

Yama, Hoko, Yatai, float festivals in Japan

On 1 December 2016, UNESCO inscribed “Yama, Hoko, Yatai, float festivals in Japan” on the representative list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

A total of 33 float festivals from around Japan are included as a single entry on the UNESCO list, among them two previously inscribed festivals, the Gion Festival yamahoko parade and the Hitachi Fuyumono, now part of the new listing.

The Japanese government proposed the 33 float festivals not just because they are centuries-old traditions, but also for the role they play bringing together many members of the community and preserving the traditional crafts of carpentry, lacquer work and fabric dyeing. Much work by many people goes into making and maintaining, and preparing and parading the floats.

Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida expressed his hope that more people would be interested in the various regions of Japan thanks to the inscription, explaining that while the 33 festivals of “Yama, Hoko, Yatai, float festivals in Japan” share common features, they have their own character, displaying many kinds of attractions of their region.



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Probably the best known of the festivals in the joint inscription is Kyoto's Gion Festival [top right]. The highlight of the festival is the *yamahoko* parade. Japanese festivals often have their origins in communities' attempts to placate the gods or ask for their blessings. Kyoto's Gion Festival for example was first held to try to appease the gods after a plague devastated the city. The apparent success of the first festival led to the people of Kyoto holding the festival in following years of strife, and with time, the festival became an annual event.

Many are covered in lanterns for evening parades such as the Chichibu Night Festival in Saitama prefecture.

The largest of Japan's festival floats are the Dekayama ('giant mountains') of the Seihaku Festival in Nanao city, Ishikawa prefecture [below, right]. At 12 metres high and weighing some 20 tons the name is fitting. Each year dolls on the float tell different kabuki stories. As with many festivals, the true origins are somewhat hazy. The three floats, each from a different



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The word for float is *yatai*. Floats can be difficult to categorise; what is called *yama* in one area of Japan might resemble a *hoko* in another area, but basically smaller floats called *yama* are carried or guided forward by groups of people using the shoulder height wooden beams on which the float rests. *Hoko* can be as tall or taller than houses. Resting on large wooden wheels, they are pulled along by teams of people using ropes.

The splendid *yamahoko* floats in the Kyoto parade proceed through the streets at a stately speed. At some festivals, floats rush through the streets at considerable speed, and just as first-time onlookers think disaster is imminent, the floats nimbly take the approaching corner. Yet other floats are destined to collide into each other as in the Kakunodate Festival in Akita

district of the city, are dedicated to three monkeys in order to avoid their curse.

The Kamezaki Shiohi Festival in Handa city, Aichi prefecture, takes place where legendary Emperor Jinmu was said to have landed on his way from Kyushu to the main island of Honshu. Despite the fact the festival involves pulling the *hoko* floats down the beach to the water, they are decorated with sumptuously embroidered fabrics [above, left] and as you can see, people are sitting on the top level. There are also musicians on each float who somehow manage to keep playing through it all.

No matter their origin or age, there is no doubting the skill and commitment that go into Japan's float festivals.

JAPAN'S WORLD HERITAGE SITES AND INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE—THE MAKINGS OF A GREAT HOLIDAY

Japan's World Heritage Sites can be a great introduction to the country and its culture. The Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) website has an informative World Heritage page: www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/scenic/worldheritage/

Elements on UNESCO's representative list of intangible cultural heritage can be found at www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/state/japan-JP?info=elements-on-the-lists. Why not enjoy a performance of *bunraku* (traditional puppetry), go souvenir shopping for traditional *washi* Japanese paper or some of the many beautiful traditional textiles, and an absolute must is to enjoy a meal or two of *washoku*, Japan's traditional cuisine—definitely a highlight of any trip to Japan.