

お正月 New Year in Japan

New Year, *Shōgatsu*, is the most widely

observed annual event in Japan and it is a time for families to spend together. It has a similar significance as Christmas has for most Australian families. Special food, decorations, greeting cards (emails too), sleeping and seeing relatives you only meet once or twice a year are some common elements between the two. *Shōgatsu* of course has the extra element of farewelling the old and seeing in the new. There is also a special awareness of doing something for the first time in the New Year. Let's look at a couple of these 'firsts'.

初日の出 The first sunrise of the year

On any day the sight of a beautiful sunrise can raise the spirits and make you wonder about the possibilities of the new day. The first sunrise 初日の出 (*hatsuhi-no-de*) of the year has special significance in Japan and people will travel to the coast or climb mountains to watch the sun come up. In 2013, the old *hatsuhi-no-de* tradition will take on a hi-tech edge as one thousand people take in the first sunrise from Tokyo's newest landmark, Tokyo Skytree. The operator of the Skytree will open the 350-metre and 450-metre high observation decks from 5am to 1,000 people—the sun is scheduled to rise at 6.45am. Given how popular the Tokyo Skytree has been with tourists since it opened in May 2011, competition for the tickets could be tough.

初詣 The first visit to a shrine or temple

Another 'first' is the tradition of visiting a shrine or temple during the first three days of the New Year called *hatsumode* 初詣. Many people still observe this custom. It is also popular to pay this visit as early as possible. People gather before midnight at the shrine or temple on New Year's Eve to be there as the year passes. At temples, a bell is rung 108 times, ringing in the year and seeing off the 108 human desires or passions (*bonnō*) that can cause people such trouble.



When you see your first *kadomatsu* decoration towards the end of the year you know that the New Year season is well upon you. Generally in cities you will see them after Christmas until a week into the New Year. *Kadomatsu* can be very elaborate arrangements normally found either side of the entrance to a house or a building; those outside department stores can be particularly impressive. However, they can be as simple as a sprig of pine such as the one shown here. *Kadomatsu's* origin is as the dwelling place (*yorishiro*) of the *toshigami*, which is the god who brings good luck at the beginning of the year.

Two ways to say 'Happy New Year!'

Yes, there are two different greetings—one to use up until the end of the year and another from 1 January. Just before the New Year, people will say 'Yoi o-toshi wo' when they see someone for the last time in the year. However, from New Year's Day this changes to 'Akemashite omedeto gozaimasu' when seeing someone for the first time at the beginning of January. The first phrase can be thought of as 'I hope the New Year will be a good one for you' and the second conveys the idea 'The New Year is here. Congratulations.' So, when writing a New Year's card in Japanese before the New Year, make sure you use the second phrase because the recipient will read your card on or after New Year's Day!

書初め New Year's calligraphy

Kakizome 書初め is the name given to writing the first calligraphy or painting the first picture in the New Year. Usually this takes place on 2 January and people often write their calligraphy with a group of people—this may be arranged by a shrine or held at other locations. *Kakizome* is considered to be a way of refreshing the spirit and it acts as a wish for improvement in your calligraphy in the year ahead. Traditionally the water used to grind the ink for *kakizome* would be drawn in the morning of New Year's Day. Also, when doing this calligraphy, you should be facing in a certain direction. There is a direction considered as auspicious for that year—this lucky direction is known as *ehō*.

初夢 The first dream

Supposed to foretell the your luck for the year, the first dream called *hatsuyume* 初夢 is another important first. It's regarded as particularly fortunate if your dream features Mt Fuji, not such a surprise given how large Mt Fuji looms in Japan's culture. However, the next most auspicious thing to dream of is a hawk and then an eggplant! *Ichi-Fuji, Ni-Taka, San-Nasubi* is how the saying goes. The hawk (*taka*) is a strong and high flyer; eggplant is *nasu* in Japanese, the same sound as the word for 'to do' or 'to accomplish'.



2013 is the Year of the Snake