

JAPAN EVENT CALENDAR

Now that you are in Japan, be sure to go beyond the usual tourist destinations and take part in some of the fascinating festivals and events held locally all over the country. There are many unique events going on throughout the year, so you'll have no shortage of chances and options.

APRIL

YAYOI FESTIVAL

The Yayoi Festival signals the arrival of spring in Nikko, which has temples and shrines registered as World Heritage sites. The main attraction takes place on April 17: a parade of a dozen beautifully adorned floats called *hana-yatai* from each town. This festival dates back to the eighth century.

▶ Futarasan Jinja Shrine, Nikko City / Tochigi Prefecture 📍 April 13 and 17

FUJI SHIBAZAKURA FESTIVAL

The largest festival of its kind, this spectacle features 800,000 pink moss phlox petals carpeting the grounds that sweep toward Mount Fuji. The contrast of lively colors against the mountain scenery is stunning, and people flock here to see the foot of Japan's iconic peak decorated in floral finery.

▶ Kawaguchikocho, Yamanashi Prefecture 📍 April 18 to May 31



PHOTO: ©AKIRA OKADA ©JNTO

MAY

HAMAMATSU FESTIVAL

More than a hundred huge fighting kites are launched into the skies over the Nakatajima Dunes—one of Japan's three largest sand dunes—that overlook the Enshunada Sea. These kites measure 3.5 meters by 3.5 meters, and when a trumpet sounds the battle begins. Making the five-millimeter-thick hemp strings intertwine, the kite-fliers try to cut their opponents' strings by friction, making the battle exciting and worth watching.

▶ Nakatajima Dunes, Hamamatsu City, Shizuoka Prefecture 📍 May 3 to 5

AOI MATSURI

Some five hundred people wearing splendid ancient costumes and traditional makeup parade through the main streets of Kyoto during this festival, which got its name because *aoi* (hollyhock) leaves are used as ornaments not only on the people's costumes, but even on cows and horses.

▶ Shimogamo-jinja Shrine and Kamigamo-jinja Shrine, Kyoto City 📍 May 15



PHOTO: ©Q.SAWAMI ©JNTO

JUNE

CHAGU CHAGU UMAKO HORSE FESTIVAL

Around a hundred horses, fitted with brightly colored harnesses and lots of bells, parade from Takizawa City to Morioka City, a distance of approximately 15 kilometers. *Chagu chagu* is an onomatopoeic expression for the bells sounding as the horses trot along.

▶ Takizawa City, Iwate Prefecture 📍 June 13



PHOTO: ©IWATE PREFECTURE ©JNTO

JULY

SUMIDAGAWA HANABI TAIKAI

This is one of Tokyo's major fireworks displays. On the last Saturday of July, the evening sky in the old part of town turns into a spectacle of dazzling colors from several tens of thousands of fireworks. This annual event is said to have originated in the custom of the common people of Edo viewing fireworks while enjoying the relative coolness of the summer evening.

▶ Taito-ku and Sumida-ku, Tokyo 📍 July 25

HAKATA GION YAMAKASA FESTIVAL

Men carrying *yamakasa*—large floats, each weighting about a ton, elaborately decorated for this festival—race through the streets of Hakata at full speed. The sight of the men focusing all their strength and energy on the floats captivates the hearts of spectators, who number as many as a million people.

▶ Hakata-ku, Fukuoka City 📍 July 1 to 15

AUGUST

MIYAJIMA KANGENSAI FESTIVAL

Kangen is Japanese court music played on various flutes, drums and Japanese stringed instruments. In the ancient capital, nobles used to enjoy the graceful orchestra festival by playing *kangen* instruments on boats floating on ponds and rivers. Approximately eight centuries ago, Taira-no-Kiyomori (1118-1181)—the warlord of the latter years of the Heian Period—remodeled Itsukushima Shrine and brought the customs then prevalent to this land to hold a ceremony dedicated to the gods.

▶ Itsukushima Shrine, Hiroshima Prefecture 📍 August 1

AOMORI NEBUTA MATSURI

This event is held in the Tohoku region on July 7 of the lunar calendar. Massive frames made of bamboo and wood are covered with paper illustrated with historic figures, samurai warriors and birds and beasts. These are illuminated from within and set up on *yatai* floats and vehicles, which proceed in the Aomori Nebuta (Neputa in Hirosaki) parade. The festivals in Aomori City and Hirosaki are especially well known, attracting tourists from all areas of Japan and overseas.

▶ Throughout Aomori City, Aomori Prefecture 📍 August 2 to 7



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SENDAI TANABATA MATSURI

This is a Tanabata event (the Star Festival) held in Sendai, the central city of the Tohoku region, celebrating an ancient legend. Gorgeous decorations made of bamboo and Japanese paper called *sasatake* are put up in the arcades in front of Sendai Station and throughout the

city in what appears to be a contest to come up with the most striking colors and displays.

