

niponica

Discovering  
Japan

にかほに

no. 35



• Special Feature •

Dancing  
Japan!





niponica  
にぽにか<sup>o</sup> no. 35

• Special Feature •

# Dancing Japan!

Japan abounds with a rich array of unique dances, each one as enchanting as the next. From local folk dances, to formal dances steeped in high-art tradition, to stunning stage performances—even dances by anime characters—there is something for everyone. Get a whole-body cultural experience. Come dance in Japan.

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Awa Odori, a traditional performing art from Tokushima, is danced every year in August, with some 100,000 people joining in.  
(Photo: Aflo)

Cover: Dancer Moriyama Kaiji (see page 11)  
Photo: Isamu Uehara (Sun-Ad)

*niponica* is published in Japanese and six other languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish) to introduce to the world the people and culture of Japan today. The title *niponica* is derived from "Nippon," the Japanese word for Japan.

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# Why Do Japanese People Dance?

In theaters, in towns, and in public squares...  
At school, at home, and on social media...  
Why is it that Japanese people like to dance so much?  
The reason is concealed within a long history.



A painting depicts a *bugaku* dance known as *Seigaiha*, waves of the blue ocean, being performed in the imperial court around the 11th century.  
From *Genji Monogatari Gacho* ("Album Set of the Tale of Genji"), Tosa School: *Momiji no Ga* ("Celebration of Autumn Foliage"; partial)  
Collection of Sakai City Museum

It is difficult to identify the very beginning of Japanese dance, but *kagura* is thought to be one starting point. *Kagura* emerged as a religious dance form intended as an offering to *kami* deities. The introduction of various musical instruments from outside Japan around the 7th century led to the advent of *bugaku*, a form of dance that developed out of the ancient Japanese *kagura* form. *Bugaku* dances accompanied by instruments including *sho* (free-reed wind instruments), transverse bamboo flutes, and *taiko* drums was under the patronage of the imperial court and nobility. The movements used in *bugaku*, with dancers slowly turning their outstretched arms, can be seen as the prototype for the light, graceful motion that later came to characterize Japanese dance in general.

Noh, which originated in the 14th century as a derivation of *bugaku*, is a song and dance-based theatrical form. In noh theater, the main protagonist, known as the *shite*, performs

## 神楽 *Kagura*

The Takachiho no Yo-Kagura (Night Kagura) has a long history in the Miyazaki Prefecture town of Takachiho, with all-night dances offered to *kami* deities that are summoned to the performances.



## かぶき踊り

*Kabuki*  
Dance



Izumo no Okuni, the founder of kabuki dance, which enjoyed enthusiastic popularity among the common people of her time.  
From *Okuni Kabuki Zu Byobu* ("Okuni Kabuki Screen"; partial)  
Collection of Kyoto National Museum

solemn, austere dances along with other characters. The movements are accompanied by spoken lines, sung lyrics describing scenes, and instrumental musical performances. Several schools of noh, which developed with the patronage of the leaders at that time, still exist today, 600 years later. Heir to the tradition's unique formal beauty (see page 10), they utilize masks, dazzling costumes, and special, dedicated stages.

Around the 15th century, a form of dance called *Furyu-odori* became wildly popular. It is thought to have originated with festivals and costumed parades. This style of group dance, in which great numbers of participants dress up in showy costumes and dance together, accompanied by instruments such as small disc-shaped gongs called *kane* and *taiko* drums, took root all over Japan (see pages 6–9). *Furyu-odori* is a form of folk entertainment known for its very diverse range of distinctive local traditions.



## 日本舞踊

*Nihon-buyo*

*Kyoganoko Musume Dojo-ji* ("The Maiden at Dojo-ji Temple"), a dance drama, expresses the various emotions of a young woman in love, with gorgeous costume changes and dance props. Here, Fujima Murasaki (III) dances in this representative *Nihon-buyo* program.  
(Photo courtesy of Murasakiha-Fujimaryu Fujima Office)

*Furyu-odori* later developed into two distinct forms: *bon-odori* dances where ordinary people take part as they please, and kabuki stage plays offered by professional performers. The origin of kabuki can be traced to around 17th-century Kyoto, when popular *kabuki-odori* dances were performed by Izumo no Okuni, a female entertainer who would dress in male costumes and incorporate popular, contemporary songs into her performances. Eventually the center of kabuki performance would shift to Edo (present-day Tokyo), where it is characterized by distinctive movement and style, virtually instantaneous costume changes, and modes of expression employing small stage props such as folding fans and hand towels. Meanwhile, in Kyoto and Osaka, *kamigata-mai* developed out of kabuki dance as a form of banquet performance. These traditions developed into *Nihon-buyo* ("Japanese dance"), which is performed at theaters and banquets. Over 100 schools of the art exist, each with their own *iemoto* founder or master.

