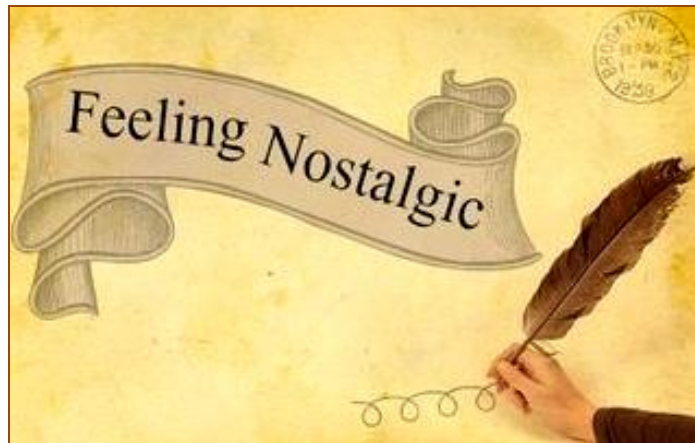


## The **PSYCHOLOGY** of **NOSTALGIA** by Francesco Gallo, psychiatrist



### **ABSTRACT**

Nostalgia, distinguished from homesickness, is a bittersweet emotion, a yearning for the temporal or spatial past. It is especially observed in immigrants who through retrospective idealization, long for their native lands and attempt to relive old times. Nostalgia, in reality, is a compilation of many memories integrated into one and for this reason, cannot be recreated. It can be experienced pathologically in post traumatic stress disease but in most situations, it's a positive experience as it gives meaning and continuity to our past, present and future.

### **RIASSUNTO**

La nostalgia, distinta dalla nostalgia, è un sentimento agrodolce, un desiderio per il passato temporale o spaziale. Si osserva soprattutto negli immigrati che, attraverso una idealizzazione retrospettiva, desiderano ardentemente la loro terra natia. Si tenta di rivivere i vecchi tempi anche se essendo una compilazione di tanti ricordi integrati, la nostalgia non può essere ricreata. Può essere un'esperienza patologica come nel disturbo post traumatico da stress ma nella maggior parte dei casi è un'esperienza positiva in quanto dà significato e continuità al nostro passato, presente e futuro.

**KEYWORDS:** nostalgia, homesickness, identity, compilation, assimilation

**Nostalgia** is defined as a bittersweet yearning to return home to the past. The word derives from the Greek prefix "*nóstos*", meaning "homecoming", a Homeric word, and the suffix "*álgos*", meaning "pain" or "ache". It was coined in 1688 by Johannes Hofer (1669-1752) in his Basel (Switzerland) dissertation to become a medical doctor. He described the fatigue, insomnia, arrhythmia, fever and indigestion displayed by Swiss mercenaries when they fought away from home in the lowlands of France or Italy where they missed their native mountain landscapes. At the time, military physicians thought these symptoms were due to a damage of the brain cells and ear drums by the constant clanging of cowbells in the pastures of Switzerland.

With time, anyone separated from their native land was considered to become vulnerable to nostalgia. By the XX century, it was no longer considered a neurological disease but a psychological one as it was believed it represented the difficulty in forgetting childhood experiences or unconsciously even fetal life. Thus, nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy of returning home or perhaps returning to childhood.

For a short video about nostalgia, just login to

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/09/science/what-is-nostalgia-good-for-quite-a-bit-research-shows.html>

In reality, "**homesickness**" is not true nostalgia, but rather a **geographic nostalgia**, a yearning for a different **space** rather than a different **time**, for return to idealized memories of a location and of the people left behind. During World War II and many other wars, homesickness was responsible for the instability and loss of manpower observed in many soldiers and it's also related to the yearly dropouts of college freshmen. In Homer's *Odyssey*, *Ulysses* yearns for *Ithaca* and after he overcomes a series of challenges, he successfully reclaims his home and wife *Penelope*.

Nevertheless, being a **bittersweet emotion**, at times it makes us recall negative periods of our lives but it generally makes us more optimistic giving life more meaning and makes death less frightening. It has been shown to reduce loneliness and nervousness, to increase tolerance and unite people. Dr. Constantine Sedikides of the University of Southampton says "*Nostalgia makes us a bit more human*".

