

niponica

Discovering
Japan

にほにか

no. 24



Special Feature

Japanese Festivals Throughout the Year

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contents



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Cover: The Chichibu Yomatsuri Festival, held every year in early December in Saitama Prefecture, is one of the three major float festivals in Japan. The festival originated with the local market in this area, which is known for its silk fabrics. Visitors flock to see some of the most gorgeous *yatai* floats and fireworks in Japan.

Photo: amanaimages

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Above: Lantern light creates the otherworldly atmosphere unique to Japanese festivals.

Opposite top: The ever-popular water balloon yo-yos at a festival stall.

Opposite middle: Candied apricots all in a row.

Opposite bottom: Little girl dressed in festival clothes.

Photos: amanaimages, PIXTA



Special Feature

Japanese Festivals Throughout the Year

For centuries, festivals have been essential to the fabric of Japan. They are held to thank the gods for the blessings of nature and to express hope for good health. Unique festivities and rituals give each festival day a special meaning.



A Time for Future Hopes

Photos: amanaimages, Afla

Yosakoi Festival (Kochi Prefecture)

Launched in 1954 by local organizations to revitalize the economy and express hope for health and happiness for all. Around 20,000 dancers join in.



Tenjin Festival (Osaka Prefecture)

Started about 1,000 years ago to pray away summer epidemics. Still today, people carry *mikoshi* shrines through the streets to bring blessings to all.



Comradship and community

Japan's four distinct seasons all have something to celebrate. Festivals heighten people's sense of community, connecting them to their common roots. They also offer individuals a source of strength.

Artisanal expertise on display

Festivals show off the Japanese aesthetic: in the *miko-shi* portable shrines or *dashi* floats, in the costumes, in the decorations. The grateful spirit of the artisans behind all the beauty is also on display.

Aoi Festival (Kyoto Prefecture)

Right: This festival traces its roots back to years of bad harvests in the 6th century, and the fervid desire for bumper crops and security. The parade brings back to life the attire, cosmetics and hairstyles favored by aristocratic society in those days.
Bottom: A wagon pulled by an ox—once a form of transportation for the noble-born—makes a dramatic appearance coming down the street. Tradition is alive to this day.



Gion Festival (Kyoto Prefecture)

Started in the 9th century to prevent natural disasters, *Dashi* floats, some 25 meters high, wind through the streets. Decorations include ancient imports and local artworks.



Life and nature, together

Nature blesses Japan with abundant harvests from both the fields and the sea. Found within nature is a spirit for good that inspires the feelings of gratitude and awe expressed at festivals.

Naha Haarii Dragon Boat Races (Okinawa Prefecture)

This water-themed festival near fishing grounds expresses hope for maritime safety and a good catch. Prayers are offered to the local gods, and boats called *haarii*, decorated with dragon symbols, race.



Nachi no Ogi Festival (Wakayama Prefecture)

Mountain deities ride on portable shrines to their home at a sacred waterfall. The red-decorated shrines are patterned after *ogi* fans. Flaming pine torches purify the shrines and route along the pilgrims' path.



Respect for ancestors and community

Not all festivals are boisterous affairs. Some show solemn reverence, carrying on traditional customs and rituals of gratitude and esteem for departed ancestors.



Niwatsuki Kannon Toro Nagashi (Yamagata Prefecture)

Held in summer to send ancestors' souls back to the other world. Candlelit paper lanterns are set on the river to show the way. Yamagata Prefecture boasts the most lanterns in eastern Japan.

Kamakura Festival (Akita Prefecture)

Kamakura snow huts, about 2 meters tall with an altar inside to the god of water, go back about 400 years. There is another kind of *kamakura* as well, no higher than an adult's knees.



The Inside Scoop on Festivals in Japan

Japan has plenty of festivals, but how many? And why? Are any linked with other countries? To learn more, we asked Haga Hinata, an author and photographer who publishes books on festivals and their traditions.

Q1

Why are so many festivals celebrated throughout the year in Japan?