## 盆踊り *Bon-odori*



The dances of a *bon-odori* festival, where participants of all ages and genders dance together around *yagura* scaffolds, is a distinctive tradition of summertime in Japan.  
(Photo: Aflo)

## コンテンポラリーダンス

*Contemporary*  
Dance



*Natsubatake* ("Recollection of sunny field") from DANCE ARCHIVES in Japan 2023 introducing Japanese contemporary dance  
Choreography: Orita Katsuko; Performed by: Hirayama Motoko, Shimaji Yasutake; Photo: SHIKAMA Takashi; Photo courtesy of New National Theatre, Tokyo

Today, in the 21st century, noh and kabuki been recognized by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritages. Meanwhile, a considerable number of Japanese performers are active on the world stage in genres including ballet and contemporary dance. Dance has also come to be a pervasive presence in the lives of ordinary people in Japan. Dance is included as a required junior high school subject, and it is commonly incorporated into school life in all types of settings, as well. Adults also dance to express their support for favorite sports teams, idols, and other performers. On social media, videos of dancers dressed up as anime characters inspire people to post their own versions, creating opportunities for young people to dance together with many others.

In all these ways and more, the Japanese people over the centuries have fostered a culture of dance as a means of promoting bonds of affinity.





# A Japanese Intangible Cultural Heritage

## *Furyu-odori*

*Furyu-odori* was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2022. The word *furyu* originally meant something elegant and graceful, but eventually it came to refer to a group dance performed by a large number of people dressed in elaborate costumes. Let's take a look at some of the tasteful dances that are still performed today in various parts of Japan.

### Bon-odori in Nishimonai ◆ Ugo Town, Akita Prefecture

Among the *bon-odori* dances that are danced during the Bon season in August when the spirits of the ancestors return, the Bon-odori in Nishimonai is considered to be exceptionally elegant. The hand gestures and footwork of the dancers, who hide their faces with woven hats and dark hoods to evoke the deceased, are supple and beautiful. *Hanui* kimono that are sewn together with pieces of silk cloth add further color to the dance. (Photo: PIXTA)



### Shiraishi-odori ◆ Kasaoka City, Okayama Prefecture

This traditional dance of Shiraishi Island is said to have gotten its start as a way of mourning a samurai who died in a battle that took place in the 12th century. Several types of dances are performed at the same time to a single melody known as *kudoki*. Today, dancers draw on 13 types of dances handed down the generations. The harmony created by multiple dances with different costumes and moves is breathtaking. (Photo: Kasaoka City Office)

### Bon-odori in Kemanai ◆ Kazuno City, Akita Prefecture

In this richly moving *bon-odori* dance, the performers carry out relaxed gestures around a bonfire with their arms stretched out to their fingertips. Both men and women wear formal kimonos with black motifs, and cover their faces with polka-dotted *tenugui* hand towels. (Photo: Aflo)



### Yasurai-bana ◆ Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture

In the spring when the cherry blossoms start falling, this dance is performed in four places in Kyoto—Imamiya, Kawakami, Genbu, and Kamigamo—as a prayer to appease evil spirits and plagues that bring about disasters. Dressed as elements with red or black hair called *shaguma*, performers beat gongs and drums, play bamboo flutes, and parade through the streets singing lyrics including "yasurai-bana." (Photo: Aflo)

### Nenbutsu-odori in Takinomiya

◆ Ayagawa Town, Kagawa Prefecture

Every year in late August, this dance is held at Takinomiya Shrine and Takinomiya Tenmangu Shrine to give thanks to Sugawara Michizane, a poet and politician who saved many people from a massive drought during the Heian period and to pray for rain and an abundant harvest. Dancers called *genji* holding large fans dance while chanting *Namu ami daya* in sync with drums, bamboo flutes, gongs, and conch shells. (Photo: Ayagawa Town)