Svetlana Boym in her book "*The future of nostalgia*" (2001) wrote that a nostalgic individual is "*a displaced person who mediates between the local and the universal*". She described nostalgia as a condition in which a person moves between the **ambivalent poles** of local/individual and universal/collective, suggesting a polarization between place of residence and place of origin, thereby creating the imagined feeling that the place of residence is not really "home". Nostalgia becomes more than just a longing for the familiarity and comfort of home; it is a sense of having lost ties to a nation and a national identity. When native citizens unwittingly mock the accent of foreigners, they show disrespect for the past of immigrants and hinder their desire to "fit in." In conclusion, Boym suggests that **progress** exacerbates nostalgia, thus, precluding assimilation of immigrants.

Some researchers in the 1970s and 1980s suggested that nostalgia could worsen **self-discontinuity**. This means that a person's identity should remain substantially the same as it used to be, for instance, an elderly relative who has lost substantial cognitive functioning, still retains some of their unique characteristics, such as, moral values, personality, memories and goals. There is a **psychological overlap** between the past, present and future which serves to realize the difference between **connectedness** (the preservation of important psychological features) and **continuity** which is more subtle in meaning.

Positive changes over time may reflect common aspirations for self-improvement. "For example, people judge that a person who changes from being very cruel to being very kind has revealed her '**true self**'—that these positive qualities were lurking within and that the person has undergone some sort of maturational unfolding".<sup>1</sup>



Migration has always existed especially in moments of economic or social difficulties but deciding to leave one's countries and family in search of better opportunities can be quite challenging since it means facing a new unknown world and become homesick or nostalgic. This is all part of the **Ulysses Syndrome** which can have very negative effects with **self-identity crisis** (see photo), fear of failure, anxiety

and depression. The name of this syndrome recalls the Greek mythological hero (Ulysses) who after the Trojan War, experienced a very difficult journey back home that made him always more nostalgic.

At the University of Arkansas, Farzana Akter's thesis in the year 2017, points out that "nostalgia does not spring from any idealized or imagined version of the past, nor is it triggered by a uniquely experienced past; instead, it's a complex state of mind that is triggered by **socio-political and cultural alienation**...the immigrants' dissatisfied and disconnected condition in the adopted land is responsible for their homesickness and nostalgia".

She believes that in USA, the "**melting pot ideology**" is **unrealistic** since various factors exist that prevent newcomers to forget their past and integrate into the mainstream. They feel "**alienated**" or "estranged" because of various forms of discrimination of natives who wish to protect their *status quo*.

"The process of **cultural identity negotiation** is by no means a negotiation of equality by which the immigrants inscribe within themselves the cultural norms of both cultures equally. The power of the **hegemonic group** definitely affects this process of negotiation, leading the **ethnic minority** to accept the majority of hegemonic customs while forsaking most of their cultural heritage to facilitate integration... Their transition from the culture of origin to the culture of adoption, no doubt a tortuous one, is exacerbated by **social segregation** and cultural isolation, both of which consequently generate feelings of **ambivalence** and **rootlessness**, which in turn often lead to **homesickness** and **nostalgia**... immigrants are nostalgic for their homeland, their nostalgia is not linked to any geographical borders, but rather it is a longing for the past time; that is, immigrant nostalgia is actually **temporal** rather than **spatial**, and, in keeping with the irretrievability of time, nostalgia is essentially an illusion that functions as a **coping mechanism** until it prompts real action—such as the physical return to the homeland—that unmask the mechanism for what it is. I further propose that nostalgia and yearning to go back necessitates a constant search for the **self** and thus act in forging a future based on **stable identity**."<sup>2</sup>

