PERSIAN NEW YEAR - NOWRUZ

Nowruz (pronounced no-rooz) is a celebration that marks the Persian New Year and is celebrated in many Central Asian communities. Nowruz comes from two Persian words. “Now” means new and “ruz” means day. The New Year begins with the vernal equinox, the day when winter ends and spring begins, usually on March 20 or 21. Although we use the spelling Nowruz in this unit, there are many different spellings in English, including Newroz, Noroz, Norouz, and Norooz.

Nowruz celebrates the Earth’s renewal when spring begins. Nowruz activities that celebrate the arrival of spring have things in common with other spring festivals around the world, including Easter, which Christians celebrate around the world, Sham Al-Naseem, an Egyptian holiday that is as old as the Pharaohs, or the Jewish holiday Purim.

Historical Beginnings

Nowruz began as an ancient Zoroastrian festival. It has been celebrated for at least 3,000 years and is deeply rooted in the rituals and traditions of the Zoroastrian religion. Zoroastrianism is an ancient Persian religion that stresses ideas like the duality of good and evil in the world, and the connection between nature and humans. It was the main religion for a long time in ancient Persia (located in the area of modern-day Iran). The religion has waned, but Zoroastrian communities still exist. The largest are in the south of Iran, and in India.

Today, Nowruz is a secular holiday, not a religious holiday. This means that it is celebrated by people of different religions. Because of this, exactly how it is celebrated can vary depending on the religion of those celebrating it. The Parsi (also spelled Parsee) people (a Zoroastrian community in India consisting of the descendants of people who migrated there from Persia in the 10th century A.D.) consider Nowruz their spiritual New Year. Famous Parsis include rock star Freddie Mercury and conductor Zubin Mehta.

Cultural Roots

Nowruz is celebrated around the world, but it has its origins in the Middle East and Southwest Asia, in the area called Persia. The Persian culture had a common language, food, music and other cultural aspects that evolved among the ethnic groups who lived in this area. Nowruz is an important celebration in the communities that have their roots in Persian-influenced areas.
Persia no longer exists as a country, but Nowruz traditions live on in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Turkey, as well as in Canada and the United States, among others.

**Persia and Iran**

What is the difference between Persia and Iran? The words Persia and Iran mean different things. The word *Persia* comes from the Greek word *Pars*. *Pars* was the Greek word for the area between the Indus Valley in what is now India and Pakistan, and the Nile River in modern-day Egypt. The Ancient Greeks called the inhabitants of this region *Persians*.

The word *Iran* has a different source. Iran comes from the word *Aryan*, a name for the ancient peoples who came to Central Asia from the Indus Valley. The state known as Persia changed its name to Iran in 1935. So today, the word *Iran* refers to the modern day country. *Persia* refers to a broad culture, more ethnic groups, and a 3,000-year-old history. *Persian* is also the name for the official language of Iran.

**Rituals and Traditions**

The Nowruz season lasts 13 days. Nowruz celebrations vary in length depending on the country, but generally last between three days and a week. In Iran they last four days for most people, but children and university students get two weeks’ vacation from school.

How do people celebrate Nowruz? It is a New Year’s celebration. People celebrate the end of one year and the beginning of another. Families and friends get together. Many grownups do not work during the Nowruz season.

**Spring Cleaning**

Nowruz is also a spring celebration., so as you might expect, spring cleaning is an important Nowruz tradition. The Persian expression for spring cleaning is *Khouneh Tekouni*, which means 'shaking the house'. Persians and other groups including Azerbaijanis and Kurds start Nowruz preparations by cleaning house a few weeks before the spring equinox. It is also a traditional time to buy new clothes and get new furniture for one’s home.

**Fire Jumping**

*Chahar Shanbe Suri* is the name in Persian for fire jumping, which is performed at night on the last Wednesday before the New Year. To celebrate Chahar Shanbe Suri, groups of people build small bonfires in the streets and jump over them. They shout the Persian phrase “*Zardie man az to, sorkhie to az man.*” That means, “May my sickly pallor be yours and your red glow be mine.” It is thought that when one jumps over the fire, it symbolically burns away all the negative things that happened in the past year.
Jumping over a fire is dangerous, so many people light a fire and shout the phrase without getting close to the flames! After fire jumping, people go home to their families and wait for the New Year to start. The exact moment when the vernal equinox happens is called Tahvil in Persian. This is when the New Year begins.

Haji Firooz

Nowadays it is not difficult to know when Tahvil is – the information is available online or in the media. In the past, before newspapers and the Internet, people knew when the New Year started because a person known as Haji Firooz visited their neighborhood, singing, dancing and announcing Nowruz.

Haji Firooz is the traditional herald of Nowruz. He symbolized the rebirth of the Sumerian god of sacrifice, Domuzi, who died at the end of each year and was reborn with the New Year.

Haji Firooz role is the same today as it was in ancient times. He wears a red costume and his face is painted black. The color black is a Persian good luck symbol. He sings and dances in the streets with tambourines and trumpets, spreads good cheer and announces the coming New Year.

