

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 (due to the globe's **tilt** — the North Pole is now tipped closer to the sun than at any other point this year).

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.

Tonight in Egypt, the sun will set directly behind the head of the Sphinx of Giza — precisely between the two great pyramids. For ancient Egyptians, the scene was to have

symbolised the cycle of **life and rebirth**.

Long ago, **Norse** people marked the day with parades and wore crowns of flowers; Vikings believed the long daylight hours were good for doing business; and **Incas** pledged to their gods offerings of food, animals and (possibly) humans.

While human sacrifices may be a thing of the past, traces of these traditions live on with distinctly modern twists.

A **study** found that 694 cities worldwide had roads that line up with the summer solstice. 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 the music of Pink Floyd.

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, which burn orange in the evening glow.

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 universal symbol that can unite us all — particularly when religion and politics are so divisive. What's more, in our industrial and digital age we need a reminder of where humans come from: nature. May the solstice celebrations begin.

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. The solstice looks cool, but let's not take things too far.



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. The sun rose at around 4:43 am and is predicted to set at 9:21 pm. As of today the length of days will get progressively shorter.

Q: What do we not know?

A: Despite its alignment with the summer

solstice sunrise, 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. One theory suggests that ancient people believed the stones had magical healing powers.

YOU DECIDE

1. Is it foolish to worship the sun?
2. Are mainstream religions like Christianity doomed?

ACTIVITIES

1. 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?
2. Using the resources under Become An Expert, find out why the summer solstice occurs. Draw a diagram which explains the process using clear labels and images.

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.

Tilt – The Earth’s north-south axis is tilted by 23.4 degrees relative to the sun.

Monoliths – A large single block of stone. There are at least 90 stones left at Stonehenge.

Pagans –

Pagan can refer to many different 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.

Life and rebirth – With the sun setting between the two pyramids, the scene resembles the hieroglyph *akhet*, which can be translated as “horizon”.

Norse – Relating to ancient or medieval Norway or Scandinavia.

Incas – The Inca civilisation arose from the

highlands of Peru and came to rule a huge empire in Western South America.

Study – Research carried out by data engineer Demeter Sztanko.

Lines up – Manhattan’s north-south avenues 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.

BECOME AN EXPERT

Read this article on [theday.co.uk](https://www.theday.co.uk) for links to recommended videos and further reading.

 Notes