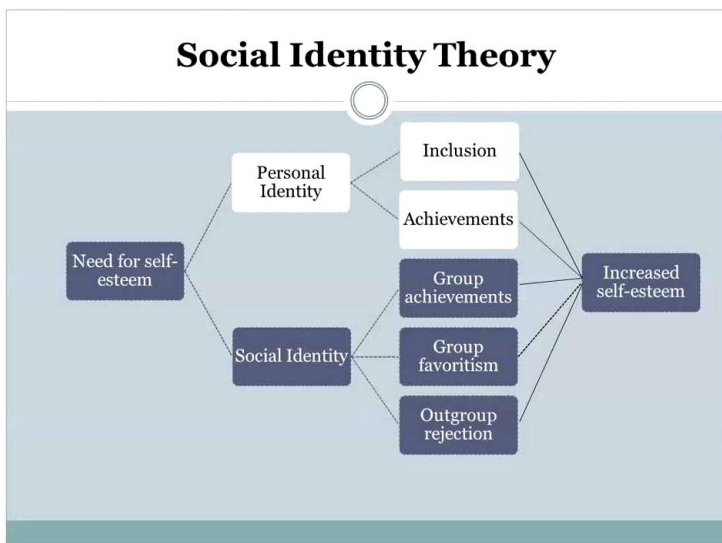
<sup>1</sup> Oleg Urminsky and Daniel Bartels, "Identity, Personal Continuity and Psychological Connectedness across time and over transformation", School of Business, University of Chicago IL, 2015, pp. 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> Farzana Akter, thesis "The net of nostalgia: class, culture and political alienation...", University of Arkansas, Fayetteville AR, 2017.

In fact, the German philosopher **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804) notes that people who return home are usually disappointed because, in fact, they do not want to return to a **place**, but to a **time**, a time of youth.

"Can scents evoke nostalgia; what might be the psychological implications of such an evocation? ... Scent-evoked nostalgia predicted higher levels of positive affect, self-esteem, self-continuity, optimism, social connectedness and meaning in life. In addition, scent-evoked nostalgia was characterized by more positive emotions than either non-nostalgic autobiographical memories or non-nostalgic non-autobiographical memories".<sup>3</sup>

Another quick way to induce nostalgia is through **music**. Also it was also discovered that people in a **cool room** are more likely to nostalgize than people in warmer rooms.



To understand the origin of nostalgia in **immigrants**, we must first comprehend the meaning of the "**Social Identity Theory**" (see **diagram**). According to it, single individuals have a social identity as they belong to particular groups (e.g., an identity as "physicians," as "men," or as "socialists"). These identities can be strong or weak and their content depend on the group's characteristics (e.g., all physicians graduated from medical schools) and on their norms (e.g., "physicians' priority are his

patients"). Social identity determines emotions (e.g., physicians are upset with wrong diagnoses) and behavior (e.g., physicians should help each as a group). Personal self-esteem increases with group achievements which are recalled with nostalgia. Discrimination occurs when a group is not recognized as "belonging", conversely, favoritism is observed when individuals are invited to join the group because similarities are shared.

Resulting from a **retrospective idealization** of lost objects, nostalgia helps **immigrants** overcome feeling defenseless and frustrated in a new and strange environment. Immigration can result in a "culture shock" and mourning over the losses (here nostalgia has a function) that can create a new **hybrid identity**. This is particularly observed when adolescents emigrate since the normal psychological process of **separation-individuation** is interrupted and the **Oedipus Complex** is renegotiated.

"**Nostalgia** among immigrants frequently has been conceived of as a brooding and obsessive **homesickness** that leads to depression, lassitude, and neurotic misery among those who have left their original home and resettled elsewhere. Recent social psychological, literary and philosophical work, however, has sought a reformulation of nostalgia that instead emphasizes the **positive uses** to which memory, even painful memory, may be put in the effort to confront the challenges to personal identities of such massive changes in the lives of an individual as immigration".<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Chelsea A. Reid et al., "Scent-evoked nostalgia", Journal Memory, on-line, vol. 23, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> David A. Gerber, "Moving backward and moving on: nostalgia, significant others, and social reintegration in nineteenth-century British immigrant personal correspondence", The History of the Family Journal, October 7<sup>th</sup> 2015, U.K., pp. 291-314

