Painting depicting a banquet in Pompeii. Circa 1st Century CE
The ancient Romans loved games and festivals. They were either preparing for or enjoying some sort of festival or celebration just about every day of the year! Ancient Romans practices contributed to the origins of many of the holiday activities we enjoy today.

Valentine’s Day: The ancient Roman festival called Lupercalia honored love. On this day, some young people in ancient Rome chose future marriage partners by drawing names from a hat. Can you imagine choosing your husband or wife by drawing a name from a hat? As you might guess, some of these relationships did not turn out very well and did not last very long. Other marriages were arranged by families for the benefit of maintaining or improving social status.

The Roman god Cupid has played a role in the celebration of love for a very long time. To the ancient Romans, Cupid was the son of Venus (the Roman goddess of love and beauty.)

May Day: No one is quite sure who first originated the idea of May Day, but for all the ancient cultures, the coming of spring was cause for celebration. It meant food could be gathered and planted. As part of their celebration, some ancient people gathered flowers and put them on window ledges to keep out pesky spirits. Others filled baskets with gifts and greenery to give to friends and loved ones.

Decorating with greenery: The ancient Romans loved celebrations. They especially enjoyed a holiday they celebrated around the 25th of December. The Romans feasted, gave gifts, were merry, and decorated their homes with greenery, customs they borrowed from the ancient Greeks!

Honoring their gods was a big part of ancient Roman daily life. There were many thousands of Roman gods. The ancient Romans believed that gods lived everywhere - in trees, under a bush, by the side of the road, in a burrow, in a flower, in a stream, under the bed, and perhaps even in the stove in your house. There was even a deity who lived inside the latch that opened the door to each home. In ancient Rome, everything had a spirit in charge of it.

Temples: There were impressive temples all over the Roman Empire. Every day, the ancient Romans brought offerings of meat and other items to at least one nearby temple. Usually they visited more than one temple every day.

Household Gods: Each home had a personal household god that kept things running smoothly at home. Some ancient Romans kept a whole room of their house for a grand display to honor their personal household god. Others had a small display somewhere in the kitchen. Whenever the ancient Romans prepared a meal, they ate it in honor of the household god.

New Gods: Not all of the gods that the ancient Romans worshiped were originally Roman gods. The Romans did a lot of traveling as they expanded their empire. Each time the Romans heard a myth about a god or goddess or spirit or deity from the people they met (and conquered), if they liked it, they adopted it and made it their own.

When they heard about the Greek gods, they adopted nearly all of them! The Romans changed many of the Greek god names to Roman names. Zeus became Jupiter. Hera was renamed Juno. But the Romans left their personalities intact.

The Birth of Christianity
During the first century CE, a new religion took hold in Rome. It was called Christianity and was originally viewed by the Romans as simply another Jewish sect. The followers of Christianity were called Christians.

Christians believed in one god. They refused to worship the Roman gods. In ancient Rome, that was against the law. Christians were treated as criminals.

In spite of persecution, Christians grew in numbers rapidly. Christians actively looked for converts. They told others about the benefits of being Christian. Christians came from every walk of life in ancient Rome, but Christianity had great appeal to Rome's poor.

- **Life After Death:** Christianity promised life after death in heaven. In the Roman religion, only gods went to heaven. Emperors were considered gods. Everyone else went to the underworld.

- **Equality:** Christianity promised equal opportunity. You had to be born into the nobility. You could join Christianity and be equally a Christian.

After nearly 300 years of persecution, in 313 CE, Emperor Constantine ruled that Christianity was legal and that Christians would no longer be persecuted for their beliefs.

This does not mean that Rome finally had religious freedom. It meant only that it now legal to worship Roman gods or to be Christian. Every other religion was still illegal.

Food

**During the Republic:** (And perhaps almost through the second century BCE) Romans ate mostly vegetables, and dined very simply.

Meals were prepared by the mother or by female slaves under her direction.

A table was set up in the central room of the house called an atrium. The father, mother, and children sat on stools around the table. Often the kids waited on their parents.

