

Practical Travel Guide - 805

ANNUAL EVENTS IN JAPAN



Japan is a land of many festivals. In cities, large and small, as well as in rural districts, colorful rites and merrymaking—some of religious significance and others to honor historical personages or occasions—are held throughout the four seasons.

No matter what month of the year you may choose for your

trip to Japan, you have an opportunity of enjoying a goodly number of these celebrations. And, joining the joyful throng, you will actually feel the pages of Japanese history being turned back and will experience the pleasant thrill of peeking into the nation's ancient culture and traditions.

Date	Event & Site	Remarks
JANUARY		
1st	New Year's Day (national holiday)	New Year's Day, the "festival of the festivals" in Japan, is celebrated with solemnity and yet in a joyful mood. The streets are gay with New Year decorations of pine and plum branches, bamboo stalks and ropes with paper festoons. People pay homage to shrines and visit friends and relatives to exchange greetings.
3rd	Tamaseseri or Ball-Catching Festival, Hakozakigu Shrine, Fukuoka City	The main attraction of this festival is a struggle between two groups of youths to catch a sacred wooden ball, which is believed to bring good luck to the winning team for the year.
6th	Dezome-shiki or New Year Parade of Firemen, Tokyo	The parade takes place in Tokyo Big Sight. Agile firemen in traditional attire perform acrobatic stunts on top of tall bamboo ladders.
7th	Usokae or Bullfinch Exchange Festival of Dazaifu Temmangu Shrine, Dazaifu City, Fukuoka	Hundreds of people try to get hold of "good luck" bullfinches made of gilt wood which are given away by priests. They are passed from hand to hand in the dim light of a small bonfire.
9th–11th	Toka Ebisu Festival of Imamiya Ebisu Shrine, Osaka	Thousands of people pray for a successful New Year's business. Ebisu is the patron deity of business and good fortune. The festival features a procession of women in colorful kimono, carried in palanquins, through the main streets.
17th	Bonden Festival at Miyoshi Shrine, Akita City	Dozens of Bonden, symbol of the Creative God, are carried by young men, who vie to be the first to reach the shrine. A similar festival is observed at Yokote City in Akita on February 16th and 17th.
2nd Mon.	Coming of Age Day (national holiday)	In Japan, children are considered adults on their 20th birthday. From that day on they are invested with all the rights of citizenship. Municipal governments host special coming-of-age ceremonies for 20-year-olds and the participants dress up in their finest clothes for this ceremony. It is the custom for 20-year-old women to wear a long-sleeved kimono on this ceremony day.
Closest Sun. to Jan. 15th	Toshi-ya or Traditional Japanese archery contest, Sanjusangendo Temple, Kyoto City	This archery contest is held at a specially-prepared archery range in the temple. Approximately 2,000 participants who turned 20 (come of age) in the previous year wear traditional costumes, draw their bows, and shoot arrows at a target.
4th Sat.	Burning of Wakakusayama Hill, Nara City	In the evening twilight, a trumpet signals the setting ablaze of Wakakusayama Hill in Nara Park. Fireworks streak to the sky from a nearby slope. The spectacle reminds one of the historic burning of the turf on this hill, which more than ten centuries ago marked the amicable end to a long dispute over the boundary of two major temples in Nara.
FEBRUARY		
Early Feb.	Sapporo Snow Festival, Hokkaido	Elaborate figures sculptured in snow are lined up along the main thoroughfare of Sapporo. Similar festivals are held in various districts of the island including Asahikawa, Mombetsu, Abashiri and Obihiro. These areas also have their own local color.
3rd	Setsubun or Bean-Throwing Festival in all Japan	According to the lunar calendar, Setsubun marks the last day of winter. People crowd temple grounds to participate in the traditional ceremony of throwing beans to drive away imaginary devils, shouting "Fortune in, Devils out!"

