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Paganism is on the rise—here’s where to discover its traditions

TikTok—specifically #witchtok—is fueling interest in this spiritual movement. Here’s how to immerse yourself in full moon rituals, spellcasting, and more.

A woman presses a staff to her forehead during the autumn equinox at Stonehenge, in the United Kingdom, while a crowd gathers to watch the sunrise.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALICE ZOO, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

BY CHRISTINE MACINTYRE



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PUBLISHED MARCH 22, 2023 • 7 MIN READ

Centuries ago, ancient Celts traveled windy moors to worship the horned god, Cernunnos. Ancient Egyptians crossed deserts to invoke the protection of Isis. Druids journeyed to a forest clearing to perform rituals under the moon. But over time, such deities faded into myth; the rituals went underground.

Recently, however, a resurgence of interest in Pagan practices—crystals and tarot cards, astrology, and herbal magic—has brought Paganism from

the fringes back to the center of pop culture, or at least to the top of your [TikTok](#) feed.

At least [1.5 million people in the United States](#) identify as Pagans—up from 134,000 in 2001. They range from Wiccans and Kemetics to TikTok witches and heathens. (See explainer of these groups below.)

“There is, in general, a move away from organized religions and toward spirituality,” says Helen Berger, an author and sociologist of contemporary Paganism and witchcraft. Female empowerment and gay rights movements, the climate crisis, and a desire for a more life-affirming religion have fueled interest in the growing spiritual community, she adds.

From spellcasting in Salem, [Massachusetts](#), to full moon rituals in Asheville, [North Carolina](#), to transcending the metaphysical plane in Sedona, [Arizona](#), here’s how to immerse yourself in the cultural traditions of Pagan communities.



Witch Brian Cain addresses a gathering of the Witches’ Magic Circle in Salem, Massachusetts, on October 31, 2021. The ceremony honors friends and family members who have died.

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The return to mainstream

“It’s very difficult to sum up what Paganism ‘is’ since there is so much diversity,” says Sarah Pike, author and professor of comparative religion at California State University, Chico. “Pagans view the natural world as sacred. They celebrate the interconnectedness of all things, seeing humans, nature, and spiritual beings as part of a web of life.”

Historically, the term pagan referred to anyone who didn't believe in Judeo-Christian principles, often belonging to ancient cultures in countries such as [Greece](#), [Rome](#), [Egypt](#), [Scandinavia](#), and [Ireland](#). "Most ancient Pagans did not use the term Pagan themselves or see themselves as belonging to a distinct group," says Edward Watts, professor of history at the University of California, San Diego.

After centuries of persecution, Paganism remained mainly a fringe practice until the 1960s. It became an attractive religion to follow for those rebelling against restrictive social norms. In the past decade, the rise of TikTok—#witchtok has more than 35 billion views—and popular TV shows like the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, *Vikings*, *Supernatural*, and *American Horror Story: Coven* are helping drive increased interest in the spiritual movement.

Where to experience Pagan culture

Attending a ritual event is one way to learn about Pagan practices. [Samhain](#), celebrated from the evening of October 31 into November 1, marks the end of harvest season and the start of winter. In Salem, Pagans observe the holiday with festivals, dancing, nature walks, and honoring their ancestors. Visitors can attend the [Official Salem Witches' Halloween Ball](#) to witness ceremonial dances, spellcasting, and other rituals.

Dixie "Queen Lady Passion" Deerman, founder and high priestess of [Coven Oldenwilde](#) in Asheville says that to experience rituals firsthand is transformational, as participants experience an ecstatic state, creating a feeling of oneness with other participants. "Immersion in ritual is akin to floating in soul-soothing water," Deerman says. "Anyone can be swept up in a liberating rite that encourages unbridled passion."

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Travelers can visit [Mother Grove Goddess Temple](#), near downtown Asheville, to join in public rituals during the ancient holy days (and Earth Day) and participate in full moon ceremonies. During other key Pagan holidays like [Yule](#) (winter solstice), [Ostara](#) (spring equinox), and [Litha](#) (midsummer solstice), Salem's [Witch House](#), the only standing structure in town with direct ties to the Salem witch trials of 1692, offers live demonstrations and activities that teach about Pagan traditions.

[\(Witch hunt tourism is lucrative. It also obscures a tragic history.\)](#)

Roger Herson, a practicing wizard, says Salem's [New England Magic and Pentagram](#) are great starting places for people exploring Paganism since they're both a "shop and school of witchcraft and wizardry," he says.

“There are many witches in Salem who still practice and teach ‘magick’ in an authentic way, as opposed to those who are more into the glitz and glam,” Herson says.

Salem and Asheville aren’t the only towns known for pagan gatherings. In Southern [California](#), [Pacific Circle Revival](#) hosts a community retreat where campers unplug and connect with the earth through spiritual rituals and educational workshops. Every July, during the midsummer solstice, [WitchesFest USA](#)—one of the most visible Pagan festivals in the U.S.—draws thousands into the streets of Manhattan for dance circles, 60 different “magickal” workshops, and guest lectures from global Pagan leaders.

Pagan-friendly communities teeming with psychic shops, astrology classes, natural healers, and metaphysical supply stores appeal to the physical components of Paganism. But in Sedona, a city known for its vortexes and sites of spiraling energy, it’s the spiritual activities that draw thousands of tourists to the Red Rocks annually.

“Tourist guides there will say there are four specific vortexes around the town—Airport Mesa, Cathedral Rock, Bell Rock, and Boynton Canyon—but local lore has it that the whole area is a vortex that enhances spiritual practices such as meditation, clairvoyance, and yoga,” says Susannah Crockford, an anthropologist and author.

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For transformative experiences, [Sedonya Conscious Living Retreat](#) allows guests to experience a [New Moon Activation and Intention Ceremony and Ritual to Rise](#) retreat at nature’s doorstep. [Green Witch Creations](#), an apothecary in Sedona, provides workshops on spiritual empowerment, chakra alignment, and aura healing. It also sells chakra jewelry and crystal wands, and offers tarot card readings and Reiki energy sessions.

Deerman says people curious about Paganism should search for ways to experience the culture firsthand and be ready to learn. “Tourists flock to meet us to see if what we write in our books is really true,” she says. “They get to see that we live what we write and are inspired by it.”

WHAT TO KNOW: PAGAN TERMS

Pagan terms to know before you go.

Cernunnos—Ancient Celt deity who oversees nature, wilderness, and sexuality.

Isis—The most powerful goddess in the ancient Egyptian religion, she oversees healing and magic.

Druid—A practitioner of Druidry, an ancient Celtic nature-based pagan religion that believes in environmental stewardship.

Wiccan—A practitioner (often called a witch or wizard) of Wicca, one of the largest modern-day, nature-based pagan religions.

Pagan—A follower of a polytheistic or pantheistic nature-worshipping religion.

Kemetic—A person who follows the beliefs of the ancient Egyptian religion.

Tik Tok witch—A social media influencer who shares knowledge on witchcraft, spirituality, and magic.

Heathen—A devotee to Norse gods who views the Icelandic Eddas and sagas (oral poems recorded in the 13th century) as sacred texts.

Witchcraft—A religious practice involving magic and affinity with nature, usually within a pagan tradition.

#witchtok—A niche section of TikTok, a video-sharing app, that revolves around magic and witchcraft.

Full moon ceremonies—A ritual event that takes place during a full moon to help release negativity and recharge spiritual and emotional batteries.

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