

DIWALI'S DELIGHTS

From the very first pre-dawn *puja* ceremony, India's Festival of Lights is a sensory celebration filled with fireworks, flavors and family.

BY CANDACE ROSE RARDON



For the first time in days, the air is still. Eerie almost, in its pre-dawn quiet. Although the sweet smells of cardamom and *ghee*, or clarified butter, linger from the many cooking sessions held the day before, gone are the bursts and blasts of fireworks I've grown so used to in the days leading up to Diwali.

Without them, the world outside my room in southern India doesn't seem quite as alive. But the sensation won't last for long, as today, the ringing explosions that so perfectly embody the excitement of this holiday will soon resume like the chorus of a favorite song.

Before the sun has yet to rise, Diwali has arrived.

IMAGE COURTESY OF SARAH MINCHIN



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Lighting the Way

It's no accident that Diwali, also spelled Devali or Deepavali depending on the region, is known as the Festival of Lights. Its very name has been shortened from two Sanskrit words—*deepa*, "light," and *avali*, "a row"—that form *Deepavali*, meaning a row or cluster of lamps, which are kept lit throughout the entire five-day autumn festival.

Similar to how the date for Easter is determined, Diwali is based on the luni-solar Hindu calendar, and thus falls on a different day every year, according to when new moon occurs. Generally, though, the celebrations take place between October and November, which corresponds to the seventh Hindu month, *Ashvin*.

Called *diyas*, the small, often teardrop-shaped clay lamps used in Diwali are filled with either oil or ghee and a single cotton wick. Some lamps are left in their natural terracotta shade, while others are covered with lively designs. Whether plain or painted, the role they play in the holiday is central.

More than a source of light, the diyas serve to welcome in certain gods who are important to Diwali, a festival as fundamental to the Hindu religion as Christmas is to Christianity. And yet unlike other major holidays, there's no one event or legend from which the Festival of Lights originates.

From the return of the Hindu god Rama after his 14-year exile, whose path home was lined with diyas, to Krishna's defeat of the demon Narakasura (the story more commonly honored in south India), Diwali is ultimately about victory—of light over darkness, of good over evil—and for this reason, it's a celebration, no matter the myriad of myths that have inspired it.

Indeed, the many traditions I would come to know—the oil lamps, the fireworks, the ritual

ceremonies—vary not only throughout India, but around the world. Declared a national holiday in nearly a dozen countries, and even observed by those of other religions such as Jains and Buddhists, the ways in which Diwali is celebrated seem as numerous as the diyas carefully laid out in each family's home.

Festival Fervor

Long before the celebration officially begins, a flurry of cooking, cleaning, decorating and shopping takes place; endless rounds of bottle rockets can be heard outside for days leading up to Diwali. As in many cultures, these holiday preparations only add to the anticipation, building families' excitement like the sound of a familiar holiday tune.

In the weeks before the festival, houses are scrubbed and shined, most especially the shrine that many Indian families have inside their own home, usually a low wooden altar set in a corner or inside a closet. To welcome Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, rangoli—floral designs radiating warm hues from an artfully placed pattern of white sand and colored rice—are also drawn on the thresholds and floors.

Packages arrive at a dizzying pace, the biggest containing boxes of fireworks—electric sparklers, mega crackers, even tubes of confetti. New clothes are purchased, and bright green banana leaves unfurled, on which our Diwali meals will be served. At all times, sweets and snacks fry in the kitchen: bars of fudge-like coconut barfi, cardamom-sweetened laddu, and spirals of crispy thenkuzhal murukku, sharply flavored with cumin seeds.

In search of a few final items, we brave a local shopping mall the night before Diwali and find it as packed with last-minute shoppers as it would



be on Christmas Eve in other parts of the world. Weaving through the crowds, I can't help but be transfixed by the sequined fabrics and shimmering window displays—a mosaic of sights and sounds I once knew nothing about.

A Dip in the Ganges

And then the clock strikes 3:30 on the first morning of Diwali. With dawn still hours away, families across India awaken, as do I. Their homes, dark and motionless at this uncommon hour, stir to life, filled with a heady mix of burning oil and fragrant sandalwood incense.

