

Santa Claus

Although Santa Claus goes by several names, depending on what part of the world he's visiting – such as Father Christmas in England, Kris Kringle in Germany or Father Frost in Russia – his role never changes. On Christmas Eve, he packs up his sleigh at the North Pole and, with help from nine magical reindeer, including one with a red nose named Rudolph, flies through the night skies to deliver toys to children worldwide.

Most experts agree that Santa – or St. Nicholas, as he was first known – was born between AD 260 and 280 in Asia Minor, near Turkey, to a prominent family. As a teenager, however, he rebelled against his wealthy family and became a monk. In fact, after his parents died, St. Nick took his inheritance and gave it away to those in need. His generosity and kindness were soon legendary. But St Nicholas was never in it for the glory. He much preferred to have his presents arrive as a surprise; often, he didn't even want to be seen.

Over the centuries, St Nicholas' fame spread. Children in America learned about him from early Dutch settlers in New York. By that time, too, Santa Claus had moved to the North Pole – or Lapland, as the British believe – and he exchanged his bishop's cloak, jeweled gloves and crozier for a warm red suit with white cuffs and a black belt, a red hat with fur trim, sturdy black boots and a pipe.

But he kept his beard...along with his joy in giving.