

ANNUAL EVENTS

Special days for every season throughout the year

New Year

Shogatsu (New Year)

Traditionally, the New Year's holidays, known as Shogatsu, were a time for thanking the gods (*kami*) who oversee the harvests and for welcoming the ancestors' spirits who protect families. The custom of displaying *kadomatsu* (decorations of pine branches and bamboo put up at both sides of the entrances to houses) and *shime-kazari* (straw rope decorations) was to welcome these gods and spirits. At the beginning of the year, people expressed appreciation to the gods and the ancestral spirits and prayed for a rich harvest in the new year. Because of this, the New Year's holidays are for the Japanese people the most important of all annual celebrations. Many people at this time draw up plans and make new resolutions for the coming year.

Nengajo (New Year's Cards)

During the New Year's holidays, people receive greeting cards, known as *nengajo*, from relatives, friends, and acquaintances. The number of *nengajo* sent for New Year's Day in 2011 was approximately 2.08 billion.

Hatsumode (First Visits of the Year to Shrines and Temples)

During these holidays, families and friends go together to pay the first visits of the year, known as *hatsumode*, to Shinto shrines and

Hatsumode

During the New Year's holidays, people go to shrines and temples to pray for health and prosperity in the year ahead. (Photos courtesy of AFLO)



Kadomatsu

Kadomatsu are New Year's decorations fashioned from pine and bamboo. They are placed on both sides of the entrances to people's homes.

Buddhist temples. In the case of Shinto shrines, these visits were traditionally made to shrines which are said to be in a "favorable direction" from the home of the visitor. The purpose of the visits was to pray for a rich harvest and the safety of the family and home during the year ahead.

Meiji Jingu Shrine in Tokyo sees the largest number of *hatsumode* visitors (3.20 million in 2010), followed by Naritasan Shinshoji Temple in Chiba Prefecture (2.98 million in 2010) and Kawasaki Daishi Temple in Kanagawa Prefecture (2.96 million in 2010).



A hina (doll) display shelf
The dolls, accessories, and peach blossoms are displayed in early March.



Otoshidama (Presents of Money for Children)

During the New Year's holidays, children receive special presents of spending money, known as *otoshidama*, from parents and relatives. Thus, children have a special reason to look forward to the opening of the new year, and in recent years it is not unusual for junior high and high school students to receive 5,000 or 10,000 yen per gift. When all the *otoshidama* are put together, they may amount to several tens of thousands of yen.

Otoshidama

New Year's gifts of money for children.

New Year's Games

In earlier times, almost all children took part in such special outdoor New Year entertainments as kite-flying and spinning tops (especially for boys) and a badminton-like game for girls called *hanetsuki*. Indoor entertainments included *uta karuta* card games, which tested the participants' quickness at recognizing poems from the *Hyakunin isshu (Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets)*, and a board game called *sugoroku*, similar to backgammon. However, for present-day children, who are surrounded by so many different means of entertainment, these New Year's games have lost their former popularity.

Spring

Setsubun

According to the lunar calendar in use before 1873, in which the numbering of the months was about one and a half months behind that of the modern solar calendar, the coming of spring (Risshun or Setsubun) was designated as the third or fourth day of the second month. Some of the Setsubun observances that were held on this day still take place on February 3 or 4, even though this coincides with the coldest period of winter. For example, there is the ritual of opening the doors and windows of houses and expelling bad luck and evil demons by tossing beans into the air while saying "*fuku wa uchi, oni wa soto*" ("fortune in and demons out"). It is also said that one will

Setsubun

Setsubun—"Fortune in and devils out!"



keep healthy by eating on this day the number of beans equivalent to one's age. This was originally an observance that took place in the imperial court on the last day of the lunar year to symbolize the sweeping away of bad spirits and winter cold and gloom, as well as to welcome the cheer of a new and bright spring.

Hina Matsuri (Doll Festival)

Hina Matsuri is celebrated on March 3, when spring is not far off. This is an annual event to pray for the happiness and healthy growth of young girls. On this day, families display *hina ningyo*, dolls dressed in traditional court apparel, along with peach blossoms and offerings of such delicacies as white saké, diamond-shaped rice cakes (*hishimochi*), and dry rice-cake pellets (*arare*)

The Hina Matsuri observance derives from ancient beliefs about ritual purification. At one time it was believed that human misdeeds and defilements could be washed away and purified in rites held beside streams. Later, dolls made of paper were used in these rituals, and after the Edo period (1600–1868) these dolls began to be designed in the form of the *hina ningyo* seen today.

Haru no Higan (Vernal Equinox Day)

The traditional observance of Haru no Higan, or "spring *higan*," coincides with the period of seven days centering on the spring equinox, around March 21. At this time, people visit family graves, pay their respects to the souls of their ancestors, and ask Buddhist priests to perform sutra-readings in their honor. A similar observance, known as Aki no Higan, or "autumn *higan*," is held during the one-week period centering on the autumnal equinox, around September 23.

Hanami
A cheerful party beneath
cherry trees in full bloom.



Hanami (Cherry-Blossom Viewing)

At the end of March and the beginning of April, when in most of Japan the cherry blossoms which symbolize the country begin to bloom, the Japanese people like to make merry at picnics known as *hanami* (“flower-viewing”), held under blossoming cherrytrees. The custom of arranging picnics to eat and drink under the spring blossoms has been widespread among the common people since the Edo period.

Golden Week

April can be a rather stressful time for students, who are beginning a new school year, and for new company employees who typically begin work careers during this month, which corresponds with the beginning of Japan’s fiscal year. However, from the end of April, many people take from a week to ten days off work, since this period includes a cluster of national holidays, namely Showa Day on April 29, Constitution Day on May 3, Greenery Day on May 4, and Children’s Day on May 5. This period is commonly called “Golden Week.” The weather is warm and suitable for excursions, and tourist destinations throughout Japan bustle with crowds of visitors. Golden Week is notorious for traffic jams and crowded trains and airports.

