

Japanese Festival

There are two main types of festivals in Japan: nationwide festivals and local festivals. While nationwide festivals do, of course, share some invariable features, they can also differ quite a bit depending on the region. And, similarly, even though the local celebrations are quite unique to that specific area, many of them also have a fair number of characteristics in common. A characteristic seen in many local festivals is the carrying of the kami (deity) of the regional shrine around the town/neighborhood in mikoshis (palanquins, portable shrines), along with many decorated daishis/yatais (floats), on or around which you can normally see volunteers playing various instruments. These festivals are also great opportunities to wear traditional clothes such as kimonos or yukatas (summer kimonos), zori straw sandals and tabi socks, as well as eat cheap (but good!) Japanese street food and blend in with the locals.

Nationwide Festivals

Seijinshiki / Coming of Age Day (*2nd Monday of January*)

Its roots date back to ancient times, when it was something of an initiation ceremony. The current celebration is based on a youth festival organized in Saitama Prefecture in 1946, and aims to instill hope and a bright outlook on the next generation, who will have the central role in forming the future of Japan. It is generally held every year on the 2nd Monday of January, although some neighborhoods prefer to hold it during the Obon Festival (see below), as the local youth is more likely to have returned home during that holiday. To be celebrated, a person must have celebrated his/her 20th birthday between last April and the April following.



Credit: flickr, Kyle Hasegawa

Hinamatsuri / Doll Festival (*March 3rd*)

Dolls wearing Heian Period dresses are displayed along with peach flowers, while sushi and shirozake (sweet sake) are consumed. Originally, the dolls served as toys for the daughters of aristocrat parents in the Heian Period, however over time, it became part of the gosekku (five annual celebrations; four of them are between seasons, and one is between years).



Credit: flickr, Nullumayulife

Hanami (*March-April, depending on the region*)

It literally means “flower viewing” and is by far the most magical season in Japan (the second one would be momiji, the season of autumn leaves; see below). During hanami, practically everyone goes to one of the parks with cherry trees (or “sakura” in Japanese) and enjoys the stunning view along with food and lots of alcohol. In fact, most of the time they are more interested in the consumption part, rather than in the flower viewing itself. There is even a Japanese proverb, “Hana yori dango” (rice dumplings over flowers) that expresses this sentiment.



Credit: Gergo Sastyin

Tanabata / Star Festival (July 7th or August 6th-8th; the latter is closer to the original date of the lunar calendar)

It is also one of the gosekku, and used to be a part of Obon, however due to the introduction of the western calendar, it became independent. Nowadays it is spent attaching wishes in the form of tanzakus (colorful papers) to bamboo branches. This tradition comes from a Chinese myth, in which the lovers, Cowherd Star (Altair) and Weaver Star (Vega) are separated by the Milky Way and only allowed to meet once every year, on this very day. Therefore it is not very surprising that besides Japan, it is also celebrated in China, Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam. The most famous festival is held in Sendai, where the streets are covered in splendid hand-made streamers and other smaller paper decorations.



Credit: Wikimedia, Aimaimy

Obon (*July 13th-16th or August 13th-16th depending on the area*)

This is one of the most important Japanese traditions, when families get together to welcome the spirits of their ancestors. They usually place various food offerings in front of the butsudan (Buddhist altar), visit and clean the family's graves. Toro nagashi, or floating lanterns marks the end of Obon in many regions, when people set a lit lantern afloat onto a river or a sea, as they believe that these lights will guide the spirits back to their world. Another characteristic of Obon is the bon odori, a dancing event on the last night, which everyone is welcome to join and which takes place inside the gardens of shrines/temples or even near stations.



Credit: flickr, Matt May

Momiji-gari (*September-December, depending on the region*)

You can surely say that in Japan every season has its own personality. Spring has sakura, summer has loud cicadas and tsuyu (rainy season between May and July), autumn has momiji (autumn leaves) and taiphoons, and winter has snow and Japanese apricots. In autumn, it is absolutely recommended to visit one of the famous momiji observation places such as the Oirase Stream in Aomori Prefecture, Nikko in Tochigi Prefecture or basically any shrine and temple in Kyoto City. The “-gari” (literally “hunting”) ending refers to the way Japanese people used to break off the branches and observe the leaves from the top of their palms. Luckily it is not a habit anymore.



Credit: flickr, liz west

Shichi-Go-San (*November 15th*)

The name of this celebration literally means 7-5-3. On this day, parents visit their local shrines/temples to pray for the health and happiness of their 3, 5 or 7 years old child(ren) (this celebration follows the traditional East-Asian age reckoning, in which newborns start at the age of 1) . Originally it was only performed in the Kanto area, however it has recently spread to the entire country. Besides the prayers, there used to be three rituals to be carried out, which were specific to the gender and the age of the child: at age 3, the girls could grow out their hair again (until that both the boys' and the girls' heads had to be shaved); at age 5, the boys could wear hakama pants; at age 7, the girls could wear the same obi belt as the adults. Nowadays these rituals can be performed regardless of gender and since shaving the children's heads is not a custom anymore, it has been replaced with an adapted version of the tradition. In the past, people used to shave the heads of their children, believing that this would enable the children to have stronger and healthier hair. The modernized version of this is that at age 3, both genders receive their first haircut. The result is photographed and kept safe in every Japanese family's photo album.