"Far from being an eager patriot in the land of his birth, seeking his Italy in whatever country will give him his bread, not fervid in his patriotism abroad, the **Italian**, like no other emigrant, aspires to return to his home. His affections (with his homeland) are warm and deep, attaching him to his **family** and the scenes of his **childhood**. When he breaks from these tugging intimacies, it is conditionally, not absolutely; he must live in them again, and he departs only that he may live in them more richly than before. Life abroad is a strange and difficult thing to the unsheltered Italian, who tolerates it only for the promise of the return to Italy. Where contrasts glare upon him from every angle, a **homesickness** appears and he becomes restless and impatient. Yet he stays and sacrifices, rounds out his purgation, putting aside as many lire as he may to realize his master passion, the assurance of a house and land and comfort for his family in his native paese"<sup>5</sup>.

"...Through exploration of the **letters to family members** of three **British immigrants** to North America in the nineteenth century, this essay seeks to demonstrate how symbolic representations of the personal past inscribed creatively in letter-writing may function, or alternatively fail to function, to provide associations that **bridge the gaps** between past and present. The past may serve up mental images of pleasant circumstances involving people, places and events that serve as **metaphoric building blocks** by which the mind may ultimately place the individual in new circumstances, now made more familiar by virtue of their comparability to the past. Or, the tendency toward nostalgic memory may simply be overtaken by immersion in new circumstances that work in time to lead individuals realistically to draw pleasure from the past, while understanding its declining day-to-day relevance"<sup>6</sup>.

The **assimilation** of our first Italian immigrants in USA would indicate they had forgotten their past and accepted **consumerism** and **capitalism**. They had to unwillingly accept the exploitative system of capitalism which nonetheless they preferred to poverty, to indoctrination and to brainwashing of Monarchy and of the Fascist regime that had started in Italy in 1922

Nostalgia is not a real recreation of the past, but rather a combination of many different memories (**screen memory**). It might appear as the memory of an early childhood event but in reality it's a **compilation** of different memories integrated into one. It can be demonstrated in psychoanalysis that the patient's earliest memory undergoes changes and divides into multiple components that are separate and definable childhood memories and because of this, we can never return to this past as it never truly existed and nostalgia does not relate to a specific memory, but rather to an emotional state. Idealized past emotions become projected onto inanimate objects, sounds, smells and tastes that were experienced concurrently with the emotions.

Our nostalgic urge to recreate the past becomes evident when we choose to marry spouses with characteristics that remind those of our mothers or fathers as we seek to recreate our idealized past. In our daily behavior, this urge may also be partially satisfied with our food choices or family recipes passed down from one generation to the next. Also, observing holidays (Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, 4<sup>th</sup> of July) gratify our nostalgic wishes and become part of "**institutionalized nostalgia**" which has remained the same for thousands of years.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert F. Foerster, "The Italian Emigration of Our Times", Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1919.

<sup>6</sup> David A. Gerber, "Moving backward and moving on... op. cit.

Nostalgia can also be **pathological**, as observed in seriously regressed **schizophrenics** whose delusions represent idealized memories or in **complicated grief**, a heightened state of mourning that prevents thinking about anything else the loss of an idealized person. Vice versa, in **Alzheimer's disease**, the past is substituted with the present and in **post traumatic stress disorder**, the past is rejected as it becomes an obsession which blocks the present.

Centuries ago, nostalgia was thought to be a disease but by the 1850s this idea was abandoned and it was rather seen as a symptom or stage of **melancholia**, a predisposing condition among suicide patients.

In 1938, Isaac Frost, classified nostalgia as an "**immigrant psychosis**," a form of "**melancholia**" and a "mentally repressive compulsive disorder". He observed that in 40 foreign domestic servants, mainly German and Austrian, who after about eighteen months of their arrival in Britain, felt exhausted, lonely, needed companionship, and developed "immigrant psychosis".<sup>7</sup>

Nostalgia was also diagnosed among soldiers of the American Civil War, World War I and World War II. In these circumstances, it meant soldiers had failed to adapt and assimilate, being incapable to overcome geographical, political, social and environmental difficulties.



It might make us feel sad and regretful but it generally gives us a positive mood. It allows people to remember meaningful experiences they shared with others, it can **improve our humor, self-esteem and social belonging**. Nostalgia can make us feel that our lives have roots and continuity. It can make us feel good about ourselves and our relationships and give us strength to move forward.