A

Japan has four distinct seasons. When the spring brought back new life, people gathered at festivals to pray for success in farming and fishing. During the hot humid summers, when epidemics used to be common, boisterous festivals provided a way to shake off bad feelings. Some other summer festivals were held to welcome the

spirits of ancestors coming to visit this world. Good harvests in autumn called for thanks to be given to the gods for their blessings. Cold winter days were a time to express thanks for a year free from misfortune and hopes for the new year. So you see, the seasons and their changes were celebrated as a way to ask the gods for help in overcoming change and adversity. The result is a wide variety of festivals held throughout the year, even today.



These outcrops in the sea are regarded as sacred.

Q2

About how many festivals are celebrated in Japan?

A

There are more than 300,000 festivals that are open to public participation, by one count. Centuries ago in Japan, the belief developed that gods inhabit the world of nature—the sea, the mountains, the rivers—as well as the kitchens and baths of ordinary homes. Even roadside boulders might be included. That's why some people say there are as many festivals as there are gods. In addition, we cannot forget the various rites and rituals at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, plus others in individual homes, which make the total a huge number. In some cases the Shinto gods and Buddha are venerated together, and big snakes and lions and other creatures are sometimes held in awe as spirits. All this shows how the Japanese mind is open to a great diversity of beliefs.



Q3

So, what are the main hopes expressed through these festive occasions?

A

My research indicates eight kinds, including festivals:

- Originating at Shinto shrines
- Expressing hope and gratitude for success in farming and fishing
- Held for good health, safety, and the prosperity of descendants

- Celebrating important people in history
 - Praying for peace
 - Commemorating the spirits of ancestors
 - Carrying on local traditional celebrations and performing arts
 - More recently introduced to bring vitality to local communities.
- Some festivals express two or more of these purposes.

Q4

Do any Japanese festivals show the influence of other countries?

A

Yes. For example, the Gion Festival in Kyoto, which has a tradition of more than 1,100 years, features a grand procession of massive floats (*yamahoko*). Their gorgeous decorations, as fantastic today as ever, were first seen about 500 years ago. In the Kyoto of those days, they demonstrated the vast financial resources of commercial and industrial businesses, and the great extent of trade with other lands. Ever since, *Yamahoko* have been decorated with imported goods from Western Europe and Southwestern Asia, such as woven textiles. Another example is the Kunchi Festival in Nagasaki Prefecture. The dances, which remain alive to this day, recall Japan's connection with the Netherlands about 400 years ago.



1 Rice planting festival held with prayers for a rich harvest.
2 Bon dances in summer said to chase away spirits that make people sick.
3 Vegetables and other fruits of the harvest are dedicated to God in autumn.
4 A divine spirit is said to come in the form of an ogre in winter to bring blessings.



Above: *Yamahoko* floats in the Gion Festival decorated with fabrics woven abroad.
Below: Dancing styles and attire originating in the Netherlands, at the Nagasaki Kunchi Festival.

Haga Hinata
Festival photographer. He has visited festivals in Japan and 48 other countries, and has written many books regarding festivals, from specialized books to pictorials.

Unique Festivals Rooted in Local Tradition

Each region of Japan is seasonally, historically, and culturally unique. The festivals in each area, celebrated for centuries, express the local identity.



和歌山 Wakayama

Warai Festival (Hidakagawa City)

Faces painted white, hands tinkling bells, bodies clothed in outlandish costumes, elderly men call out "Laugh it up" to share happiness with all.
<http://www.town.hidakagawa.lg.jp/>
Available in Japanese.



新潟 Niigata

Shirone Odako - Gassen Kite Fighting (Niigata City)

The world's largest kites do battle, jolting and jostling until all of the kites but one crash to the ground.
<http://www.shironekankou.jp/tako/>
Available in English, Chinese, and French.

東北地方

Tohoku Region Tohoku Kizuna Festival

Launched to remember all those lost in the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, with hope for complete recovery. The six prefectures of the region take turns celebrating their unique festival in one place every year.
<http://tohoku-kizunamatsuri.jp/>
Available in Japanese.



1 Nebuta Festival Aomori

Huge floats chase away the evil spirits that perhaps might come out in the summer nights.