Table knives and forks were unknown, but the Romans had spoons like ours today. Before food was served, it was cut into finger food, and eaten by using your fingers or a spoon.

In the last two centuries of the Republic, this simple style of living changed a bit. A separate dining room was designed. In place of benches or stools, there were dining couches.

**During the Empire:**

**The lower class Romans (plebeians)** might have a dinner of porridge made of vegetables, or, when they could afford it, fish, bread, olives, and wine, and meat on occasion.

Since many of the lower class were citizens, the ancient Romans had a program to help them, somewhat like a welfare program. The welfare program was called the annona.

There was also a separate school-lunch program (the alimenta), just for kids, which was instituted, or at least greatly developed in early 2 CE.

In the regular food welfare system, people were issued welfare stamps, which were little tokens, called tesserae. You showed up with your tokens (tesserae) and containers, at large government warehouses. You got wheat flour -- or bread already baked from government bakeries, and other foodstuffs. Meat was distributed on special occasions with special tokens.

**The upper class Romans (patricians)** had dinners that were quite elaborate. The men had the dinner parties; their wives and children ate separately. They ate many different foods, drank lots of wine, and spent hours at dinner. Quite often, the men’s dinner parties had entertainment, such as dancing girls or a play, or both. Men reclined on couches, arranged around the dinner table. In their separate dining quarters, wives and children usually sat on chairs. As things loosened up in the late Empire, wives could go to a dinner party.

There were several types of events that only women attended, the most prominent of which was the religious/social **Festival of the Bona Dea**, the "Good Goddess", held in the house of the hostess. If a man went to the Bona Dea, even the woman's husband in what was after all his own house, he could be put to death!

**Julius Caesar divorced one of his wives** because there were rumors that a man had slipped into the Bona Dea festival at his house. Although it was never proved, it was on that occasion that Caesar said that not only Caesar's wife should be above reproach, she should be "seen" to be, as well.

http://rome.mrdonn.org/dinner.html
Entertaining the Masses

Most people in Roman times did not have much spare time. They were too busy working. They liked games though. Soldiers often played board games with counters and dice. Counters and boards for their games have been found. Archaeologists aren't always sure of the rules!

Hunting was also popular. People hunted animals for fun as well as for food. The Romans introduced a new type of deer to Britain, just for hunting.

Some things the Romans did for fun were horrible. They enjoyed fights between gladiators, and fights between people and animals. These bloodthirsty shows were put on in front of crowds in large arenas called amphitheatres.

Roman emperors paid for free shows at theatres and amphitheatres. It was a good way to make themselves popular.

What did gladiators do?
Gladiators fought one another, usually in pairs. They also fought wild animals such as lions or bears. When a gladiator was beaten (but still alive), the audience would wave scarves or put their thumbs out if they wanted him killed. If he'd fought well, and they wanted him to live, they would close their thumbs onto their fingers. Different types of gladiators used different weapons. For example, a man with a sword and shield might fight a man with a three-pronged spear or trident, and a big net.

The Colosseum was a huge public entertainment center.

The Colosseum could seat 45,000 spectators. Some people were not lucky enough to have a seat in the Colosseum. If you didn't mind standing, the Colosseum could hold up to 70,000 spectators!

This is where the ancient Romans gathered to watch bloody combat between gladiators, and battles between men and wild animals. This is where they threw people to the lions! To see men being killed was very entertaining to the ancient Romans. On occasion, they flooded the Colosseum with water, to hold naval battles. During the battles, many competitors died.

The ancient Romans were great builders. They built things to last. The Colosseum was built of concrete, faced with stone, as were most amphitheatres. It was built in the early days of the Roman Empire, around 70 CE. It was designed to host huge spectacles. Anyone could attend the events in the Colosseum. Admission was free. Much of it is still standing today, and you can visit it if you ever go to see the glory of Rome!

http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/romans/leisure/
http://rome.mrdonn.org/colosseum.html
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