All the **senses** (vision, hearing, smell, taste) may be used to precipitate the nostalgic experience, as it occurs when we hear music, see pictures, videos or movies and smell odors such as the aroma of fresh popcorn or baked foods. Hearing an old song can vividly bring back memories. Smelling something during childhood is usually never forgotten as the olfactory cranial nerve is directly connected with the limbic system, the area of the brain considered the seat of emotions. A song heard once at a specific moment and then not heard again until a much later date, will give the listener a sense of nostalgia for the events which had occurred.

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<sup>7</sup> Isaac Frost, "Home-Sickness and Immigrant Psychoses. Austrian and German Domestic Servants the Basis of Study", Journal of Mental Science, Volume 84, Issue 352, Cambridge UK, September 1938.

Occasional nostalgia was seen to have **many positive functions**, such as:

- improve mood by effectively coping with problems that inhibit one's happiness;
- increase social connectedness by remembering the people we were close to,
- enhance positive self-regard by helping us to feel better about ourselves;
- provide existential meaning by increasing our self-esteem and the value of life by mitigating life threats, problems and stress;
- increase learning and memory;
- provide comfort and contribute to mental health;
- increase the effects of advertising to buy long-established products such as Coca Cola and Levi Strauss jeans even if they never had used the products before ("vicarious nostalgia").



To detect the presence of "nostalgia" in the year 2010, at the Department of Psychology of the University of Southampton in UK, six researchers Frederick S. Barrett, Kevin J. Grimm, Richard W. Robins, Tim Wildschut Constantine Sedikides and Petr Janata created the "**Southampton Nostalgia Scale**" (**SNS**) questionnaire with 7-items scored with a 7-point criteria (1 being "not at all" and 7 being "very much") :

1. How valuable is nostalgia for you?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. How important is it for you to bring to mind nostalgic experiences?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. How significant is it for you to feel nostalgic?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. How prone are you to feeling nostalgic?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5. How often do you experience nostalgia?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6. Generally speaking, how often do you bring to mind nostalgic experiences?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7. Specifically, how often do you bring to mind nostalgic experiences?

- \_\_\_\_\_ At least once a day
- \_\_\_\_\_ Three to four times a week
- \_\_\_\_\_ Approximately twice a week
- \_\_\_\_\_ Approximately once a week
- \_\_\_\_\_ Once or twice a month
- \_\_\_\_\_ Once every couple of months
- \_\_\_\_\_ Once or twice a year

To evaluate nostalgia, **four other questionnaires** were used:

1. The **Personal Inventory of Nostalgic Experiences (PINE) questionnaire** with four items or questions worded in the past tense. Here responses were recorded on a 7-point scale (1= *Not at all*, 7 = *Very much*):
  - “How nostalgic did you feel today?” 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
  - “To what extent did you feel sentimental for the past?” 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
  - “How much did you feel a wishful affection for the past?” 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
  - “To what extent did you feel a longing to return to a former time in your life?” 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Notice that PINE is negatively related whereas SNS is positively related to well-being.

2. The **Time Perspective Inventory (TPI)** includes **five factors** to describe individual differences in how participants think about time:
  - past positive (e.g., “It gives me great pleasure to think about my past”),
  - past negative (e.g., “I think about the bad things that have happened to me in the past”),
  - present fatalistic (e.g., “Since whatever will be will be, it doesn’t really matter what I do”),
  - present hedonic (e.g., “I believe that getting together with one’s friends to party is one of life’s important pleasures”), and
  - future (e.g., “I believe that a person’s day should be planned ahead each morning”).

Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale (1 = *Very uncharacteristic*, 5 = *Very characteristic*).

Nostalgic stories are not always past happy experiences even if the joys are mixed with a sense of loss. Nonetheless, the positive elements greatly outnumber the negative ones. Nostalgia usually gives us a stronger feeling of belonging and affiliation and we become more generous toward others.