2 Kanto Festival Akita

Tall poles shine with hundreds of paper lanterns (*kanto*). They take on a life of their own, expressing hopes for a good autumn harvest.

3 Morioka Sansa Festival Iwate

To the beat of 10,000 traditional-style drums, people dance to drive demons away.

4 Sendai Tanabata Festival Miyagi

Bamboo poles are decorated and displayed in the hope for good health and a full harvest.

5 Hanagasa Festival Yamagata

Colorful floats and dancers take to the streets, in thanks for the blessings of nature in the mountains.

6 Waraji Festival Fukushima

Japan's biggest straw sandal (*waraji*) makes its appearance, expressing a hope for sturdy legs.



兵庫 Hyogo

Nishinomiya Shrine's Ritual Gate Opening (Nishinomiya City)

The title of "Happiest Man" for the year is given to the first man to reach the shrine's main building.
<http://nishinomiya-ebisu.com/index.html>
Available in Japanese.



山口 Yamaguchi

Iwakuni Yukaba no Kanmai Sacred Dances (Iwakuni City)

The festivities include a presentation of dances and acrobatic stunts on a pine tree, all offered to the gods.
<http://yukabanokanmai.com/>
Available in Japanese.



長崎 Nagasaki

Takengei (Nagasaki City)

Two youths dressed as white foxes perform stunts up high to thank the gods for the happiness they provide.
<http://visit-nagasaki.com/spots/detail/682>
Available in English, Chinese, and French.



熊本 Kumamoto

Onda Festival (Aso City)

The celebration includes women in white *kimono* carrying a meal for the gods on their heads and praying for a bountiful harvest of grain.
<http://asojinja.or.jp/>
Available in Japanese.



愛媛 Ehime

Warei Taisai Festival (Uwajima City)

Winding through the streets are floats—one featuring the legendary monster *Ushi-oni*, with a neck that moves—asking for divine intervention for good health.
<https://ushioni.gaina.ne.jp/>
Available in Japanese.

静岡 Shizuoka

Kakegawa Festival (Kakegawa City)

Held once every three years, this extravaganza includes a hefty lion—the biggest one in Japan—prancing in the street.
<http://www.kakegawa-kankou.com/matsuri/>
Available in Japanese.



Photos courtesy of Sendai City Tohoku Regional Collaboration Promotion Office, Niigata City Minami Ward Tourist Association, Niigata Prefecture, City of Kakegawa, Shizuoka Prefecture, Hidakagawa Town, Hidaka County, Wakayama Prefecture, City of Iwakuni, Yamaguchi Prefecture, City of Uwajima, Ehime Prefecture, City of Nagasaki, Nagasaki Prefecture, City of Aso, Kumamoto Prefecture, Kyoto News

Supporting Festival Excitement

People with various skills and interests are involved in every festival. Have a look behind the scenes, and meet some of the people who help make festivals happen.



Scene from a display organized by Kagiya for the Edogawa Fireworks Festival in Tokyo.
Photo courtesy of Edogawa Fireworks Festival Execution Committee.

祭 Harnessing the energy of experts to electrify the night

Fireworks paint tableaus in the night sky every summer in Japan. In the old days, pyrotechnic artisans wrapped explosive powder and chemicals in *washi* paper. Today, the wow factor depends on the producer's skills with launch timing and visual effects.

The fireworks company Kagiya, a family business, has been around for more than 300 years. Amano Akiko, the former owner's second daughter, was inspired by her father. "I always wanted to be cool like him, in the thick of the action." What started as a whim, later developed into a serious ambition.

Her father knew she wanted to join the company, but he objected to her idea. She recalls: "I told him I was going to work in a different fireworks factory, where we didn't know anyone. I knew I had to gain experience and knowledge if I was going to get into manufacturing fireworks and staging events. Dad had wanted me to take over just the business side of things. It took more than six months to persuade him."

Back then, there wasn't one woman in Japan working directly with explosive powder. Still, Amano knew she



Top: As pyrotechnics producer, Amano Akiko (10th from left) organizes big fireworks events. Here, she is pictured with engineers employed by her company, Kagiya.
Above: In admiration of her father, Amano Osamu, she set out to become a pyrotechnic artisan like him.

could succeed—if she could get experience in fireworks manufacturing, a risky process requiring extreme caution. Then she could earn the respect of the self-assured men at Kagiya and bring out the best in them.

