

Gion Matsuri: Kyoto's month-long summer festival

Summer days in most of Japan are hot and humid, and honestly for many people a little uncomfortable. But travelling to Japan in mid-summer still has many attractions. One of the best reasons to visit is that summer is peak festival time. Without doubt, one of Japan's greatest festivals is the Gion Festival. Throughout the entire month of July, various rituals and events are held as part of the festival. The highlight is a grand parade of giant floats through the streets of central Kyoto.

The Gion Festival is the festival of Yasaka Shrine, which is also called Gion Shrine. As the alternate name suggests, the shrine has long been central to the life of the famous Gion district of Kyoto. Today the festival highlight is a parade of thirty-two floats, and looking at this magnificence, it is difficult to imagine the festival's origins. They lie in a time of hardship for the then imperial capital of Japan.

In 896, a devastating plague caused great suffering and it was thought the *kami* (gods) were unhappy. To placate them, a 'service for souls' or Goryo-e was held; the reigning emperor ordered that special prayers be said at Yasaka Shrine. The prayers were successful, so later whenever the city was affected by similar misfortune, it became the custom to hold these purification rituals. From around 970, the Gion Goryo-e became an annual event, and with only a few interruptions, the Gion Festival has been held for more than a millennium.



A hoko float with its giant wheels

The splendid floats in the grand parade are known collectively as *yamaboko*. The *yama* floats are single-storey and carried by groups of people on their shoulders; the *hoko* floats, pictured, are two-storeys high and are pulled on giant wheels. Each float belongs to a certain neighbourhood. While the link with Yasaka Shrine is still central to the festival, over time the festival floats began to reflect a more worldly element as craft guilds and kimono textile merchants

decorated their floats with sumptuous products to demonstrate their expertise and their wealth. The imagery in some float tapestries is Chinese, Persian and European; the reason for this is that very wealthy merchants acquired items traded along the Silk Route. In fact, the floats are sometimes referred to as mobile museums. It is possible to get a close-up look at the floats and see how they are constructed



The chigo or sacred child in the lead float

(without nails) in the second week of July when they are assembled in the various neighbourhoods.

Yoiyama is the name given to the three nights before the main parade. The streets are lined with festival stalls and filled with people admiring the finished floats on display which are lit by lanterns. Over these three days, another interesting custom is the 'Folding Screen Display'. Old textile merchant houses and businesses open up



Yasaka Shrine, the home of the festival

the front of their properties to display artworks for all to see.

Come the main day, 17 July, the parade begins after the *chigo* or sacred child in the front float cuts a straw rope. Since last year there is a second, slightly smaller parade on 24 July.

The month-long festival ends fittingly with the Nagoshi Summer Purification ritual at a small shrine within the Yasaka Shrine grounds. The Nagoshi ritual purifies the spirit and wards of illness for the rest of the year.

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Save the date! Matsuri in Sydney will be on Saturday 7 November at Darling Harbour. (Palm Grove)

Sydney's own Japanese festival is a great day for the family, a chance to put on your yukata, enjoy Japanese festival foods, games and activities, and a whole lot of entertainment. Not to be missed. More details in our next issue.



Images from the 2014 Matsuri in Sydney