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3rd	Lantern Festival of Kasuga Shrine, Nara City	Approximately 3,000 lanterns, either standing in the precincts or hung from the eaves of the buildings, are lit, presenting an enchanting sight.
11th	National Foundation Day (national holiday)	On this day, the origin of Japan is reflected upon and wishes for continued development are made. According to an ancient Japanese legend, this is the day when Emperor Jimmu, the first Emperor of Japan, established his capital in the Yamato district. This day is celebrated in commemoration of the foundation of the country.
15th–16th	Kamakura in Yokote City, Akita	Kamakura is a popular pastime for children in snowy areas. They make snow houses called Kamakura in which they enshrine the God of Water and hold parties.
3rd Sat.	Eyo Festival of Saidaiji Temple, Okayama City	A multitude of partially clad young male devotees elbow and shoulder one another for a pair of sacred wands thrown to them in the darkness in and around the temple.
17th–20th	Hachinohe Emburi Festival, Aomori	Emburi is a harvest festival rich in local color. More than 30 groups of villagers, each comprising of 20 people, get together at Shinra Shrine on Mt. Choja in the morning and go down into the streets in gala processions.
MARCH		
1st–14th	Omizutori or Water-Drawing Festival of Todaiji Temple, Nara	In the evening, a solemn rite is performed in the flickering light of pine torches. Young ascetics brandish huge burning torches, drawing circles of fire and shaking off the burning pieces in the darkness of the night, for which pious people make a rush as the fire flakes are believed to have a magic power against evil. The function is held on the largest scale on the night of the 12th.
3rd	Hinamatsuri or Doll Festival in all Japan	In this special festival for girls, a set of Hina dolls and miniature household articles are arranged on a tier of shelves, covered with bright red cloth. These Hina dolls consist of the Emperor and Empress in ancient costumes, their ministers and other dignitaries, court ladies and musicians.
Sat. & Sun. (Mid Mar.)	Sagicho Festival of Himure Shrine, Omihachiman City, Shiga	Gaily decorated floats are carried along the streets. On the last day of the festival, these floats are burned in the shrine precincts, surrounded by dancing devotees.
Early–Mid Mar.	Fire Festival of Mt. Aso, Kumamoto	This festival features Hifuri Shinji or Fire Torch Swinging, Noyaki or Grassfire and Takigi Noh or Torch Light Noh Performance.
Around 20th	Vernal Equinox Day (national holiday)	The week centering around this day is known as Higan, when all Buddhist temples throughout the country hold special services and people pray for souls of the departed offering flowers and incense at the tombs and altars.
APRIL		
8th	Hana Matsuri or Buddha's Birthday	Commonly called Hana Matsuri or Floral Festival, it is celebrated in all Buddhist temples in commemoration of Buddha's birthday. At the temples, a small image of Buddha is displayed before the public and sweet tea called "Amacha" is poured over shoulders of the image as an expression of devotion.
2nd Sun. – 3rd Sun.	Kamakura Festival of Tsurugaoka Hachimangu Shrine, Kamakura City, Kanagawa	The festival is featured by various events reminiscent of such great characters in history as, Yoritomo Minamoto, Yoshitsune Minamoto, Shizuka Gozen—by elegantly-performed sacred dances, a mikoshi parade and "yabusame" or horseback archery, etc.
14th & 15th	Sanno Festival of Hie Shrine, Takayama City, Gifu	This festival, said to date back to the 15th century, is noted for a gala procession of gorgeous floats.
16th & 17th	Yayoi Festival of Futara-san Shrine, Nikko City, Tochigi	The festival is featured by a parade of gaily decorated floats.
29th	Showa Day (national holiday)	This day was the birthday of the late Emperor Showa. Upon his death in January 1989, it was renamed.
MAY		
3rd	Constitution Memorial Day (national holiday)	Commemorated on this day is the establishment of the modern Japanese Constitution, which came into effect in 1947. This new Constitution prohibits armament and war.
3rd–4th	Hakata Dontaku Minato Festival, Fukuoka City	Citizens in fancy disguises parade through the streets, masquerading as legendary gods on horseback to the accompaniment of Shamisen, flutes and drums.
3rd–5th	Kite Battles in Hamamatsu City, Shizuoka	Huge kites are flown by groups of citizens, who try to cut the strings of their opponents' kites by skillful maneuvering.

