

The Noto Lights

The Abare Festival in the town of Noto
Photo: © Ishikawa Prefecture Tourism League

Summertime on the Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa Prefecture is celebrated with a variety of distinctive lantern festivals.

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STRETCHING far into the Sea of Japan, the Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa Prefecture is a region where a unique culture has developed in the midst of beautiful natural scenery. The region has given birth to such a diversity of folk events throughout the year that it has been called the “treasure house of festivals.”

One typical festival held during the summer on the Noto Peninsula is the Kiriko Festival. *Kiriko* are a kind of huge lantern shaped like cuboids covered with a variety of decorations and pictures. They are fitted with long poles so that people can carry them on their shoulders. Kiriko Festivals are held in more than 200 locations throughout the Noto Peninsula from July through October.

Kiriko Festivals are said to have originated as rituals held to prevent epidemics and to pray for good health. Kiriko made in 1853 still exist, and by the latter part of the Edo period (1603-1867), Kiriko Festivals like those of today were already being held on a grand scale.

“As the Kiriko Festivals spread throughout the villages of the Noto Peninsula during the Edo period, they became a matter of village pride,” says Akihide Tamura of the Ishikawa Prefectural Board of Education Secretariat. “Villages began to compete against each other on the size, the decorations and the number of kiriko, so the festivals diversified.”

Kiriko lanterns are hauled into the sea during the Okinami Tairyo Festival in Anamizu. Photo: © Ishikawa Prefecture Tourism League

Of the some 200 Kiriko Festivals, we focus here on three major ones.

The leading Kiriko Festival is the Abare Festival held on the first Friday and Saturday of July in the town of Noto. Legend has it that the Abare Festival began about 350 years ago in order to give thanks to a spirit known as Gozu Tenno, who had cured an epidemic. Large numbers of people carrying two *mikoshi*, or divine palanquins, and more than forty *kiriko*, proceed powerfully between five flaming torches. The people then go wild, casting the *mikoshi* into the sea or river and even into a fire. It developed into a riotous festival in order to please Gozu Tenno, who enjoys displays of daring.

The Okinami Tairyo Festival held in the town of Anamizu on August 14 and 15 is one in which people carry five *kiriko* into the sea in order to pray for safety at sea and a large catch. Wading chest deep in the water, they shake the *kiriko* violently.

The Jike Kiriko Festival held in the city of Suzu on the second Saturday of September features colossal *kiriko* towering some 16.5 meters tall and weighing 4 tons. The frames of four *kiriko* are finished in Wajimanuri lacquer and decorated with engraved dragons finished with gold leaf.

“The Kiriko Festival is enjoyed not just by the people carrying the *kiriko* but by all the residents of the town,” says Tamura. “The festival is very important in binding local residents together.”

As the festival approaches, adults assemble the *kiriko* while children practice the drum and flute.



Town natives who work elsewhere come back in order to take part in the festival.

In the Kiriko Festival, moreover, a custom known as *yobare* has been handed down. On the day of the festival, relatives and acquaintances are invited to each house and served *gottsuo*, a special kind of food prepared for the day. *Gottsuo* is a local dish which makes plentiful use of the abundant natural food products of the Noto region. It is used to welcome guests and reinforce mutual bonds.

“When you travel in the Noto region, you come in contact with its natural beauty and the warmth of the local people,” says Tamura. “And in the summer, one can see the Kiriko Festival. It would no doubt be a spiritual journey in which one could come face to face with the *kami-gami*, or nature-spirits, of Noto.” ㊦



A serving of *gottsuo* prepared according to the *yobare* tradition, in which the head of each household welcomes guests on the day of the Kiriko Festival.