Happy New Year!

When the New Year is close and the clock is ticking down, families and friends get together and wait for Tahvil. When the New Year begins, they wish each other well, saying “Happy New Year!” (“Sal-e No Mobarak!” in Persian). The eldest person in the family hands out special New Year’s sweets. Young children receive coins. People visit neighbors and relatives and exchange Nowruz gifts.

The Table of the Seven S’s

On the first day of Nowruz, family members gather around the haft-seen table. The haft-seen table is the central symbol of Nowruz celebrations. Haft means seven in Persian, and seen is Persian for the letter S. The haft-seen table is a table of seven foods that start with the letter S. The seven things are, in Persian: Sabzeh, Samanu, Seeb, Senjed, Serkeh, Seer and Somaq. All these items are important symbols. Putting together a haft-seen table is a family activity.

Nowruz Visits

People visit the homes of friends, neighbors, and relatives during the Nowruz holiday. They share food and chat. Everyone has to visit many people, so visits are short, about half an hour long. On a visit, you often run into other friends and relatives who are visiting the same house at the same time.

At Nowruz, people stock up on cookies, pastry, special nuts and fresh and dried fruit. They serve these to the visitors, along with tea and other beverages. Younger people visit their elders first. After that, older people return the visits.
In Iran, it has become common for people to get together and throw big Nowruz parties in a central location, instead of traveling between many individual houses.

Omens

Some people believe that what a person does on Nowruz influences the rest of the year. For example, if you are kind to people on Nowruz, then the New Year will be good. If there is discord, the year will be bad.

Some people tie a knot in a piece of clothing, such as their shirt, or in the corner of a handkerchief and ask the first stranger they meet to help them untie it. If the stranger helps them, then it means their misfortune will be removed.

There is a tradition called fal-gosh. People stand where others cannot see them, in a dark corner or behind a wall, and listen to conversations of passersby. They interpret what they hear as an answer to their own questions. For example, if a young woman wonders if she will get married in the New Year, and then hears a stranger say, “I would love to do that,” she might interpret it as a positive omen.

Coloring Eggs

Easter is not the only spring holiday for which people decorate eggs. Eggs are a fertility symbol in many cultures, and the Persian culture is no exception to this. Elaborately-decorated eggs are a feature of Nowruz.

Holiday Foods

What would a cultural celebration be without its special dishes? Most cultural celebrations around the world have special foods associated with them. One Nowruz specialty is a noodle soup called ash-e resteh. It is usually served on the first day of Nowruz. The noodles symbolize all the possibilities that life holds in store for a person. People say untangling the noodles brings good luck.

Reshteh polo is rice cooked with noodles, which people say brings success in life.

Another food associated with Nowruz is fish served with rice made with green herbs. It is called sabzi pollo mahi. The green herbs in the rice symbolize the green of nature at springtime. Herbs traditionally used are chives, coriander, dill, fenugreek and parsley. It is a traditional food on New Year’s Day.

Kookoo sabzi is a soufflé some people serve for dinner at New Year. Made with herbs and vegetables, it is a light, fluffy omelet-like dish made with eggs and walnuts mixed with chives, coriander, dill, parsley, spinach and spring onions.

Just before the New Year, many Azeri people cook dolme barg, a dish made of meat, rice and vegetables which are cooked, wrapped in grape leaves and cooked a second time. They say it helps your wishes come true.
Special sweets are also popular at Nowruz. These include cookies made from rice flour, which are called *naan berengi*. People also eat *baqlava*, a sweet, flaky pastry; sugar-coated almonds known as *noghi*, and the sprouted wheat pudding from the haft-seen table, *samanu*.

**Sizdah Bedar**

The haft-seen table stands in the home for thirteen days after Nowruz begins. The thirteenth day is called *Sizdah Bedar* and has a special meaning. In Persian, Sizdah Bedar means *getting rid of the thirteenth*.

The ancient Persians believed that the Zodiac’s twelve constellations controlled the twelve months of the year. They also believed that each constellation ruled the earth for a thousand years, after which the world was engulfed in chaos. The thirteenth day of Nowruz symbolizes a time of chaos. On that day, families go outdoors and have picnics and parties to avoid the bad luck associated with the number thirteen.

As the last day of Nowruz, Sizdah Bedar is as festive as the first day. Parks are full of families eating special foods at picnics. People dance, eat, and sing. They also bring *sabzeh*, sprouted wheat or lentils, from the *haft-seen* table. The sabzeh sprouts are thrown to the ground or more commonly into running water such as a river, to carry away misfortune and sickness, and to symbolically make nature greener.