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5th	Children's Day (national holiday)	Ceremonies and parties are observed throughout the country in which the children are wished happiness and prosperity. People hoist carp-shaped streamers on tall bamboo poles outdoors, take a hot bath with iris leaves floating in it, and eat rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves called Chimaki or rice cakes stuffed with sweet bean paste wrapped in oak leaves called Kashiwa-mochi. Some homes display a Kabuto (ancient warrior helmet) in the hope that the boys will have a strong and healthy warrior spirit.
3rd Fri. & Sat.	Takigi Onoh Performance at Kofukuji Temple, Nara City	Noh Plays are presented after dark to late evening, on a stage set up in the precincts of the temple, under the light of blazing torches.
11th – Oct. 15th	Cormorant Fishing on the Nagara River, Gifu City	Cormorant fishing is an ancient method of catching Ayu, a trout-like fish, with trained birds. This takes place at night under the light of blazing torches fastened to the prows of fishing boats.
Sat. & Sun. before 15th	Kanda Matsuri of Kanda Myojin Shrine, Tokyo (held every other year)	Dozens of mikoshi portable shrines are paraded in the neighboring area of the shrine. A gala tea ceremony is also offered.
15th	Aoi Matsuri or Hollyhock Festival of Shimogamo and Kamigamo Shrine, Kyoto City	The festival features a magnificent pageant colorfully reproducing the Imperial procession that paid homage to the shrines in ancient days.
17th & 18th	Grand Festival of Toshogu Shrine, Nikko City, Tochigi	This centuries-old festival is featured by a gala parade (on the 18th) of over 1,000 armor-clad people, who escort three shrine palanquins through the town's streets.
3rd Fri., Sat. & Sun.	Sanja Festival of Asakusa Shrine, Tokyo	Nearly 100 mikoshi portable shrines, carried by happi-coated men and women, assemble at the shrine; afterward they parade to the respective parishioners' areas. A gala pageant, with 1,000 participants in traditional attire, consisting of Sanja-bayashi festival music, Geisha, Kiyari, etc. add color to the festival.
3rd Sun.	Mifune Matsuri or Boat Festival, Arashiyama, Kyoto City	This charming festival is held on the Oi River near Arashiyama in the suburbs of Kyoto. It revives the atmosphere of the Heian Period (794–1192) when the Emperor and his courtiers often went on pleasure trips on the river.
JUNE		
1st & 2nd	Takigi Noh Performance at Heian Shrine, Kyoto City	The famous Takigi Noh, participated in by the various Noh schools, is presented after dark under the light of blazing torches on an open-air stage set up in the shrine's compound.
14th	Rice-Planting Festival at Sumiyoshi Shrine, Osaka	Eight selected beauties ceremoniously transplant rice-seedlings in the shrine's paddyfield to the accompaniment of music and rice-planting folk songs.
2nd Sat.	Chagu-Chagu Umakko or Horse Festival, Morioka City, Iwate	At this festival, a number of colorfully decorated horses are led by their proud owners from Sozen Shrine where the owners pray for the longevity of their horses.
Mid Jun.	Sanno Festival of Hie Shrine, Tokyo (held every other year)	Originating in the Edo Period (1603–1867), the festival is featured by a procession of mikoshi portable shrines through the hub area of Tokyo.
JULY		
1st–15th	Hakata Gion Yamakasa, Fukuoka City	This festival is highlighted on the 15th by a fleet of giant Yamagasa floats topped by elaborate decorations representing castles, halls and dolls. They are either pulled along or shouldered by youngsters in gay attire through the streets.
7th	Tanabata or Star Festival in all Japan	As an offering to the stars, Vega and Altar, who meet across the Milky Way, children set up bamboo branches to which colorful strips of paper bearing their wishes are tied.
13th–15th	Bon Festival in all Japan	The festival is celebrated from the 13th to the 15th either in July or August, depending on the area in Japan. Religious rites are held throughout the country in memory of the dead who, according to Buddhist belief, revisit the earth during this period. Lanterns are lit and Bon Odori folk dances are offered to comfort the souls.
14th	Nachi Himatsuri or Fire Festival of Nachi Shrine, Nachi-Katsuura, Wakayama	This festival is featured by the lighting of 12 giant torches carried by white-robed priests.