So she studied the latest manufacturing processes and techniques, and then in the year 2000 she took over as the 15th owner of Kagiya. Today, she is at the heart of the action when staging events. She designs fireworks, orders supplies, schedules launch sequences, and chooses audio effects.



With sparks flying all around, Amano directs the order and timing of the rocket launches. Photo: Takaoka Kunihiko

For a big event she manages about 100 staff, watching the weather and the audience's mood. At some events she issues almost 300 launch orders in an hour. With her on each Kagiya team there are usually about seven other women, and the Kagiya sense of mission is stronger than ever.

"For centuries spectators have found fireworks exhilarating. Nowadays, with new technology every year, shows are more exciting than ever. Yet we aim to do more—not just with technology, but with timing. Embracing the traditional Japanese aesthetics of *ma* (dramatic pauses) and *yoin* (lingering feelings), we try to take spectators' breath away as they wait for the next moment."

In old Edo, fireworks were used as a prayer for the repose of souls lost in earthquakes, floods and other disasters. Faithful to that tradition, Amano will always remember the advice of her predecessor, her father: "Never forget the awesome power of fire."

"Zero Garbage Action Plan" Spreads from Kyoto

Collaboration: Gion Festival Action Plan for Zero Garbage Association



"Reuse" marks have helped reduce the amount of garbage.



Matching T-shirts for the approximately 2,200 volunteers, many of them university students.

The Gion Festival in Kyoto goes back 1,100 years. Fantastic floats take to the streets, and around 600,000 people from all over Japan are there to see them. But the event generates almost 50 tons of garbage, some of which gets left on the streets.

The Gion Festival Action Plan for Zero Garbage Association was established in 2014, aiming to be part of the solution by boosting eco-awareness. To reduce the number of food and beverage containers thrown away, the association launched a program to lend and collect reusable ones during the festival period, and to set up "Eco Stations" to separate recyclables from solid waste. With more than 2,000 volunteers in action, the festival in 2014 generated 25% less waste than the previous year, even though visitor numbers were up 24%! In 2017, with corporate support, the program set out to further increase recycling rates by affixing "Reuse me!" icons to containers. Results were good.

The program was spearheaded by a non-profit group called Environment Design Laboratory, ecotone. Its director, Ota Kohei, explains: "When spectators bring back the containers for recycling, they're likely to say things like 'I enjoyed the food' and 'Hey, thanks a lot.' We didn't hear that much before, when the containers were throwaways."

Many of the volunteers are young and sign up year after year. They say that the Action Plan is having more impact every year. It seems that festivals help promote public eco-awareness.

The Action Plan in Kyoto is attracting attention in other cities, too. Organizers of the Tenjin Festival in neighboring Osaka Prefecture have begun setting up "Tenjin Festival Action Plan for Zero Garbage" groups in some localities, using Gion Festival strategies. People from other parts of the country visit to study the program. The Action Plan has the dynamism it needs to expand from Kyoto nationwide.



Left: Recycle stations were set up in about 50 locations, for separating into combustibles, cans and plastic bottles.
Right: The Tenjin Festival used to generate around 60 tons of combustible garbage, but this was cut in half in the first year.

A Short Guide to Festival Costumes

Festival costumes have many parts. You are likely to see these as people carry *mikoshi* portable shrines through the streets, a tradition that goes back about 400 years.

Collaboration: Asakusa Naka-Ya



1 Hachi-maki headband

Worn by bushi warriors, the *hachi-maki* is a cloth people wrap around their head to demonstrate dynamism and vigor during a festival.

2 Hanten jacket

Part of the work attire of artisans and tradespeople. People often wear one while carrying *mikoshi* portable shrines.

3 Koi-kuchi shirt

A kind of inner-wear, this garment has this name because the sleeves look something like the mouth (*kuchi*) of a carp (*koi*).

4 Hara-gake apron

Work wear worn by men and women. It has a large pocket, originally designed to hold work implements.

