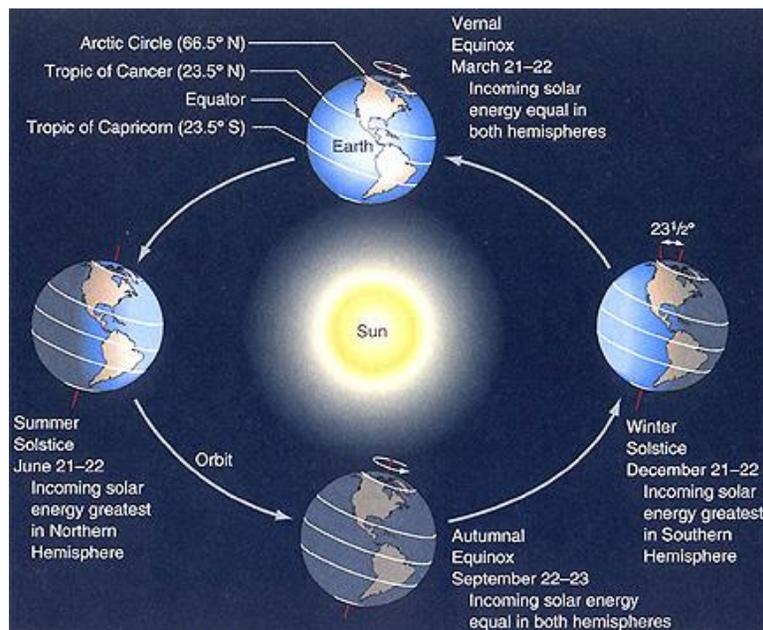




Winter Solstice

The solstice occurs everywhere on earth at the same time: around 5:00 pm on Dec. 21. The word *solstice* means “sun stands still” in Latin, and marks the time that the earth is tilted closest, or farthest away, from the sun. During the few days around the solstice, the sun may appear to stand still, as the day length switches from shortening to growing longer.

For those of us in the Northern hemisphere, our winter solstice occurs on Dec. 21. This means that we are farther away from the sun than we will be the rest of the year. But for people living in the Southern hemisphere, this date marks the summer solstice, since the lower portion of the earth is tilted toward the sun. On the winter solstice, the day is shorter and the night is longer than any other day in the year.



This image from [NASA](#) shows the earth's tilt and our closeness to the sun at various times of year.

Even though the winter solstice is the shortest day of the year, this date also marks the beginning of winter. Interestingly, our seasons trail the solstice, due to thermal mass held by the oceans. Since these large bodies of water retain heat and cold, they affect the climate, typically making January and February our coldest months. Similarly, summer solstice and the beginning of summer mark the longest day of the year, on June 21, and generally our hottest months are July and August.

Historically, while the summer solstice is a time to anticipate the growing season and harvest, the winter solstice has been a time of celebration for the imminent return of light. Many communities and religions have created rituals and festivities around this time of year. Some ancient structures were also built to allow light to enter certain areas only on the solstice. Across communities and religion, the return of light following the winter solstice is cause for gratefulness and hope.