Women place oil lamps around the altar, where the families hold their puja ceremony to worship and give offerings to the goddess Lakshmi (or other deities, based on the region). Before everyone showers for the day, the oldest member of the family pours oil over their heads, a ritual as essential to Diwali celebrations in southern India as stories of Rama's return are to communities in the north.

"The oil bath is an important part of Diwali. You are supposed to take a dip in the Ganges," says the father of my host family, referring to the sacred river located far north of their home in Tamil Nadu. "But since we are not near the river, we use the oil."

Specifically, they use gingelly oil, made from sesame seeds, before taking a shower or bath, as it is commonly believed Krishna did after defeating Narakasura. The puja ends with new outfits handed out to everyone—new saris for the girls, new dress shirts for the guys—which they immediately change into before breakfast. Garlands of fresh jasmine flowers are also pinned to the women's hair, the fragrant white blossoms dangling like stars next to their dark braids.

"That is why we wear the new clothes," my host-father continues, "to represent bathing in the Ganges." Although the rest of the day will be filled with piquant food, more fireworks and other family traditions, it is these early morning rituals (the oil bath and new clothes) that best symbolize each family's fresh start and new beginning, as Diwali



DIWALI AROUND THE GLOBE

India is not the only country that celebrates Diwali. In fact, the Festival of Lights has been declared a national holiday in nearly a dozen countries. Here's a look at other Diwali traditions around the world:

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO: When East Indians arrived in the Caribbean in the 19th century, they carried many Hindu traditions with them. Today, large celebrations take place on the Divali Nagar site in Chaguanas, headquarters of the National Council of Indian Culture.

SINGAPORE: The city's Little India district, especially the vibrant light-up along Serangoon Road, is the place to be for Diwali in Singapore. As many families live in tall apartment buildings, they gather in the streets to light sparklers (all other fireworks are prohibited).

FIJI: With a strong Indian population, Diwali is celebrated in this Pacific Island nation by Hindus and non-Hindus alike. Traditional sweets, fireworks and new clothes are all part of the festivities, as are school competitions and visits with family and friends.

MALAYSIA: To celebrate Diwali, known here as Hari Diwali, Hindu Malaysians hold open houses, inviting their friends and neighbors of all religions over for a meal. As in Singapore, firecrackers are banned, but other traditions such as the oil bath are still followed.

UNITED KINGDOM: Diwali is important to the large Indian community in the U.K., even if not technically a national holiday. In the heart of London, the annual Diwali on the Square event transforms Trafalgar Square with food stalls, light displays and dance performances.



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also marks the Hindu new year for many regions across India—especially the north.

Not Just a Family Affair

Although Diwali is most often celebrated privately, this isn't always the case. After breakfast and a round of sparklers, confetti and fizzling "flower pots," we journey an hour south to a community of 100 families who have organized a full day of group festivities.

When we arrive, the community's activity room is brimming with women of all ages having their hands and feet decorated with *mehndi*, or henna. Little girls sit in a row letting the designs dry, hands in the air and feet propped up, while their mothers and grandmothers banter and choose henna designs for each other, from curling floral patterns to long flourishes shaped like peacocks.

The room fills again later that afternoon, this time with the entire community for a singing performance. Families arrive in their crisp new clothes; the women especially catch my eye, their

saris a spectrum of deep fuchsia and peach, teal and gold, and lime green chiffon bordered in pink.

Many rituals from that morning are repeated throughout the day—from a Lakshmi puja performed by several Hindu priests, or pundits, to a savory dinner served on fresh banana leaves—and yet the atmosphere feels that much more festive celebrating as a group. When dinner ends, we gather outside for fireworks.

One man orchestrates the display like a conductor giving musicians their cue. "Next, next, next," he calls out feverishly. "Now we do the big items." Young boys are brave enough to run up and set off the fireworks with sparklers, neon bouquets bursting overhead and a thousand whistling embers scattering in the night sky.

The first day of Diwali ends much like it began, in darkness, with the oil lamps burning well into the night. The festival will continue throughout the week with more food, temple visits and celebrations, it is these first booming firecrackers that will echo in my mind for days to come. **M**