



Festival Favourites

*Traditional fashion, fans, fireworks and funny faces—
welcome to a Japanese summer festival!*

Visit Japan at any time of the year and there should be a festival, or a *matsuri*, going on somewhere. That said, in Japan today, summer is thought of as festival time.

The origins of festivals vary, but put simply, in the country, festivals were closely bound with seasons and rice-based agriculture, and spring and autumn festivals prayed for a good crop or gave thanks for one. In summer, a country festival would be asking the gods to protect the local crops against natural disasters; in the cities, summer festivals were often held to ask the gods to intercede and protect the people against fire, disease and pestilence. For example, the famous Gion Matsuri in Kyoto which dates back to 869CE was established by the then Emperor to pray to the god of Yasaka Shrine for protection from disease that was ravaging the city.

Such origins are far from the minds of most festival-goers nowadays. Today's festivals are largely about coming together as a community and are an occasion to have fun.

Once you've attended a few festivals, you will notice certain features they have in common. Let's look at a couple you're bound to come across at summer festivals.

Summer festivals are often held in the grounds of the local shrine.

For many people it's one of the few times they will go to their local shrine in a year. Stalls selling food and various games for kids are a favourite part of any festival.

One of the first things you would notice is people wearing the summer cotton kimono called the *yukata*. Traditional attire is largely only worn on special occasions and festivals are such an event. Some of the people wearing *yukata* [middle image] or the shorter *happi* coat would be taking part in a procession carrying a portable shrine known as the *mikoshi*. Inside is the deity from the local community shrine and the actual *mikoshi* is carried

through the local streets by a group of twenty to thirty people. Not only men but also women bear the shrine on their shoulders. Foreigners living in the community are often invited to join the group. A warning: *mikoshi* can be very heavy.



You may also see, particularly at festivals in the country, a rather odd couple doing a dance which sometimes appears to be little more than random swaying. The dancers are masked: one wears a mask known as *Okame*—a chubby smiling woman with rosy cheeks, and the other a mask, known as *Hyottoko*—a man with his lips pursed [top]. *Okame*, also called *Otafuku*, is said to represent prosperity. *Hyottoko* is thought to be trying to light a fire. You can buy your own festival mask (normally worn on the back of your head) at one of the festival stalls. Much more popular with young festival-goers are masks of famous *anime* and *manga* characters.

Fireworks, poetically called *hanabi* or 'flowers of fire' in Japanese, were introduced to Japan by the Portuguese. Many summer festivals feature fireworks—not all on the scale of the Sumida River fireworks [bottom] which have been held in central Tokyo since they were first begun in 1733. This firework display goes for more than 1½ hours. On a more intimate scale, small or 'toy' fireworks are permitted in Japan and many people will enjoy fireworks with friends or family by the beach or at a park on a summer's evening.

Summer in Japan is hot and humid, and another thing you will notice at summer festivals is that many people are carrying around *uchiwa* fans. Traditionally these were made from bamboo, but most today have a plastic frame. On one side you will often find the name of a major sponsor; on the other is a design. A common design consists of a large single character on a background of waves such as the one shown here [top left]. This is simply the Japanese character for *matsuri*—祭—festival!