### Ayakomai ◆ Kashiwazaki City, Niigata Prefecture

This performing art handed down over a period of some 500 years and performed in two theaters, Takanda and Shimono, consists of three parts: the *kouta-odori* danced by women, the *hayashi-mai* danced by men, and *kyogen* (noh farce). The *kouta-odori* is a captivating dance involving graceful footwork and supple fan gestures is performed by a girl wearing a red cloth called a *yurai* on her head. (Photo: Takahashi Masahito / Haga Library)







### Yoshihiro-gaku ◆ Kunisaki City, Oita Prefecture

This dance is held at Gakuniwa Hachiman Shrine in July every year as a prayer to ward off insects from damaging agricultural crops. Musicians wearing koshimino straw raincoats around their waist and helmets on their heads perform this dynamic dance. (Photo: Kunisaki City)

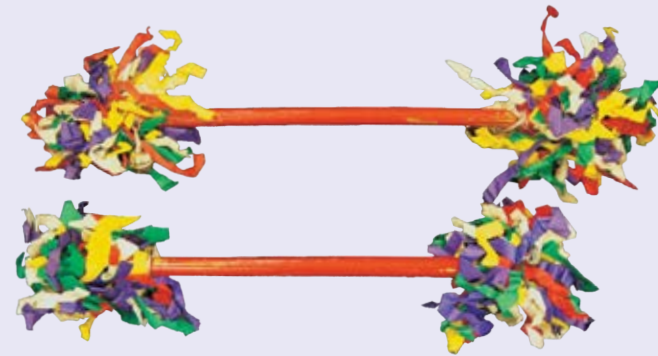
### Kanomizu-kakeodori

◆ Gujo City, Gifu Prefecture

This dance is performed at an annual festival that has been held continuously for over 300 years at Hakusan Shrine in the Kanomizu district. They dance around with bamboo flower decorations called *sinai* on their backs, beating drums and gongs. Dancers wear a variety of costume, such as masks and *hanagasa* hats with flowers. (Photos: Gujo Tourism Federation)

### Chakkirako ◆ Miura City, Kanagawa Prefecture

This dance is held at Kainan Shrine on the 15th day of the New Year to pray for good fortune in fishing and business. Girls dressed in red kimonos dance with two *ayatake* (bamboo sticks with bells and decorations) called *chakkirako* and fans, accompanied by the singing of elderly women. (Photo: Aflo)



### Ayatake

Dancers hold these bamboo sticks decorated with colored paper and bells in both hands, twirling them and striking them against each other as they dance. The *ayatake* pictured here are used in the Chakkirako dance. (Photo: Miura City)



### Fue

The *yokobue* and *shinobue* bamboo transverse flutes are often part of Japanese folk dances. The main melody of the music that accompanies these dances comes from the clear, high tones of the *fue*.



### Uchiwa

Like the *ougi* fans, the non-folding *uchiwa* fan also plays an important role in dances. Dancers flutter and clap these fans, adding flair to the dance steps. Pictured here is the large *uchiwa* fan used in Nenbutsu-odori in Takinomiya. (Photo: Ayagawa Town)



### Taiko

The *taiko* is a drum played with a mallet or *bachi* stick. Yasurai-bana and Yoshihiro-gaku dancers perform these dances as they beat the small, handheld, high-pitched *shime-daiko* drum (pictured).

## Props Add Flair to Dances

Rhythmic and melodic musical instruments are used as props to accentuate the choreography and add to the glamor and excitement of Japanese *Furyu-odori* folk dances.

Cooperation: Miyamoto Unosuke Co., Ltd.



### Ougi

In addition to being a practical tool for keeping cool, folding *ougi* fans are an essential part of Japanese dances and festivals. The fan is used in a variety of ways—fully open and held high, or swept through the air in a wave-like motion. Pictured is the *ougi* used in the Chakkirako dance. (Photo: Miura City)



### Kane

These disc-shaped gongs are made of copper and other metals and struck with a thin mallet to create a rhythm. They are used in nearly every Japanese *Furyu-odori* dance. They produce a high-pitched, piercing sound.