### 3. **Well-being** or satisfaction with life **scale**

Five well-being or satisfaction with life indicators relevant to well-being (inspiration, empathy, searching for meaning in life, regret, and depression) and to nostalgia, are listed below and are assessed using numbers 1 to 7 (1 = Extremely dissatisfied, 2 = Dissatisfied, 3 = Slightly dissatisfied, 4 = Neutral, 5 = Slightly satisfied, 6 = Satisfied and 7 = Extremely satisfied).

- \_\_\_\_\_ In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
- \_\_\_\_\_ The conditions of my life are excellent.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am satisfied with my life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

### 4. **Affect Scale**

**Positive activated affect (PA)** was assessed with the words enthusiastic, delighted, happy, glad, and excited; **positive deactivated affect (PD)** with the words calm, peaceful, relaxed, contented, and at ease; **negative activated affect (NA)** with stressed, angry, annoyed, tense, and nervous; **negative deactivated affect (ND)** with depressed, disappointed, miserable, gloomy, and sad.

Responses were recorded on a 7-point scale (1 = *do not feel this way at all*, 4 = *feel this way moderately*, 7 = *feel this way very strongly*).



Also the **relationship** between **nostalgia** and **well-being** was evaluated by considering loneliness, rumination, reflection, satisfaction with life, self-esteem, optimism, inspirations and regrets.

**Loneliness** was positively related to tomorrow's nostalgia, we controlled for loneliness in the other lagged analyses.

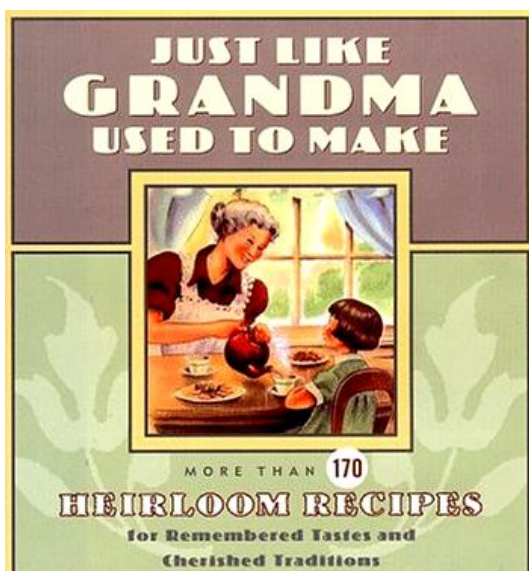
**Rumination** items are "How much today did you ruminate or dwell on things that happened to you?", "How much today did you play back over in my mind how you acted in a past situation?", and "How much today did you spend time rethinking things that are over and done with?"

**Reflection** items are "How much today did you think about your attitudes and feelings?", "How much today did you think about the nature and meaning of things?", and "How much today did you think introspectively or self-reflectively, i.e., about yourself and what you are like?"

Substantial conclusions remain the same, i.e., that nostalgia was still significantly related to tomorrow's negative social and achievement events, to thinking about the past and with rumination and reflection.

**Ecological momentary assessment (EMA)** is a method used in research to study nostalgia. It assesses individuals' current experiences, behaviors, and moods as they occur in **real time**, taking into account repeated sampling of an individual's behaviors in their natural environment. It is an intensive longitudinal research methodology that involves asking participants to report on their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and/or environment on multiple occasions over time. It allows researchers to measure "life as it is lived", suggesting that EMA techniques can greatly enhance our understanding of nostalgia in real-world settings.

In **conclusion**, nostalgia can have negative effects but usually has positive ones. It stimulates individuals to accept the present and face the future since it gives meaning and continuity to the many life events as it unites past, present and future. It makes us appreciate our early formative experiences and our first emotional attachments, giving value to friendship, love and family.



Whenever the writer of this article returns to his place of birth (Lago, Province of Cosenza in Calabria, Italy), many old timers he meets remind him of his dead grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts as they were during his childhood. This **revivification** is of course nostalgia and it indicates the inability or the unwillingness to forget his former identity and replace it with a new one. There he can speak his native tongue (Calabrese dialect), smell aromas of the past, eat traditional local food, hear church bells ring, attend Holy Mass on Sundays, listen to folk music and participate in traditional local festivities.

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