5 Jika-tabi boots

The design is basically a split-toe *tabi* sock furnished with a flexible protective sole. *Jika-tabi* were originally worn for physical labor.

6 Setta footwear

Japanese-style sandals made from the outer layer of bamboo, fitted with leather soles. They are quite water resistant.

Festivals for Children

Long ago, when children fell ill more often, many festivals involved children, expressing hopes for good health and growth. Many still happen all over Japan today.

A prayer inked on the baby's forehead Hatsuyama Festival

A communal expression of hope for the good health and growth of children. Held every year on June 1, the first day of the climbing season, at Ashikaga Fuji Sengen-jinja Shrine in the city of Ashikaga, Tochigi Prefecture, in the northern Kanto region. New-born babies are taken to the shrine, where a bright red stamp is used to make a harmless ink seal on their foreheads.

The shrine's focus of veneration is Mount Fuji, and the festival's name, *hatsu* (first) *yama* (mountain), implies that this is the first time many of the children have visited this mountain shrine. In ancient times, when many children suffered from the floods, famines and epidemics that occurred, dragons drawn on banners were put up in the wind on the mountain the shrine venerates, and this, so the legend goes, helped protect local children from harm. This is how the festival started. When the ink stamp makes its impression on little foreheads, some kids stay quiet, but some show surprise and make a bit of a ruckus.



Above: The red seal on the forehead stamped by the shrine represents divine protection.
Below: The priest at this Shinto shrine radiates affection as he makes the red seal.

Good spirits chase away laziness Namahage

On New Years' Eve, in the city of Oga, Akita Prefecture, in the Tohoku region, local youths disguised as demons go from house to house shouting loudly in the local dialect "Are there any kids around here who cry a lot?" or "Does any kid here disobey their parents?" These "demons," known locally as *namahage*, wear awesomely large masks and traditional straw *mino* raincoats, so it is not surprising that the sight scares some children and makes them cry.

The whole point for the people where this custom is observed, however, is that the *namahage* are actually good spirits come to warn children and adults alike against laziness, and to offer blessings for good health, bring good harvests from the fields and food from the sea and hills, and grant good luck and happiness for the new year. Homes receiving visits from *namahage* are ready to welcome them cordially with food and saké made from recipes passed down from one generation to the next.



As the *namahage* chase away laziness from the kids, family members play at protecting their kids from the *namahage*.



Good health for girls Nagashi-bina

A festival that expresses the desire for good health and happiness for girls, held in April each year. In Mochigase Town in the city of Tottori, Tottori Prefecture, facing the Sea of Japan, the dolls are floated down a river in a custom called *mochigase no nagashi-bina*. Paper dolls representing a man and a woman are placed on a round cover made of woven straw, decorated with sprigs of peach blossoms or the like, and then sent on their way down the Sendai River.

Since the custom first developed about 400 years ago, the dolls, made generally from paper, are brushed against a person's body so that misfortune and bad luck is transferred to the dolls, and then to the river after the dolls float away. Today, girls dressed in their festive best gather on the riverbed on the day of the festival and, together with their sisters and other family members, set the dolls on the flowing water. The scene is quite colorful, just the right setting for a girls' festival.



Top: Girls in their best kimono set the dolls afloat with their wishes.
Above: Dolls of a married couple could be used in a ritual as substitutes for people.

Halloween: A fun time for young adults

Halloween, the evening of October 31, is known as a time for children to dress up in frightening costumes and go door to door in their neighborhood. The custom began long ago in Europe to pray for a good autumn harvest and chase away bad spirits. Since around 2010 it has grown in popularity in Japan too, although it is mostly celebrated by people in their 20s and 30s who enjoy "cosplay" —having fun by putting on "costumes" to "play."

In Tokyo, young people gather in lively

parts of the city like Shibuya and Roppongi, dressed as fanciful creatures, perhaps anime characters, strolling along the streets and turning them into a party. Their photos will probably end up on social media, and local clubs and restaurants get into the act to help people enjoy themselves.

Special sales counters at department stores offer costumes, together with makeup sets and accessories. The economic ripple effect from this fad is growing year by year.