Credit: photozou,

□ カイネコ

Omisoka, New Year's Eve (*December 31*)

Before you can get rid of all the 108 worldly desires (bonno) by listening to the temple bells at midnight, you need to clean your house thoroughly (called *osoji*) and pay off your debts! You should also eat toshigoshi-soba, which guarantees that your good luck will be extended, just like your noodles.



Credit: flickr, Kanko*

Shogatsu, New Year (January 1st-3rd, 1st-7th or 1st-15th depending on the region)

Shogatsu is supposed to signify all of January (as the word *gatsu* means month), however it is generally used to refer to either sanganichi (1-3) or matsu-no-uchi (1-7 or 1-15). It is customary to visit your relatives, co-workers and friends during shogatsu (onenshi) and bring them a present (onenga). Of course, if you cannot stop by personally for some reason, you can send them a new year's greeting card (nengajo), which has, regrettably, more recently been replaced by SMS or e-mail. During this period, children receive small allowances from parents and grandparents (otoshidama) and pine tree decorations (kadoomatsu) are placed in front of houses. Most people also visit a shrine (traditionally three) either right after midnight on New Year's Eve or at least during sanganichi in order to thank the gods for the last year and pray for happiness and health in the new one (hatsu-mode or hatsu-mairi).



Credit: flickr, ayustety

Local Festivals

Wakakusa Yamayaki (*4th Saturday of January*)

An annual festival in Nara City, which is primarily famous for the spectacular grass-burning on the hillside of Mount Wakakusa-yama. It is performed for several reasons: as a ritual for the spirit of the sage that is buried on the mountain, and to avoid bad luck in the new year. The fire is usually accompanied by fireworks, resulting in a magnificent view of earthly and heavenly fires reaching towards each other.



Credit: Wikimedia, [□](#) [□](#) [□](#) [□](#) [□](#)

Sapporo Snow Festival (*early February*)

The biggest festival in all of Hokkaido, which attracts over 2 million visitors annually. It started in 1950, when local schools organized a snow-themed event with 6 ice statues in Odori Park. Since 1974, several foreign teams from the sister cities of Sapporo (Portland, USA; Munich, Germany; Shenyang, China; Novosibirsk, Russia; Daejeon, South Korea) have been participating as well. If you would like to volunteer, make sure to apply during the previous November! And, even if you do not wish to participate actively it is more than recommendable to come and stare at the numerous splendid snow and ice sculptures in awe, in the same park where this festival started some 65 years ago.



Credit: flickr, SteFou!

Yokote Kamakura Festival (*February 15-16*)

Another snow festival held in Akita Prefecture, however unlike the one in Sapporo, the major attractions here are the hundreds of breathtaking igloos called kamakura scattered all around the city. Each of them hosts a snow altar for the water deity. Several different kinds of delicious rice cakes and rice wine are offered by the local children in exchange for offerings.



Credit: Wikimedia,
(□) □

Todaiji Omizutori (*March 1st-15th*)

It is also called Shunie and is one of the oldest Buddhist religious services in Japan, with over 1,200 years of history. It is performed annually at the Todaiji temple in Nara City, by 11 monks (rengyoshu). The name comes from a ceremony, during which the priests descend from the Nigatsu-do hall in order to draw water from a well at the base of the temple late at night between the 12th and the 13th of March. Another astonishing event during this service is the Otaimatsu, which involves a dozen giant (6-8 m, 40-70 kg) burning torches being lit on the balcony of this hall; the embers falling down allegedly provide the visitors with a safe year.



Credit: flickr, musume miyuki

Kanda Festival (*the weekend closest to May 15 in odd numbered years*)

It is considered to be one of the three largest traditional matoris in Japan (the other two are Gion Festival in Kyoto and Tenjin Matsuri in Osaka; see below). The extravagant version is held every other year (odd-numbered years) in mid-May, while the scale is considerably more moderate in the years between. It is certainly an unforgettable sight to witness about 300 Edokkos (people who were born and raised in the Kanda area, which was the city center during the Edo Period) marching through the main streets holding some 100 portable shrines on their shoulders. If you miss it, or you would like to know more about the history of this festival, make sure to visit the Kanda Myojin Museum (hours: 10:00-16:00, fee: 300 yen for adults).

The shrine itself was originally built in 730 and, even though it has been reconstructed and renovated several times since then, the current buildings are still able to provide you with a dazzling atmosphere. Because of its proximity to Akihabara, it is frequently visited by people, who require divine protection for their digital devices. You need not miss out either: take home a charm (omamori) to shield your gadgets from malicious forces (1,000 yen).