# Traditionalists and Innovators

Photo: Kurihara Osamu



Masked in the titular role, Saburota gives a magnificent performance in *Okina*.

## Dance as Prayer

Performers of noh, the world's oldest existing theater tradition involving song and dance, move slowly as if stamping the stage with their feet, accompanied by flute and small and large hand drums and a chorus chanting in verse form. Originating in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, noh techniques and styles have been handed down the generations to the present day.

One of the most promising young noh performers to carry on this tradition is Kanze Saburota. His father, Kanze Kiyokazu, is the 26<sup>th</sup> head of the Kanze school and a descendant of Kan'ami and Zeami, the founders of noh.

"I practice every day with my teacher [his father]. I watch and learn each and every movement and replicate them again and again."

Saburota made his stage debut at the age of five, taking on a *shite* (leading role) for the first time at the age of 10. At 16, he performed his first *hatsuomote* role in mask. Under the guidance of his father, Kiyokazu, he has continued to grow, and in 2022, at the age of 23, he performed the titular role in *Okina*, a classic in the Kanze school repertoire.

*Okina* is not a typical noh play, as there is no story as such. Rather it is a sacred rite danced by performers as prayer for the people. Performing as divine figures, the solemn dance serves as a memorial for the dead and a prayer for peace in the future.

"If the feeling of prayer does not come naturally from within, the dance will not be good. For this reason, I was taught that it is also important that one behaves correctly in life, as well."

