

正月

Seeing in the New Year

There are so many different traditions associated with the New Year in Japan. Countless elements have combined over time to form today's New Year celebrations.



Envelopes for otoshidama

New Year, *Shōgatsu*, is the most widely observed and elaborate annual event in Japan. Customs do vary from region to region and the original significance of some customs may have become lost or unclear to many people today. Let's look at several New Year's customs that continue to thrive.

お年玉 *Otoshidama* literally means 'gem or treasure of the year'. It is something that Japanese children really look forward to. Today the custom of giving *otoshidama* involves presenting children with colourful envelopes that contain money. Children normally receive this New Year's pocket money from parents, grandparents or neighbours. In the past, the *otoshidama* were food and other goods exchanged between families. They also had a religious significance—gifts or offerings that had been given to deities would later be distributed among parishioners by the shrine or temple that had received them.



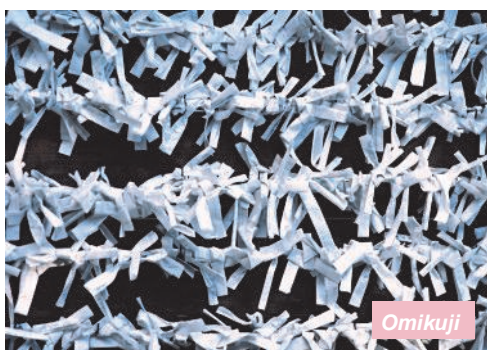
Toshihoshi soba

年越しそば *Toshihoshi soba* is just one of the special foods associated with this time of year, and if you are lucky enough to spend New Year with a family in Japan, there is a good chance you will be served a bowl of these buckwheat noodles on New Year's Eve and you'll be told to eat them because they bring luck. You may have eaten *soba* noodles on other days of the year, but *toshihoshi soba* is special. *Toshihoshi soba* means 'year-crossing *soba*' and the hope is that by eating these long noodles a family's good fortune will last long into the new year.



Kadomatsu

門松 *Kadomatsu* decorations can be large and impressive arrangements combining multiple elements such as the one shown here, or they can be simple sprigs of pine secured with red and white ties. There are many regional variations regarding this tradition: the dates to display *kadomatsu* and the types of trees used differ, and the actual name varies too.



Omikujii

Kadomatsu is the most common name used today and means 'gate pine'—the most common practice is to put out a pair of *kadomatsu*, one either side of the entrance of houses and other buildings such as department stores, which often have very impressive examples. Inside a house the *kadomatsu* is used singularly. The *kadomatsu* is not simply a decoration; it has its origins as the dwelling place, *yorishiro*, of the god who brings good luck at the beginning of the year known as the *toshigami*. In larger cities today, you will generally see *kadomatsu* after Christmas and for a week into the New Year.

初詣 *Hatsumōde* is the first visit people pay to a shrine or temple during the first three days of the year. Many people still observe this custom. Quite a number make a point of paying their visit as early as possible and gather before midnight on New Year's Eve to be there as the year passes. At temples, a bell is rung 108 times, ringing in the New Year and seeing off the 108 human desires or passions (*bonnō*) that can cause people such trouble. Some people will try to learn their fortune for the coming year by drawing lots called *omikujii*. Should the lot you draw be unfavourable, you would tie it to a nearby tree or on special lengths of wire or rope in the temple or shrine grounds.

New Year celebrations continue to change in Japan, but it is probably fair to say that *Shōgatsu* holds a similar place as Christmas does in Australia as far as scale and importance. For many the time retains an often deep religious significance; for others customs may still be observed but perhaps the time-off to spend with family and friends is of greater value to them. And just as many Australians like to travel during their Christmas holidays, the same applies for Japanese people. And of course, there is the pleasure of finding some time to simply relax.