▶ Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture ◉ August 6 to 8



PHOTO: ©YASUFUMI NISHI ©JNTO

AWA-ODORI FOLK DANCE FESTIVAL IN TOKUSHIMA

This Tokushima festival features folkdances performed to welcome the souls of ancestors during the O-bon season (mid-August). It is well known throughout Japan for the words "It's a fool who dances and a fool who watches!" that are voiced to set the rhythm, regardless of their meaning.

▶ Tokushima City, Tokushima Prefecture

◉ August 12 to 15



PHOTO: ©JNTO

SEPTEMBER

OWARA KAZE-NO-BON FESTIVAL

This traditional folk event is designed to appease the wind and appeal for a bountiful crop, and takes place every year for three days from September 1. It corresponds to the 210th day from the first day of spring according to the traditional Japanese calendar, and is considered the time of the year that is often beset by calamities such as typhoons. Although there are many explanations about its origins, it is generally believed that the O-bon ritual of paying homage to ancestors was merged with a festival praying for a rich harvest.

▶ Toyama City, Toyama Prefecture

◉ September 1 to 3

OCTOBER

TAKAYAMA MATSURI AUTUMN FESTIVAL

The Takayama Festival, cited as one of Japan's three most beautiful festivals, actually is a combination of two festivals: the Sanno Matsuri at Hie Shrine and the Hachiman Matsuri at Sakurayama Hachiman Shrine. The Hachiman Matsuri, held annually on October

9 and 10, prompts local inhabitants to start their winter preparations. The greatest attractions are the eleven *yatai* floats, which are designated as significant intangible folk cultural assets.

▶ Takayama City, Gifu Prefecture

◉ October 9 and 10

NAGASAKI KUNCHI FESTIVAL

This autumn festival held at Suwa Shrine has a history of 370 years, and is now held every year for three days starting on October 7 in accordance with the solar calendar, drawing large numbers of tourists from both inside and outside Nagasaki Prefecture.

▶ Kaminishiyama-machi, Nagasaki City

◉ October 7 to 9

TOKYO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

The Tokyo International Film Festival celebrates its twenty-seventh year in 2015. It is Japan's one and only international film festival recognized by the International Federation of Film Producers Associations, also Asia's largest, and is always a lively showcase for cinematic entertainment.

▶ TOHO Cinemas Roppongi Hills, Tokyo

◉ October 22 to 31

TOKYO MOTOR SHOW

This trade fair offers a chance to see the latest automotive designs and technologies, and is considered one of the top five motor shows in the world. This year marks the forty-fourth show, and will have the theme "With more freedom . . . change for cars, change for lifestyles, change for society."

▶ Tokyo Big Sight

◉ October 29 to November 8

DECEMBER

OGA NAMAHAGE FESTIVAL

This festival features a tradition passed down from ancient times around Oga City in Akita Prefecture. On New Year's Eve, a group consisting of two to three young village men disguise themselves as a rather grotesque deity called Namahage, resembling an *oni* (demon). Wearing large masks, straw raincoats and loincloths, holding wooden knives and pails, they go dancing along and visiting houses at night, roaring and frightening misbehaving children and others.

▶ Oga City, Akita Prefecture

◉ December 31

JANUARY

DEZOME-SHIKI

Organized by the Tokyo Fire Department, this event is held to pray for a safe year. Although similar events are held throughout Japan, this spectacular New Year's Parade of Firemen features over a hundred fire engines and helicopters, and large-scale firefighting and emergency drills.

▶ Tokyo Big Sight

◉ January 6

FEBRUARY

SAPPORO SNOW FESTIVAL

Rows of small and large snow sculptures are created and displayed at three sites in Sapporo City during this snow festival, which draws two million people, including many overseas tourists. Odori Park, located in the city center, serves as the main venue, and a space extending 1.5 kilometers is transformed into a snow museum. International Square becomes the stage for the International Snow Sculpture Contest, at which over ten teams from the world over compete every year.

▶ Sapporo City, Hokkaido

◉ Seven days, starting in the second week of February



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MARCH

OMIZUTORI

Priests at Todai-ji Temple, famous for its enormous statue of Buddha, confess their sins before the Eleven-Faced Kannon (the goddess of mercy) enshrined in Nigatsu-do Hall, and also pray for world peace and a rich harvest for fourteen consecutive days. This ritual, called Shuni-e, has been practiced since 752.

▶ Todai-ji Temple, Nara City

◉ March 1 to 14

Information by Japan National Tourist Office