After Sizdeh Bedar, Nowruz is over. Adults return to work and children go back to school.
Choose the best answer for each question on this page

1. What does Nowruz celebrate?
   a. Persian independence
   b. The birth of Zoroaster
   c. Persian New Year
   d. Vernal equinox

2. When is Nowruz usually celebrated?
   a. In March
   b. In May
   c. In September
   d. In December

3. How old is Nowruz?
   a. 3,000 years
   b. 1,000 years
   c. 75 years
   d. The article does not say

4. Nowruz is a(n) ... celebration.
   a. Iranian
   b. Persian
   c. European
   d. None of the above

5. Nowruz is a celebration of which modern religion?
   a. Zoroastrianism
   b. Islam
   c. Christianity
   d. None, it is a secular celebration

6. How is the Persian New Year related to the Vernal Equinox?
   a. They are the same thing
   b. It begins on the Vernal Equinox
   c. The Vernal Equinox is not related to the Persian New Year
   d. It ends on the Vernal Equinox

7. Who is Haji Firooz?
   a. The inventor of Nowruz
   b. A famous Persian poet
   c. A person who announces Tahvil
   d. A person who builds bonfires
Write complete sentences to answer the questions on this page

1. Why do you think Nowruz is such an important holiday for those who celebrate it?
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________

2. From the way it is used in the article what do you think is the meaning of *secular*?
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________

3. Who do you think celebrates Nowruz in Canada and the United States? Why do you think they celebrate it?
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________

4. Imagine you are a child in a culture that celebrates Nowruz. What would you look forward to the most? Why?
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________

5. What do you understand differently after reading about Nowruz? How will you use this information in the future?
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
WRITING ABOUT NOWRUZ

Think about the themes of springtime celebrations such as Nowruz. What does Nowruz have in common with other celebrations? What are the differences? What do you think are the reasons for the similarities and differences? Write a story, essay or poem that expresses these themes.
Glossary of Nowruz Vocabulary – Page 1

**Ash-e resteh** - Noodle soup, traditional Nowruz food

**Azeri** - Traditionally Shiite Muslim people of Azerbaijan, parts of Armenia and northern Iran.

**Baqlava** - Sweet, flaky pastry

**Chahar Shanbe Suri** - Fire-jumping (traditional Nowruz activity)

**Equinox** - One of two times in the year when day and night are approximately the same length; they mark the beginning of spring (vernal equinox) and the beginning of fall (autumnal equinox)

**Fal-gosh** - Method of divining (fortune-telling) by listening to conversation of strangers and interpreting what they say as an answer to a question.

**Haft-seen table** - “Table of the seven S’s” – Nowruz tradition

**Haji Firooz** - A colorful figure who announces the approach of the New Year in Persian tradition.

**Iran** - Modern country in the Middle East/Southwest Asia, roughly equivalent with the location of historical Persia.

**Khouneh Tekouni** - spring cleaning

**Naan berengi** - Rice flour cookies, traditional Nowruz food

**Noghi** - Sugar-coated almonds, traditional Nowruz food

**Nowruz** - Persian New Year celebration, celebrated in countries throughout the Middle East, Southwest and Central Asia and elsewhere

**Persia** - Historical empire in Southwest Asia with a distinctive culture and language (Persian). Persian is now spoken in Iran. The name comes from the Ancient Greek word *Pars*, which referred to the area between the Indus Valley and the Nile River.

**Pollo mahi** - Fish with rice cooked with green herbs. Traditional Nowruz food

**Qu’ran** - The holy book of Islam. Also spelled Koran.
Glossary of Nowruz Vocabulary – Page 2

“Sal-e No Mobarak!” - “Happy New Year!” in Persian

Sabzeh - Grass of sprouted wheat, lentils or barley. Traditional item on the haft-seen table.

Samanu - Sweet, creamy pudding made from sprouted wheat. Traditional item on the haft-seen table.

Seeb - Apples. Traditional item on the haft-seen table.

Senjed - Sweet, dry fruit of the lotus tree. Traditional item on the haft-seen table.

Serkeh - Vinegar. Traditional item on the haft-seen table.

Seer - Garlic. Traditional item on the haft-seen table.

Shahnameh - Epic Persian story. Sometimes placed on the haft-seen table.

Shams ud-Din Hafez - 14th-century Persian poet. His works are sometimes placed on the haft-seen table.

Sizdah Bedar - The 13th (and last) day of Nowruz.

Somaq - Crushed spice made of sumac berries. Traditional item on the haft-seen table.

Sumerian - Ancient civilization in the area (roughly) of modern-day Iraq.

Tahvil - The moment of the vernal equinox, and beginning of Nowruz

“Zardie man az to, sorkhie to az man.” - Persian expression meaning “May my sickly pallor be yours and your red glow be mine.” Shouted when jumping over a bonfire (Chahar shanbe suri).

Zoroaster - Persian prophet who founded Zoroastrianism. Also called Zarathustra.
Answers to NOWRUZ

Multiple-choice questions
1. c
2. a
3. a
4. b
5. d
6. b
7. c

Short-answer questions
1. Answers will vary. Accept logical, realistic answers.
2. secular = not related to religion
3. Answers will vary. Accept logical, realistic answers. (i.e. immigrants from Persian cultures or their descendants, etc.)
4. Answers will vary. Accept logical, realistic answers.
5. Answers will vary. Accept logical, realistic answers.