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14th-17th	Gion Matsuri of Yasaka Shrine, Kyoto	The festival is actually celebrated from the 1st through the 31st of July and is one of the most noted festivals in Kyoto. It dates back to the 9th century, when the head priest of the Yasaka Shrine led a large number of men and women in forming a procession to escort the decorated palanquins as a means to seek the protection of the gods against the pestilence that was then ravaging the city. On the 17th, gorgeously bedecked "yama" and "hoko" floats parade through the main streets.
3rd Mon.	Marine Day (national holiday)	The holiday was founded to celebrate the ocean's bounty and to pray for the prosperity of Japan as a seafaring nation.
22nd-24th	Ushioni Matsuri or Summer Festival of Warei Shrine, Uwajima City, Ehime	The festival is highlighted by many mikoshi crossing the river accompanied by hundreds of people with torchlights in their hands. Togyu or bull fighting and a fireworks display are other major events.
Last Sat.	Sumida River Fireworks Festival, Asakusa, Tokyo	This is the grandest one of its kind in Tokyo.
Last Sat., Sun. & Mon.	Soma Nomaoui or Wild Horse Chasing on Hibarigahara, Haramachi, Fukushima	A thousand riders in ancient armor vie for three shrine flags set-up on the plain and men in white costumes try to catch the wild horses chased into an enclosure by the horsemen.
24th & 25th	Tenjin Festival of Temmangu Shrine, Osaka	A fleet of sacred boats bearing shrine palanquins sail down the river escorted by other boats which carry images of historical interest.
(usually in) Jul.	Kangensai or Music Festival of Itsukushima Shrine, Miyajima, Hiroshima	The date of the festival varies every year, since it takes place on the 17th of June according to the lunar calendar. Brightly decorated sacred boats are towed from the large red-painted "torii" gate standing in the sea to the opposite shore across the channel. On the boats classical Gagaku (court music and a dance) are performed.
AUGUST		
1st-7th 2nd-7th	Aomori Nebuta Festival and Hirosaki Neputa Festival, Aomori	The Nebuta and Neputa (papier-mâché dummies representing men, animals and birds) are placed on carriages and pulled through the streets with powerful chants and jumping dances. The Nebuta is held in Aomori City from 2nd to 7th, and Neputa in Hirosaki City from 1st to 7th.
Mid Jul. – Early Sep.	Gujo Odori, Gujo-gun, Gifu	Gujo Odori is one of the most popular folk dances. Thousands of townspeople wearing "yukata" dance to the accompaniment of merry music.
3rd-6th	Kanto Festival, Akita City	This festival is a form of Tanabata, which is observed to comfort souls of the dead revisiting the earth in this period and to invoke divine help for a prosperous autumnal harvest. Young men in gay attire try their skill at balancing Kanto, long bamboo poles hung with many lighted lanterns, on their hands, foreheads and shoulders. "Kanto" is said to be a road sign for the souls.
5th-7th	Yamagata Hanagasa Matsuri or Floral Sedge-hat Festival, Yamagata City	More than 10,000 townspeople, each wearing a low round sedge-hat adorned with artificial flowers, dance their way through the city's main streets.
6th	Peace Ceremony, Hiroshima City	The ceremony held at the Peace Memorial Park in the city is in memory of the A-bomb victims. In the evening, thousands of lighted lanterns are set adrift on the Ota River by the citizens, with prayers for world peace.
6th-8th	Sendai Tanabata or Star Festival, Miyagi	The festival, the largest of its kind in Japan, is observed one month later than in most parts of the country. The streets are decorated with colored paper streamers and strips.
9th	Peace Memorial Ceremony, Nagasaki City	The ceremony held in the Peace Park in Nagasaki City is in memory of the A-bomb victims. Mayor of Nagasaki delivers a Peace Declaration to the World in the ceremony.
12th-15th	Awa Odori, Tokushima City	The entire city bursts with singing and dancing. Day and night, groups of musicians in fancy attire parade on the streets.
15th & 16th	Yamaga Toro Festival, Yamaga City, Kumamoto	A parade of Toro Odori dances are performed by women wearing "yukata". Each has a lantern that is lit on her head and they parade on the main streets.
16th	Daimonji Bonfire on Higashiyama Nyoigadake, Kyoto	A spectacular bonfire in the shape of the Chinese character "大" meaning large, is lit near the summit. This is the most splendid attraction of the Bon Festival in Kyoto.
26th & 27th	Lantern Festival of Suwa Shrine, Isshiki-cho, Aichi	In the evening, great paper lanterns, painted with colorful designs, are lit in the shrine compound.