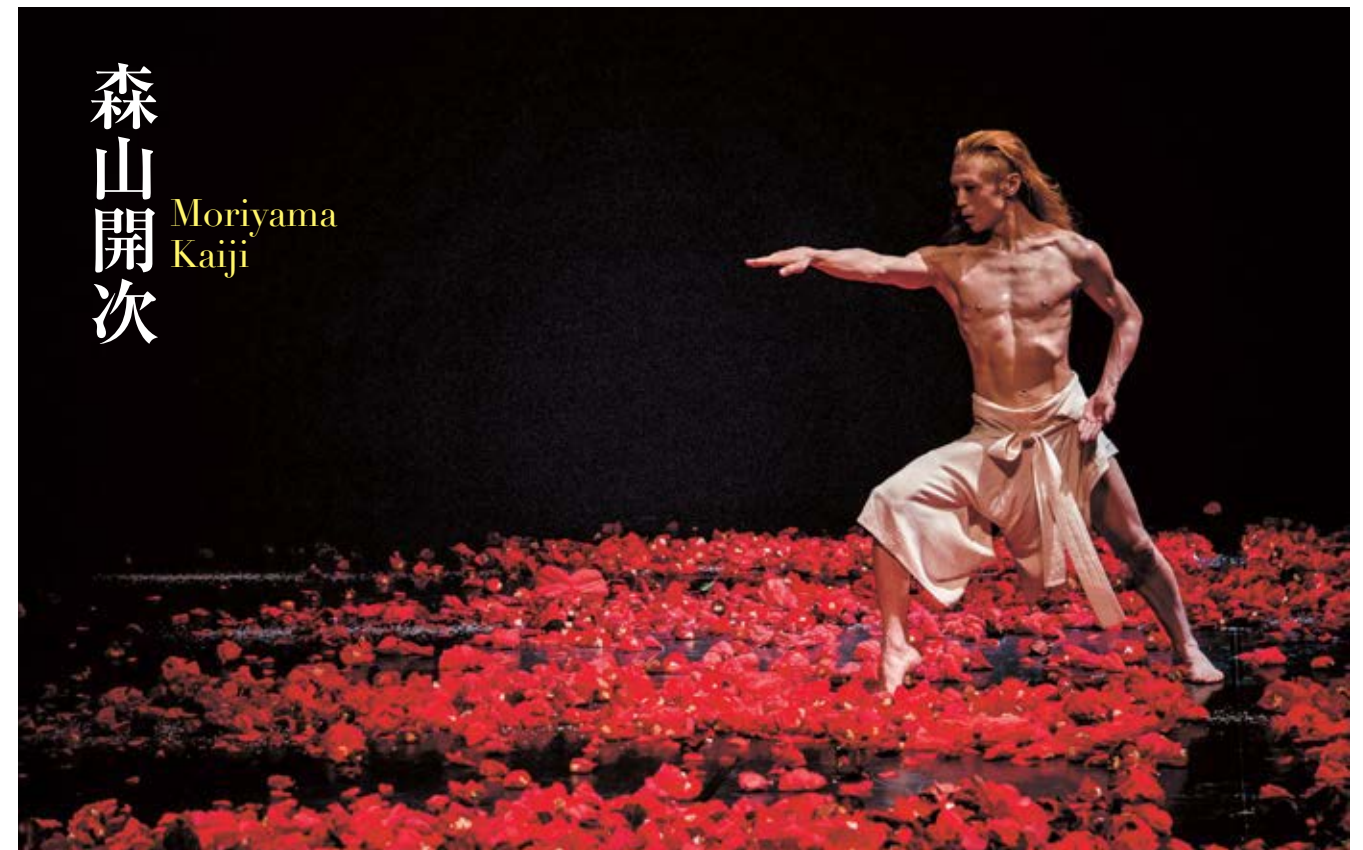


Saburota standing in *kamae*, the fundamental noh pose — chin pulled in and hips held tight

While working hard to carry on the traditional Japanese art, Saburota has recently taken on the challenge of creating new noh plays with contemporary themes. He says he hopes to create opportunities for people unfamiliar with classic Japanese arts to discover an interest in noh.

"Noh plays unfold with only a few words and gestures, and many people may find it difficult to understand. But a great aspect of noh is the ability to use your imagination and interpret it in your own way."

A young noh performer carries on 600 years of history and a dancer pioneers new expressions to convey classical themes. Transcending a specific age, Japanese culture, both old and new, blossoms on the dance stage.



## Dancing Between Presence and Absence

Moriyama Kaiji is a leading figure in the field of contemporary dance. He captivates audiences with the one-of-a-kind expressivity of his dance, bringing fluid movements that form supple curves together with linear movements that cut sharply through space.

"I often move in an airy, floaty way. This is to express lightness. I want to eliminate heaviness and, if possible, eliminate even my own presence. I dance in pursuit of this feeling."

With *Yu-Zuru*, which he debuted in 2001, Moriyama did in fact capture this feeling. The dance is based on the Japanese folk tale *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* about a crane who takes human form to repay a favor to an elderly couple. Is the performer a bird, a person, or something not even of this world? Moriyama danced this story of an ambiguous entity in an attempt to depict absence. From that point on, he says, "Expressing that space 'between presence and absence' has been a theme for me."

Since then, he has been developing a wide range of stage productions that address Japanese culture, including *Katana*, in which he portrays a sharpened Japanese sword, and *Ninja*, which incorporates ninja sorcery in a dance filled with humor.

"I would like to develop a uniquely Japanese physical expression by depicting things that are difficult to see, such as the spirit embedded in the sword and the movements ninja use to disguise their presence."



Top: *Katana* represents the sharpness of the Japanese sword through a highly toned body.  
Photo: Yoshikazu Inoue  
Center: *Ninja* depicts the image of the ninja in humorous physical movements.  
Photo: SHIKAMA Takashi  
Photo courtesy of: New National Theatre, Tokyo  
Bottom: Moriyama says, "I want my body to continue to be able to transform into any type of presence."  
Photo: Studio ARCHITANZ





## Private Luxury on a Public Stage Miyako Odori

Among the many schools of Japanese dance, the Inoue school of Kyomai has made its mark as a Kyoto art form for *ozashiki*, private parties held in traditional establishments with *geiko* and *maiko* (apprentice *geiko*) providing entertainment. Among the Kyomai dances, also choreographed and performed by *geiko* and *maiko*, are the Miyako Odori dances. Performances are given for the public every year from April 1 to 30 at the Gion Kobu Kaburenjo Theater. This is a rare opportunity to experience dances typically only performed at exclusive *ozashiki* parties. It has become a springtime highlight for Kyoto sightseers.

Left: The finale ensemble. The hour-long performance features eight dances.  
(Photo: Qualite link, Inc.)  
Right: The historical Gion Kobu Kaburenjo Theater was built in 1913.  
(Photo: Qualite link, Inc.)



## Going to the Theater to See Dance Performances

Traditional Japanese dance, modern dance, and even dances featuring real-size, live-action versions of popular animated characters—Japanese theaters stage all kinds of dance performances.