Young people dressed up as characters from anime shows and video games.

Tako-yaki

Octopus Dumplings

A festive snack cooked to a sunny brown

Photos: Natori Kazuhisa, PIXTA



Sold in boat-shaped containers at street stalls at festivals.

Pour wheat batter into hot semi-spherical molds, add diced octopus, flip the mixture about to cook into small round dumplings, and you have *tako-yaki*. Browned to a diameter of about 3 or 4 cm (perfect for popping in the mouth), they are sized for eating on the move, ideal for festival time.

Once out of the skillet, *tako-yaki* have a tempting fragrance and a crisp surface. Inside they are soft, and with one crunch they are practically ready to melt in your mouth. The small chunk of octopus inside has a slightly chewy texture. With their delectable bittersweet sauce, the taste is truly special. Not only that, they are topped off with a brushing of mayonnaise, savory bonito flakes and a dash of green *nori* seaweed, ready to satisfy. Some cooks add sugar, chocolate or diced fruit to the wheat batter, and the octopus can be replaced with

cheese, *mentaiko* spicy cod roe, sausage, or *mochi* rice cake. Trying out different kinds is another way to enjoy *tako-yaki*.

Tako-yaki are easy to make at home, too, and that is another attraction. *Tako-yaki* started in Osaka, where you can now expect just about every home to have a special griddle for the purpose. Family tastes vary, of course. The treats are also sold frozen in supermarkets and elsewhere, and some people add them to their *bento* lunchbox as extra goodies.

In recent years, several chain franchises have sprung up. *Tako-yaki* have become a favorite—not only for festivals, but for everyday eating, too.

How to make

- 1 Stir water into wheat flour, mix in stock and egg, and pour into hot *tako-yaki* molds.
- 2 Drop in diced octopus.
- 3 While cooking, turn over several times with a skewer until round and cooked.
- 4 Arrange on a plate with sauce. To your taste, brush on mayonnaise and serve.



A *tako-yaki* vendor at the festival. Metal skewers are used to flip *tako-yaki* several times to make them come out round.



Place wheat flour and diced octopus into the batter in the semi-circular frying mold.





Where Ocean, Rivers and Mountains Decorate a City

Saiki

The city of Saiki in Oita Prefecture is naturally blessed by both sea and land. The beautiful surroundings give good reason to celebrate throughout the year.

Photos courtesy of the Saiki City Tourism Association, PIXTA, amanaimages



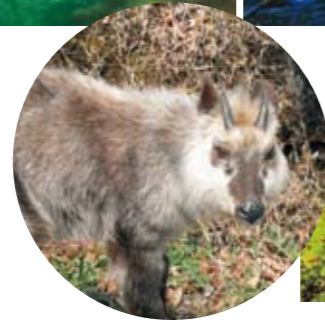
The Bungo Futamigaura rocks are a very popular spot to view the first sunrise of the year.



Deep in the mountains within Saiki city limits, in the south, a river flows over an enormous slab of rock in the Fujikawachi Gorge. Here you can enjoy the thrills of "canyoning" and other adventures.



Japanese fireflies numbering in the hundreds of thousands gather over the upper reaches of the Bansho River within the city limits, from the middle of May to mid-June. They are celebrated with local festive events. Left: Japanese serow (goat-antelopes) and *sobo-sanshouo* salamanders are among the rare wildlife living in the western mountains. Photos courtesy of Association for Natural History of Bungo Ono City



Saiki is the largest city (903.11 km²) on the entire island of Kyushu. Located in Oita Prefecture, the zigs and zags of the coastline look out on the blue ocean, source of around 400 different kinds of seafood. The Ise-ebi lobster and Hiogigai colorful noble scallop are scrumptious. Saiki sushi boasts a wide variety of toppings that compete with the best tastes in the world. Offering gastronomical delights at reasonable prices, sushi shops and markets welcome a constant flow of visitors.

