Base your answers on the reading “Holidays in the Hispanic World.”

- 1 In a traditional Latin American home, which of the following most closely compares with the Christmas tree in a traditional U.S. home?
- A *la Nochebuena*
  - B *el nacimiento*
  - C *la piñata*
  - D *el Día de los Reyes*
- 2 Which one of the following statements is true?
- F All of the nations of Central America have the same Independence Day.
  - G In the United States, the best-known national holiday among the Latin American nations is *el Día de los Reyes*.
  - H Of the nations of Latin America, all but two celebrate their national holiday within the five-month period from May to September.
  - J All of the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America got their independence from Spain.
- 3 What holiday in the United States has the same underlying purpose as *el Día de los Muertos*?
- A the Fourth of July
  - B Memorial Day
  - C Labor Day
  - D Veterans' Day
- 4 Complete this statement: Today a person's *santo* is most often
- F a saint's birthday.
  - G his or her own birthday.
  - H the day dedicated to the saint who has the same or a similar name.
  - J either March 19, May 30, or June 29.
- 5 **READ  
THINK  
EXPLAIN** October 12 was once a fairly major holiday throughout the Americas. Why do you suppose that in most countries the national holiday has become of greater importance than Columbus Day? Do you think this is a good thing or a bad thing? Why?
- 6 **READ  
THINK  
EXPLAIN** If you live far to the north or to the south of the equator, there are considerable differences in the way in which you might celebrate the end-of-year holidays. Explain why and describe at least three of those differences.