Above: The dynamic *Oni* ("Ogre") is performed to the music of the professional *taiko* drumming troupe Kodo.  
(Photo: Shinoyama Kishin)  
Right: Niigata-City Performing Arts Center is designed to appear to be floating on water.



## Modern Dance, From Niigata to the Global Stage Noism Company Niigata

Noism Company Niigata is the resident dance ensemble at the Ryutopia Niigata-City Performing Arts Center. As such, it is Japan's first dance company to be exclusively affiliated with a public theater. The company is led by world-acclaimed director, choreographer and dancer Kanamori Jo, who explores and presents one-of-a-kind dance modalities developed in a unique training process that integrates physical arts from the East and the West. The young dancers, who are selected from around the world, are based in Niigata, where they are involved in community activities for local residents, while creating a performing art shared with the world.



## Dances Featuring Real-Size, Live-Action Versions of Animated Characters Sanrio Puroland

If you have ever dreamed of seeing Hello Kitty and other Sanrio characters singing and dancing, right up close and personal, the indoor theme park Sanrio Puroland is the place for you. Join in the pop music parade, wave your penlight in the air with all your favorite characters, and immerse yourself in the Sanrio world.



Above: Enjoy the Sanrio star characters' dancing to your heart's content at the Miracle Gift Parade.  
Left: Entrance to Sanrio Puroland, an invitation to a fairytale world  
©1990, 2023 SANRIO CO., LTD. TOKYO





### *Oshi no Ko* ("Favorite Child")

This anime depicts the realities of the entertainment industry and the world of pop idols, focusing on the story of Ai (pictured), an exceptionally clever pop idol, and her children. In the film, Ai and other idols often sing and dance, and many young fans post videos on social media of themselves performing the same dances.

©Akasaka Aka x Yokoyari Mengo / SHUEISHA Inc. / *Oshi no Ko* Production Committee.

### *Sore Ike! Anpanman* ("Let's Go! Anpanman")

A long-running series loved by children since it first aired in 1988, the program conveys the importance of courage and friendship through episodes involving Anpanman, a superhero and symbol of justice, and his friends. The closing song *Anpanman Taiko* ("Anpanman Exercise"), *San San Taiko* ("Sun Sun Exercise") and other songs from the series are accompanied by dance routines that engage the whole body with large movements and are easy for children to remember. It is often performed at parent days at schools and other children's events.

©Yanase Takashi / FROEBEL-KAN CO., LTD. / TMS / NTV



## Dance in Anime

The characters in Japanese anime often dance. Especially during the title sequence and closing credits, when the characters are shown in a different light, these dances are charmingly sweet at times and boldly dynamic at others.



©Takamatsu Misaki / Kodansha Ltd. / *Sukippu to Rofa* Production Committee

### *Suzumiya Haruhi no Yuutsu* ("The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya")

This series depicts the somewhat mysterious high school life of students Suzumiya Haruhi and Kyon. Watching the characters perform fast-paced dance moves to the ending song, *Hare Hare Yukai* ("Sunny, Sunny, Happiness") prompted many to try it themselves. The trend even went viral with people posting videos on the Internet with the hashtag #*odottemita* ("I Tried the Dance.")

©2006 Tanigawa Nagaru / Ito Noizi / SOS



### *Hirogaru Sukai! Purikyua* ("Soaring Sky! Pretty Cure")

An installment in the Pretty Cure franchise, the series tells the story of the main characters who transform into Pretty Cure magical warriors who face various obstacles. The closing scene brings them together in a dance with charming choreography that makes kids want to join in with the characters.

©ABC-A / TOEI ANIMATION CO., LTD.



### *Sukippu to Rofa* ("Skip and Loafer")

This story of high school life focuses on the interaction between the main character, Iwakura Mitsumi, who comes to Tokyo from the countryside, and her friends. In the title sequence, Mitsumi and her classmate Shima Sosuke skip and dance, setting a gentle tone that leaves the viewer with a warm feeling.

