

Nowruz is an important festival in Iran, Central Asia and beyond. Read on to find out how people celebrate the Persian New Year.

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

Vocabulary

1. rebirth
2. renewal
3. equinox
4. wheat sprouts
5. prosperity
6. bonfire
7. wrestling
8. from top to bottom

Definition

- a. money and a good life
- b. when something old is replaced with something new
- c. carefully and completely
- d. a large fire in the open air
- e. when something comes back to life
- f. when both the day and the night last 12 hours
- g. a sport where two people fight and try to make each other fall to the ground
- h. plants which are placed in water and grow green shoots

Nowruz

What is Nowruz?

Nowruz means ‘new day’ in Persian and is the most important festival of the year in Iran. It is also celebrated in a number of other countries across the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, the Balkans and East Africa, and dates back at least 3,000 years. The holiday has changed over the thousands of years that it has been celebrated, and different regions have preserved or developed different traditions, as well as adding new ones. But wherever it is observed, it celebrates the original message of rebirth and renewal.

When is it celebrated?

Nowruz marks the spring equinox, when night and day are of equal length. This is usually on 20 or 21 March. It’s the day when winter changes into spring in the northern hemisphere, and it feels like a new beginning. In Iran it is followed by four days of public holidays, and schools and universities close for two weeks.

How do people prepare for Nowruz?

People start their preparation for the festivities weeks beforehand. They clean their homes from top to bottom, including carpets, windows and curtains. Everyone in the family helps out.

Anything broken is repaired or replaced and the house is decorated with flowers. By doing this spring cleaning, people wash away the bad things from the previous year and prepare for better things to come in the new year.

People prepare a special table in their homes, where they place small dishes holding seven symbolic foods and spices. The names of these foods all start with the letter 's' in Persian and so the table is called the 'seven s's' (*haft-seen*). The dishes generally contain wheat or bean sprouts (*sabze*), vinegar (*serke*), apples (*sib*), garlic (*sir*), a wheat-based pudding called *samanu*, a red spice called *sumac*, and *senjed*, a kind of wild olive which is common in the region. Other symbolic objects can include goldfish, painted eggs, candles and a mirror. The seven s's symbolise life, love, health and prosperity.

How is it celebrated?

Fire forms an important part of the celebrations, and bonfires are built and lit on the streets for four Tuesdays in the weeks before Nowruz. On the last Tuesday, people observe the Festival of Fire (*Chaharshanbe Suri*), which involves jumping over these fires, which is believed to bring health and good luck in the new year.

Iranians spend the night of Nowruz with their family. The traditional new year dinner is white fish with rice and herbs. Many families give a money gift (called *eidi*) to the children to mark the new year. People often visit each other's homes and always bring traditional gifts.

People also celebrate on the street. Traditional poetry, song and dance play a key role in the celebrations, and people fill the streets to watch and take part in the performances. Traditional sports are also popular. They often involve horse-riding or wrestling.

When does it end?

The festivities end on the thirteenth day after Nowruz, when people traditionally spend the day picnicking outside. The countryside is full of families eating, dancing, singing and enjoying the last day of the holidays.

Tasks

Task 1

Choose the correct answer.

1. What does 'Nowruz' mean in Persian?
 - a. New day
 - b. New year
2. Where is Nowruz celebrated?
 - a. In many countries in Asia
 - b. Only in Iran
3. What do the seven s's have in common?
 - a. They're all parts of the home.
 - b. They're all types of food.
4. Where do people in Iran celebrate the night of Nowruz?
 - a. At street performances
 - b. With their families
5. What do people traditionally eat on the night of Nowruz?
 - a. Fish and rice
 - b. Wheat sprouts and apples
6. What do people do on the last day of Nowruz?
 - a. They jump over fires.
 - b. They spend the day outside.

Task 2

Put the activities and events in the order they happen.

- _____ Jumping over fires
- _____ Nowruz begins
- _____ Preparing the seven s's
- _____ Going for a picnic
- _____ Eating fish and rice
- _____ Watching street performances
- _____ Nowruz ends
- _____ Cleaning the house

Discussion

Would you like to celebrate Nowruz?

Answers

Preparation task

1. e
2. b
3. f
4. h
5. a
6. d
7. g
8. c

Task 1

1. a
2. a
3. b
4. b
5. a
6. b

Task 2

- | | |
|----------|------------------------------|
| <u>3</u> | Jumping over fires |
| <u>4</u> | Nowruz begins |
| <u>2</u> | Preparing the seven s's |
| <u>7</u> | Going for a picnic |
| <u>5</u> | Eating fish and rice |
| <u>6</u> | Watching street performances |
| <u>8</u> | Nowruz ends |
| <u>1</u> | Cleaning the house |