

5. National Cocoa Day

This is primarily a fun celebration of the hot cocoa beverage and the pleasant things associated with it. The observance recognizes many other uses of cocoa, as well, however. National Cocoa Day is celebrated on December 13th each year and is referred to as a “National” holiday, even though there are no Congressional records or Presidential proclamations for it. So, the holiday’s origin is uncertain. It is believed that the Mayan peoples were the first to have a chocolate beverage over 2000 years ago. A cocoa drink was also part of the Aztec culture by 1400 A.D. Hot cocoa became popular in Europe after it was introduced to the New World from Mexico. It is now enjoyed in many variations around the globe. Cocoa contains antioxidants and can actually provide some health benefits if prepared with moderate amounts of fats and sugars.

6. Hanukkah

Hanukkah is an eight-day Jewish holiday that starts on the 25th day of the month of Kislev on the Jewish lunar calendar. This usually falls sometime between late November and late December on the secular calendar. In Hebrew, the word "hanukkah" means "dedication." Historical background for Hanukkah’s origins can be found in the books of *1 and 2 Maccabees*, which are not part of the Jewish canon of the *Hebrew Bible*. The Maccabees were a small band of Jewish fighters who sought to free the Land of Israel from Syrian-Greek occupation in the mid-160s B.C. The Syrian-Greeks had defiled the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and banned their religious practices. The Maccabees waged war against the Syrian-Greeks, and after a three-year battle, the Jewish Temple was reclaimed, cleaned, and rededicated. Hanukkah has become a celebration of this victory. About 250 years after these events took place, Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote his account of the holiday’s origins. He called it the “Festival of Lights” and that description is still often used today.

7. Winter Solstice

The winter solstice is an astronomical event that occurs around December 21st each year. Solstices happen two times annually – December 21 (winter solstice) and June 21 (summer solstice). They are the result of the Earth being tilted by an average of 23.5 degrees as it orbits the sun. The winter solstice is marked by the point where the Earth is tilted its furthest distance away from the sun. At this time, the sun hugs closer to the horizon than at any other time, yielding the least amount of daylight and the shortest day of the year. After months of growing shorter and lower since the summer solstice, the sun’s arc through the sky appears to stabilize, with the sun seeming to rise and set in the same two places for several days. This could explain how the term “solstice” came to be used. It is derived from the Latin phrase for “sun stands still.” Immediately following the winter solstice, the sun’s daily arc begins growing longer and higher in the sky, reaching its peak at the summer solstice. Then the whole thing starts over again.