

# Discovering the world's favourite numbers

A maths expert wants to find out about our favourite numbers. What's yours? Why? And what do the answers reveal about individuals and even national cultures?



## MATHS

**T**ravelling round the globe researching the origins, applications and beauties of mathematics – not to mention the eccentricities of maths enthusiasts – writer and maths graduate Alex Bellos found himself challenged at every turn.

'Hey, Alex, what's your favourite number?' The question baffled, even irritated him. As a 'serious' person, he couldn't understand the concept of an emotional attachment to one number rather than another, let alone why people seemed to have such strong feelings about it. Surely the question was frivolous, and of interest only to people who were superstitious about lucky numbers or sentimental about some date that was significant to their own self or family?

But the question kept on coming, and he kept on answering that he didn't have a favourite – to Alex, all numbers were equally fascinating.

So after a while, he decided to bring

some rigour and analysis to this alternative approach to numbers. Displaying no lack of ambition, Alex has invited all of us, across the world, to tell him about our favourite numbers and the reason they are special to us. If we don't have a favourite, he wants to know that too, and why. From this global survey, he hopes to demonstrate some trends.

For example, we already know that in Chinese cultures, the number 8 is considered lucky. And the survey has already thrown up the idea that people in India are particularly enthusiastic about 1, 10 and even 0.

Intriguingly, this attraction to the symbol of nothingness could have a religious or spiritual dimension: early Western civilisations, including Greece and Rome, had no way of quantifying the idea of infinity and no zero, seriously limiting their ability to count and calculate, which maths historians speculate was to do with a fear of the void, of a world without God;

but for Indians, from whom we derive modern numbering systems including the crucial addition of zero, nothingness is nirvana, the state of emptiness towards which all humanity should strive.

### MAGIC NUMBERS

When it comes to individuals, Alex thinks that those with more mathematical ability might tend to have purely mathematical reasons for their preferences – that they love a prime number or a number that is very divisible, for example.

But those with more personal reasons for liking a particular number might have less mathematical ability and therefore a greater desire to exert emotional control over something that they don't understand very well by giving it characteristics 'and making it into a friend.'

When the results are published next year, we'll find out more patterns. So go on, get involved!

## Q & A

### Q How many people have favourite numbers?

**A** Many, although it's expected that the survey will find that some have no preference. Of those that do make a choice in favour of a particular number, the reasons could be a birthday, a date or year on which something good happened, or a belief about lucky numbers.

### Q And people are afraid of 13?

**A** It's called 'triskaidekaphobia' and it's remarkably widespread. Many hotels leave out room number 13 in case of superstitious guests. The superstition may come from the fact that there are 13 months in the pagan lunar calendar.

### Q What about reasons to find a number 'friendly'?

**A** In one academic study, an interviewee liked

2 because it looks like a duck and isn't lonely like 1. Another prefers the visual roundness of 8 and the 'completeness' of 10.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'All numbers are the same – they all scare me.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?