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SEPTEMBER		
1st–3rd	Owara Kaze-no Bon Festival, Toyama City	In the evenings, Owara-bushi folk dance to the accompaniment of Shamisen, flutes and drums is presented by yukata-clad villagers in the area.
3rd Mon.	Respect-for-the-Aged Day (national holiday)	People wish the elderly of the nation a long life and thank them for their contribution to society for so many years.
16th	Yabusame at Tsurugaoka Hachimangu Shrine, Kamakura City, Kanagawa	Yabusame is a fascinating sport of horseback archery, a reminder of feudal days when Samurai warriors competed grimly in horsemanship and archery.
(usually in) Sep.	Oyama-Sankei or A Visit to Iwakiyama shrine, Aomori	Mt. Iwaki, known as Tsugaru Fuji from its resemblance to Mt. Fuji, is considered a sacred place by the local people, who march to the shrine on the mountain with prayers and joyful music. The date of the festival varies every year, since it takes place on the 1st of Aug. according to the old calendar.
Around 23rd	Autumnal Equinox Day (national holiday)	The week centering around this day is known as Higan, when all Buddhist temples throughout the country hold special services and people pray for souls of the departed offering flowers and incense at the tombs and altars.
OCTOBER		
3rd Sat. & Sun.	Miya Festival, Gamagori City, Aich	The highlight of this festival is called “Kaichutogyo” that four huge old floats are pulled in the ocean by many young men.
7th–9th	Nagasaki Kunchi of Suwa Shrine, Nagasaki	This festival is highlighted by a parade of floats of Chinese origin including Kasaboko carts, lavishly decked with umbrella-shaped decorations along the city’s main streets. Colorful dances of Chinese origin are also performed.
8th–10th	Marimo Festival on Lake Akan, Hokkaido	Marimo (<i>Aegagropila sauteri</i>) is a singular spherical green weed, found in Lake Akan in Hokkaido and Lake Yamanaka in Yamanashi. The festival is given by the native Ainu inhabitants. On the 9th Ainu dances are performed on the lakeshore and on the 10th the weeds are thrown into the water with ceremony.
9th & 10th	Hachiman Festival of Hachiman Shrine, Takayama City, Gifu	This festival, said to date back to the 15th century, is noted for the gala procession of gorgeous floats.
2nd Mon.	Health Sports Day (national holiday)	This is celebrated to promote the mental and physical health of the people through the enjoyment of sports. This day was established in commemoration of the Tokyo Olympic Games, which began on October 10th, 1964.
11th–13th	Oeshiki Festival of Hommonji Temple, Tokyo	This festival is celebrated in commemoration of the Buddhist leader, Nichiren (1222–1282). People march toward the temple carrying large lanterns decorated with paper flowers.
14th & 15th	Nada Kenka Matsuri or Roughhouse Festival of Matsubara Shrine, Himeji City, Hyogo	Gorgeous shrine palanquins jostle each other and the bearers vie to show their skill in managing the palanquins.
17th	Autumn Festival of Toshogu Shrine, Nikko City, Tochigi	A palanquin is carried from the main shrine to the sacred place called Otabisho escorted by armor-clad parishioners.
22nd	Jidai Matsuri or Festival of Eras of Heian Shrine, Kyoto City	This festival is held to commemorate the founding of the old capital city of Kyoto in 794. It is featured by a procession of over 2,000 people in groups, attired in picturesque costumes, representing important epochs in the city’s history.
22nd	Fire Festival of Yuki Shrine, Kurama, Kyoto	Long rows of torches placed along the street leading to the shrine are set on fire and gaily-dressed children march to the shrine holding burning torches.
NOVEMBER		
3rd	Culture Day (national holiday)	This day was established to stress the importance of science as well as thank those who have contributed to the advancement of Japanese culture. On this day the government bestows medals to people who have made significant contributions to cultural progress in Japan.
3rd	Hakone Daimyo Gyoretsu, Kanagawa	The long parade passes along the old Tokaido Highway lined on both sides with tall cryptomeria trees.
2nd–4th	Karatsukunchi Festival of Karatsu Shrine, Saga	This festival is highlighted by a parade of huge colorful floats pulled along the streets by young men in gay uniforms with music accompaniment.