Children’s Day

Children’s Day, which falls on May 5 during Golden Week, was traditionally called Tango no Sekku (known as “Boys’ Day” in English), and was a day set aside to wish for the healthy growth and future career success of young boys. Traditional decorations were carp-shaped cloth streamers attached to poles (*koinobori*) and dolls in the guise of warriors (*mushaningyo*), while special food delicacies were rice dumplings wrapped in

bamboo leaves (*chimaki*) and rice cakes wrapped in oak leaves (*kashiwamochi*).

In ancient times, the fifth month of the year was considered a bad month, and the fifth day of that month was thought to be particularly inauspicious. Tango no Sekku first developed as an annual observance of ritual purification to eliminate defilement.

On this day there is the custom of bathing in hot water containing iris leaves. It was traditionally thought that such leaves not only had medicinal properties but could banish evil.

Summer

Tanabata

The first annual observance of summer is known as Tanabata, falling on July 7. It is a day that commemorates a romantic story, first handed down to Japan’s imperial court via China and Korea and then becoming popular among the common people, about the once-a-year meeting on a bridge across the Milky Way of the “cowherd star” and the “weaving princess star.” It was believed that wishes made on this day would be fulfilled; in gardens and other places people set up leaf-bearing bamboo stalks to whose branches they attached strips of paper on which their wishes were written.



Carp streamers
Carp-shaped windsocks made from cloth are flown to mark Children’s Day.



Tanabata
On July 7, people write their wishes on narrow strips of paper and decorate them with bamboo grass for the Tanabata festival.

Today, Tanabata festivals are celebrated at numerous places around Japan. Some of the best-known take place at the Kitano Tenmangu Shrine in Kyoto, the Konpira Shrine in Kagawa Prefecture, and in the cities of Hiratsuka in Kanagawa Prefecture and Takaoka in Toyama Prefecture. Also well known is the Sendai Tanabata festival in Miyagi Prefecture, which takes place a month later on August 7, closer to the time of year when Tanabata was earlier observed by the lunar calendar.



Fireworks Displays

Throughout Japan, night skies in summer are lit by colorful fireworks as various localities put on fireworks displays (*hanabi taika*). Japan's fireworks technology is said to be the world's best and has been handed down from generation to generation since the Edo period. Today's fireworks displays are often controlled by computers to enhance their precision and spectacular visual effects. In Tokyo, fireworks displays along the Sumida River have been famous annual events since the Edo period.

Bon

Bon or Obon is an annual observance to welcome and console the souls of one's ancestors, who are thought to visit one's home at this time of the year. It was traditionally observed around the middle of the seventh month according to the lunar calendar. At present it is observed in most places between July 13 and 15, though in some regions between August 13 and 15.

On July 13, welcoming fires (*mukaebi*) are lit to greet the ancestors' spirits. Then, on the sixteenth, seeing-off fires (*okuribi*) are lit as the ancestral souls return to the spirit world.

During Bon, many companies and stores close for vacation and since people who work away from their native places often return there with their wives or husbands and children, transportation facilities, as during Golden Week, become very congested.



Tsukimi

During the annual *tsukimi* (moon viewing) observance, people make offerings of dumplings (*dango*) and *susuki* grass as they enjoy the full moon.

Autumn

Tsukimi (Moon Viewing)

According to the lunar calendar, the full moon appearing around the middle of the ninth month was called the mid-autumn moon (*chushu no meigetsu*), and it became a custom to arrange moon-viewing parties to appreciate its particular beauty. This was originally a custom practiced in China, which spread to Japan in the Heian period (794–1185). Houses were decorated with eulalia grass (*susuki*) and dumplings were made and offered to the moon together with samples of crops from the autumn harvest.



Shichigosan

November 15 is a day for visiting Shinto shrines with boys aged three and five and girls aged three and seven to pray for their safety and healthy growth. Traditionally, small boys wear *haori* (Japanese half-coats) and *hakama* (divided skirts) and the girls wear kimono, but many are seen nowadays wearing suits and dresses. On this day, parents buy at shrines a type of candy called *chitose-ame* which is supposed to convey prayers for long life, and at home families celebrate by eating rice boiled with red beans (*sekihan*) and a sea bream prepared complete with head and tail (*okashiratsuki no tai*).

New Year's Eve

When Christmas has passed and the *bonenkai* are over, it will soon be December 31, called in Japanese *omisoka*. Just before midnight, Buddhist temples all over the country begin to strike bells in an observance known as *joya no kane*. The bells are struck 108 times, symbolizing a purification of what are said to be 108 earthly desires (*bonno*). Then a new year will begin with the observance of Shogatsu.

Winter

Bonenkai (Year-End Parties)

After the beginning of December, many year-end parties known as *bonenkai* take place in pubs and restaurants. These are motivated both by the idea of expressing appreciation for people's hard work during the year and the notion of forgetting difficulties, and having a good time at the year's end. People of all ages and belonging to all kinds of groups, including students and company employees, become busy planning these events. In most cases, each participant pays his or her own expenses, but there are cases where companies sponsor *bonenkai* for their employees and cover these parties' costs.

Christmas

In Japan, Christmas has become popular as a seasonal occasion and, whether or not they are Christians, the Japanese people are fond of displaying Christmas trees, eating Christmas cakes, and exchanging Christmas presents. It is an especially exciting time for children, who await the bringing of gifts by Santa Claus while they sleep.