

The modern twists on an ancient sun festival

Should we all celebrate the summer solstice? Pagans descended on Stonehenge this morning to celebrate the longest day of the year. Some think we all could benefit from a little sun worship.



Sunrise: Last year around 13,000 people watched the summer solstice from Stonehenge.

It is the longest day of the year; marks the beginning of summer; and has inspired extravagant festivities for centuries. Today is the summer solstice.

This is the day each year when the Earth's **northern hemisphere** is exposed to the most sunlight.

The UK is predicted to enjoy 16 hours and 38 minutes of sunshine. While this may be an opportunity for more fun in the sun, solstice customs have a long history.

Approximately 5,000 years ago the immense **monoliths** of Stonehenge were arranged so the rays of the summer solstice would fall precisely on its central Altar Stone. Modern-day **pagans** flocked to the site this morning to witness the phenomenon, just as

ancient Celts did thousands of years ago.

These traditions live on with distinctly modern twists.

For example, Midsummer Boulevard in Milton Keynes was designed to perfectly align with the rising sun on the day of the summer solstice. Its architects once celebrated the solstice there with an all-night bonfire and Pink Floyd songs.

And in recent years New Yorkers have been celebrating "Manhattanhenge". This is when the setting sun **lines up** with the city's street grid — its slow descent perfectly framed by city's skyscrapers.

Should we all celebrate the summer solstice?

Sun god

Of course, some say. These ancient traditions are older than the world's main faiths, and the sun is a symbol that can unite us all — particularly when religion and politics are so divisive. Furthermore, it would help us all connect more deeply with nature.

Don't be silly, others respond. The fact that humans no longer pay attention to mumbo-jumbo sun worship proves how far we have progressed. The rituals of our ancestors were based on irrational fears that various gods would be angered. Now we rely on enlightenment values of reason and science.

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: The summer solstice technically occurs

when the sun is directly over the Tropic of Cancer, or at a latitude of 23.5 degrees north. In London this will occur at precisely 11:07 am.

Q: What do we not know?

A: We do not know exactly why Stonehenge was built. Some believe it was intended to be a sacred hunting and feasting site; others that it acts as a rudimentary astronomical calendar.

YOU DECIDE

Is it foolish to worship the sun?

ACTIVITIES

Consider the word “sun”. In one minute write down all the things you associate with the term. Share your ideas with the class. Are most of the words you have written positive or negative? Why does the sun have such a central place in world cultures? Should modern people celebrate nature more?

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

“The sun is new each day.”
Heraclitus

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

Northern hemisphere – In the southern hemisphere, today is the winter solstice – the shortest day of the year.

Monoliths – A large single block of stone.

There are at least 90 stones left at Stonehenge.

Pagans – Pagan can refer to many old religions – all distinct from the world’s major faiths. Paganism is often characterised by a belief in multiple deities and the worship of nature.

Lines up – Manhattan’s north-south streets run at about 29 degrees to the east of true north. This means the phenomenon occurs close to, but not on the same date as the summer solstice.

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