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15th	Shichi-go-san or Children's Shrine Visiting Day in all Japan	Shichi-go-san literally means "seven-five-three," and children of these three years, all dressed in their best, are taken to the shrines by their parents to express their thanks to the tutelary deities for their good health and to pray for future blessings.
23rd	Labor Thanksgiving Day (national holiday)	This day was established to provide a day for recognition of the importance of labor and to stress the importance of work in everyone's mind.
Nov.	Tori-no-ichi or Rooster Fair, Tokyo	The festivals are held on "rooster" days in November according to the oriental zodiacal calendar. Kumade or bamboo rakes adorned with ornaments symbolizing good fortune are sold. The Otori Shrine at Asakusa is best known.
DECEMBER		
2nd & 3rd	Chichibu Yo-matsuri or All-night Festival, Chichibu City, Saitama	The festival, counted as one of the three grandest float festivals in Japan, is highlighted by a parade of six huge, lavishly adorned and lantern-lit floats. On the evening of the 3rd, all the floats assemble at the Chichibu Shrine and proceed along the city's main streets.
14th	Gishi-sai of Sengakuji Temple, Tokyo	Gishi-sai or memory of the famous vendetta carried out by the 47 Ronin (masterless samurai) of Ako (present Hyogo back in 1720) is celebrated at Sengakuji Temple.
15th-18th	Kasuga Wakayama On-Matsuri of Kasuga Shrine, Nara	The festival is featured by a gala procession of people masquerading as courtiers, retainers and wrestlers of those long-ago days.
17th-19th	Hagoita-Ichi or Battledore Fair, Asakusa, Tokyo	It is held in the compound of Asakusa Kannon Temple. Stalls will be open all night.
23rd	The Emperor's Birthday (national holiday)	The Emperor of Japan does not rule but is a symbol of the nation. On this day prayers are offered of his longevity, and the Imperial Family, appearing on the balcony of the Imperial Palace, exchanges greetings with the crowd of visitors below.
31st	Okera Mairi of Yasaka Shrine, Kyoto City	At midnight a sacred fire is kindled in the shrine precincts, and each worshiper tries to take some of the sparks to his home, with which to cook the first meal of the new year.

Tourist Information Center (TIC)

TIC of Japan National Tourism Organization is your helping hand while in Japan. Its main services are providing travel information and free literature on Japan such as tourist spots, transportation, and suggesting tour itineraries, etc.

1st Fl., Shin Tokyo Bldg., 3-3-1, Marunouchi, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo
100-0005 Tel. 03-3201-3331
Open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Closed: Jan. 1st)
<http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/arrange/travel/guide/tic.html>

JNTO Website

JNTO Website can be a great help for getting detailed information for your travel to Japan. It provides a wide range of travel information in English and other 12 languages via the internet on transportation, accommodations, shopping and events. Information is updated frequently to enable you to access the latest information anytime.

URL: <http://www.jnto.go.jp>

Note: Transportation expenses, admission fees and other charges may change due to the increase in the consumption tax rate to 8% from April 2014.

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