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## The bittersweet realisation of the impermanent and transient nature of things.

**Mono no aware** is a concept well ingrained in Japanese culture and tradition and has a long history dating back to the Heian Period (794 – 1185). The period was named after the location of the imperial capital, which moved from Nara to Heian-kyo (now Kyoto), and was characterised by court aristocracy, the pursuit of aesthetic refinement in art and literature, and the rise of Buddhism.



Image: National Diet Library of Japan

A scene from *The Tale of Genji*

The phrase **mono no aware** was famously used over 1,000 times in the great classic novel *The Tale of Genji*, written by Lady Murasaki Shikibu during this era about life in the Japanese Imperial Court, love and human relations.

## Cherry Blossoms

One of the most notable aspects of nature that encapsulates this difficult-to-translate phrase are Japan's beloved **sakura** — or cherry blossoms. Every year the **sakura** season heralds the beginning of spring and brings in many tourists and locals alike.

These beautiful flowers bloom right across the nation, from the very tip of Hokkaido down to the tropical islands of Okinawa, which claims the first bloom of the country – as early as February – with petals of vibrant pink.

But out of all the flowers in Japan, including the **ume** (plum flowers) – which are often commonly mistaken for **sakura** due to their similar colour, shape and bloom time – why are the **sakura** particularly revered? It all comes back to **mono no aware**: **sakura** are only in full bloom for a week before falling and covering the ground like a blanket.

## O-hanami

To celebrate the blossoms and appreciate their spectacular beauty, many people gather in local parks, bringing along a blanket and packed picnic lunches to enjoy with friends and family as they sit beneath the cherry trees. This special tradition in Japan is called **o-hanami** (お花見). The kanji 花 represents 'flower' and 見 represents 'view' or 'see', which together mean 'flower viewing'.

## Matsuri

Large cherry blossom festivals, called **sakura matsuri**, are usually held at prime **o-hanami** spots. If you didn't pack a lunch, you could always go for a wander past the food stalls and see what tasty Japanese festival foods await.



While you're walking around with petals falling

gently in the wind, make sure you don't pass up the opportunity to try the seasonal limited edition **sakura** flavoured ice-creams. These delicious cones of soft pink swirls may look extra sweet, but they have a surprisingly salty side to them, too.



Finally, don't forget to step back from your camera and enjoy nature unfolding around you with a sense of "ah" - or **mono no aware**.



Jessica was a JET participant based in Akita Prefecture from 2017–2019.

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