

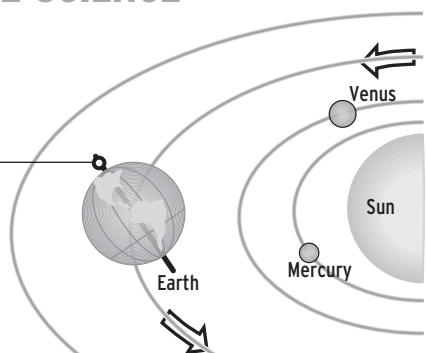
Have a short day

By MICHAEL DOSS | THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

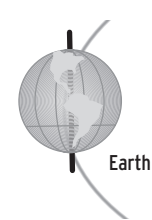
Today marks the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere (and the longest in the Southern). The sun rises at 6:53 a.m. today and will set at 4:47 p.m., giving us just under 10 hours of daylight. Compare this to the summer solstice, when Orange County gets more than 14 hours in our day.

THE SCIENCE

As the Earth spins around its axis, an imaginary line goes through the planet between the North and South poles. But the Earth is not perpendicular to the orbital plane around the sun, and thanks to this tilt, we enjoy the four seasons. For several months of the year, one half of the Earth receives more direct rays of the sun than the other.



When the axis points away from the sun - from December to March - the Southern Hemisphere enjoys the direct rays of the sun during their summer months. Alternatively, when the axis tilts towards the sun, as it does between June and September, it is summer in the Northern Hemisphere but winter in the Southern Hemisphere.



On the first days of winter and summer, the tilt change briefly becomes zero. Then the direction of the tilt moves the other way. In the Northern Hemisphere, this direction change, which takes place on Dec. 21 or 22, signals the beginning of winter. It also marks when the amount of daylight starts to increase again, and the days get longer.

The Register

THE SPIRIT

Religious people worldwide have observed the winter solstice in a number of ways.

Ancient Egypt: The god-man/savior Osiris died and was entombed on Dec. 21.

Ancient Rome: Saturnalia began as a feast day for Saturn on Dec. 17 and went through Dec. 23.

Druidism: Druids formed the professional class in ancient Celtic society, performing the functions of priests, teachers, philosophers and musicians. The solstice for them was the time of the death of the old sun and the birth of the dark half of the year.

American Indians: The Pueblo tribe looked forward to spring and rebirth with prayer sticks, retreats and altars at the solstice.

Neopaganism: The winter solstice is called yule. The most common practitioners are called Wiccans. It is a time for introspection and planning. They might celebrate on the evening before, at sunrise on the morning of the solstice, or at the exact time of the astronomical event.

Christianity: Many symbols and practices associated with Christmas are of pagan origin, and taken from solstice celebrations, including holly, ivy, mistletoe, the yule log, the giving of gifts, the decorated evergreen tree, and more. In Massachusetts, Puritans unsuccessfully tried to banish Christmas during the 17th century because of its heathen influences.



TRADITION: Christmas trees are set up at Vienna's Opera House. Historians say yule trees date to druids using pine boughs to mark the solstice.



STONEHENGE: The remnants of the last in a sequence of circular monuments built between 3000 B.C. and 1600 B.C. are one of Britain's most popular tourist attractions and a spiritual home for thousands of druids and mystics. It has become a traditional gathering place during the solstices. Exactly how and why Stonehenge was built remains a mystery. Some experts believe it is aligned with the sun because its builders came from a sun-worshipping culture, while others believe the site was part of a huge astronomical calendar. The site consists of 20-foot-tall stones encircling several inner circles and horseshoes of smaller stones. The largest stones weigh between 25 and 45 tons, with some topped by 7-ton lintels.

Sources: The Associated Press, U.S. Naval Observatory and religioustolerance.org. Compiled by Michael Doss, Register Research.

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