Credit: flickr, Marufish

Asakusa Sanja Festival (*3rd weekend in May*)

The Sanja (literally means “three gods”) Festival was born in 1872, when three separate events were merged into one. It is the annual festival of the Asakusa Shrine, and one of the most representative ones in Japan. During the three days it is organized, as many as 30 groups of men, women and children move around their own community’s mikoshis (portable shrines). There are also floating stages, on which you can watch musicians playing on flutes and drums, as well as dancers moving to their rhythm. Follow them to the shrine, where you will witness the performance of the Binzasara Mai traditional dance.



Credit: Wikimedia, Torsodog

Kyoto Gion Festival (*July*)

As mentioned above, the Gion Festival in Kyoto is one of the three largest traditional matusuris. It continues throughout the entire month of July and its name comes from the Gion geisha/entertainment district, although most of the events take place somewhere else. Its history began in 863 during the Heian Period, when a protective festival was held to end a series of disastrous plagues. Currently it is organized together by the Yasaka Shrine and the Yamaboko-cho neighborhood. The festival reaches its peak during the Yamaboko Junko parades on the 17th and the 24th. The 17th features as many as 32 floats, part of them are yamas depicting scenes from Japanese and Chinese mythology, the rest are hokos that are combinations of portable music halls and museums. All of them are fairly big and heavy (almost 10 tons). The 24th has 10 umbrella floats and dance performances to offer the onlookers.



Credit: flickr, Izu navi

Osaka Tenjin Festival (*July 24-25*)

It has been held by the Osaka Tenmangu Shrine since 951. Currently it is one of the largest boat festivals in the world: 3,000 people sail some 100 boats from the Tenma-bashi Bridge upstream, which are lit after dusk as part of the boat processions. The volunteers are all dressed in 11-13th century imperial-court style clothes and, before embarkation, perform a parade with many portable shrines. It is also recommended to visit one of the many kagura (Shinto theatrical dance) or bunraku (traditional puppet theatre) stages in the city, but make sure to get back in time to welcome the arrival of the 3,000 people crowd to the shrine, when you can witness the fantastic closing ceremony (around 10pm on the 25th).



Credit: [Wikimedia](#), [663highland](#)

Nebuta Festival (*August 2-7*)

This is the festival of giant lanterns depicting historical figures such as samurai warriors, along with birds and other animals. According to one legend, its origins come from a warlord's attempt to wipe out all the Ezo people from Northern Honshu and Hokkaido, during which, much like the story of the Trojan War, he hid his soldiers inside big dolls, and this strategy allowed him to succeed. In fact, it is said that the Aomori City version represents the departure to the front, and the Hirosaki City version, also called Neputa around there, represents the glorious return. These two variants have many other different aspects that are definitely worth experiencing.



Credit: [Wikimedia, 663highland](#)

Akita Kanto Festival (*August 3-6*)

This is another important festival in the Tohoku region besides Nebuta and Sendai Tanabata. Its main focus are the 8 meters long bamboo poles that are decorated with 46 lanterns in the shape of rice plant ears, and weigh approximately 50-60 kilograms. They are believed to drive away the evil spirits, while people are praying for the good harvest.



Credit: flickr, yisris

Tokushima Awa Odori (*August 12-15*)

A dancing festival that is told to be associated with the celebration of the newly build Tokushima Castle in 1587, during which the feudal lord, Hachisuka Iemasa offered sake to the people and the drunk crowd started to dance with such unsteady movements. Awa odori can be seen in most of the cities during the Obon season, although none of them compare to the one in Tokushima. Here, besides watching the parade and the stage performances, you are welcome to join the dance at the Odori Hiroba!



Credit: flickr, Nullumayulife

Himeji Nada no Kenka Festival (*October 14-15*)

If you think that half-naked people struggling with heavy portable shrines on their shoulders or other structures carrying more half-naked men playing on instruments and dancing was not crazy enough: you should see the kenka matsuri, or the fighting festival, where groups of people clad in different colors deliberately make the shrines collide with each other. In fact, the bigger the collision, the more the kamis are pleased. The winner's village receives a year of good luck and abundance in harvest.



Credit: flickr, lensonjapan

Jidai Festival (*October 22*)

Its history dates back to 1895, when the construction of Heian Jingu was completed, where two emperors, Kanmu and Komei are enshrined. As a matter of fact, October 22 is the day, when Emperor Kanmu moved the capital from Nagaoka-kyo to Kyoto in 794. Its main spectacle is the 2 km long parade, which features an array of about 2,000 people dressed in traditional clothes, starting from the Meiji Period all the way to the time of Emperor Kanmu (Enryaku Era, 782-806).



Credit: Wikimedia,
Corpse Reviver

Abroad

If you cannot visit Japan for some reason, don't panic just yet: there are still plenty of annual festivals abroad that are related to Japanese culture and organized by the local nikkei population. Although Brazil and the United States (especially California State) have the largest Japanese diaspora, you can find quite eye-catching events and celebrations in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Canada and Malaysia, just to mention a few.

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