In Saiki, the sea and mountains provide a bountiful supply of resources, especially food. To give thanks to the spirits of nature, the people here celebrate various festivals throughout the year. At the Johyara Festival in September, local fishermen and youth shout out "Johyara! Johyara!" ("May we get a big catch!") as they row fishing boats flying colorful "big catch" banners. They compete for vim and vigor. At the Kiura Sumitsuke Festival, held once every two years, people traditionally take pieces of *daikon* radish



Above left: The Johyara Festival is held every September. Hopes for good fishing are accompanied by big colorful banners flapping in the sea breeze. Above right: A fun way to wish for future happiness: participants in the Kiura Sumitsuke Festival rub charcoal on each other's faces. The more charcoal, the happier the outcome. Left: Green tourism programs include interacting with the locals, to learn about Saiki's natural environment, culture and history.



Fish stock goes into making *goma dashi udon*. Boiled noodles are dropped in the bowl, the piping hot stock is poured on, and the meal is ready.



Ise-ebi lobster and noble scallop are also some of Saiki's local specialties.

blackened with charcoal to rub on each other's faces, all in fun as a wish for happiness.

Within the city limits to the west lie Kyushu's highest mountains. Deep within them live endangered species, the best known being the Japanese serow (goat-antelope) and a type of salamander called *sobo-sanshouo*. In June 2017, the area was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve: an exemplary area where humanity and nature sustainably and harmoniously co-exist.

For those who want to get out in nature, campgrounds and cycling routes are some of the options. In the north-western corner of the city, where the Kuwabara River flows through the Fujikawachi Gorge, there is a popular place for a special type of water sport. A single immense slab of granite, together with the gentle curves the river has carved into the rock over eons, offer the thrill of "canyoning" adventures in summer, where people jump from the slab into the pool far below. The pure running waters are great for such exploits, but also for tranquil moments. Elsewhere within the city limits, hundreds of thousands of fireflies do their mystical dance on the Bansho River from mid-May to mid-June. Of course, the locals hold a festival in appreciation.

Saiki's temperate climate offers excellent conditions for growing *kabosu* citrus fruit. Then there are the grapes, whose sour-sweet taste is enhanced by the warm days and cool nights. The grapes are often made into vinegar or some other seasoning, all highly regarded as local specialties.

Farming communities and fishing villages both have their charms, actively promoted over the last few years as "only in Saiki" green tourism experiences. Visitors can stay in a house deep in the mountains, or in a fishing-related facility, helping with the harvest and eating with the friendly locals. There is nothing quite like spending some quiet time with a culture that has stayed alive for many years.

Saiki has so many fascinations close by, giving travelers countless ways to enjoy the place. If you go, your own choices will make your trip truly memorable.



Saiki Area Maps

● Access
Fly from Tokyo's Haneda Airport, Chubu International Airport, or Osaka's Itami Airport to Oita Airport: flight time from 60 to 100 minutes. Then take a bus to Oita Station. From there, board a limited express train to Saiki Station, about 70 minutes away.

● Information
Saiki City Tourist Information Center
<http://saiki-kankou.com/>
Available in Japanese.

Saiki Green Tourism Society
<http://www.yappa-saiki.sakura.ne.jp/saiki-gtr2/index.html>
Available in Japanese.



Souvenirs of



Japan 15



Leave Your Usual Self Behind

O-men Masks

Photos courtesy of PIXTA, amanaimages

Made of paper, wood or some other material, an *o-men* mask lets you take on the character of another person or an animal or any number of other possibilities. About 1,400 years ago, performing arts like traditional dance came to Japan from the Asian continent, and before long *Noh* dramas and *Kyogen* farces were performed with masks at the royal court and elsewhere. Over time, the theater spread to the common folk, and masks came to be worn at popular festivals and cultural events as well.

Put on a mask and you change your appearance into something other than who you are—maybe even

a god. This helps to explain why *o-men* became a key part of religious festivals, to welcome local deities. Since *o-men* let festival participants “mask” their true identity, they became a small but common means to experience feelings beyond the ordinary.

Typical *o-men* have long included demons and foxes, although today you will see other colorful masks, even plastic faces of animé characters. The fun is for adults and children alike—put on a mask and some traditional garb and you’ll have the perfect outfit for a fun and festive time.

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