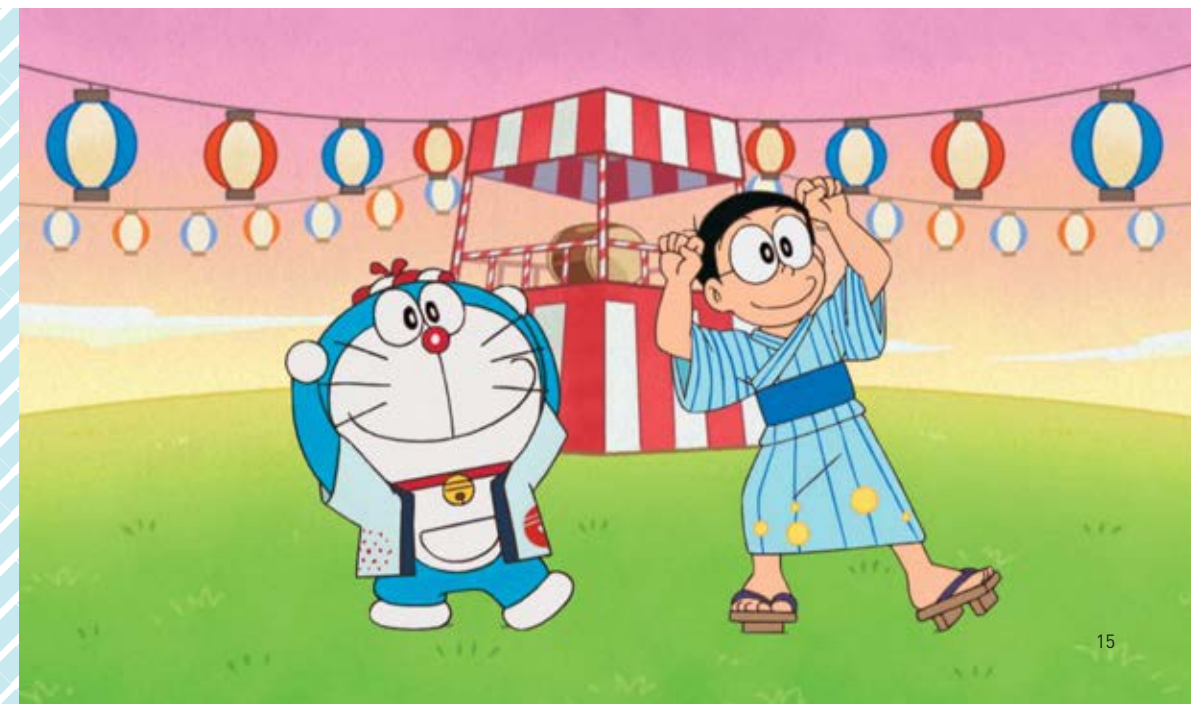
©Takamatsu Misaki / Kodansha Ltd. / *Sukippu to Rofa* Production Committee



### *Doraemon*

One of the most popular anime in Japan, the series depicts the daily life of Doraemon, a cat-shaped robot from the future, and Nobita, an elementary school student. This long-running program debuted in 1979 and has been on Japanese TV for over 40 years. One closing song, *Odore Dore Dora Doraemon Ondo* ("Dance, Doraemon!"), features the characters dressed in *happi* coats and *yukata* robes dancing a *bon-odori* dance.

©Fujiko Production / SHOGAKUKAN Inc. / TV Asahi Corporation / SHIN-EI ANIMATION Co., Ltd. / ADK







A Virtual Journey  
through Japan

# Japan's Masked Dances

Flowers, animals, ogres, gods—it is traditional for people in Japan to dress in spectacular costumes for regional festival dances.



Hiroshima

## Hanagasa Odori (Flower Hat Dance)

While many local performing arts feature *hanagasa* straw hats ornately decorated with artificial flowers, the *hanagasa* worn at the festival in Kitahiroshima-cho in Hiroshima Prefecture are especially gorgeous. They are decorated with strings of Japanese paper flowers strung on bamboo cord that hang some 1.5 meters long. The costumed dancers are a vision of grace as they parade through the town streets.  
Photo: photolibrary



Niigata

## Ondeko (Ogre Drum Dance)

An ogre dance from Niigata Prefecture's Sado Island, a place where the performing arts thrive. This dance is offered at shrines and people's homes to pray for a good harvest and for peace and prosperity in the household. This highly entertaining performance pairs the beating rhythm of the *taiko* drums and a gentle dance that incorporates elements of *noh*. It is performed in some 120 neighborhoods on the island, and trying to spot the differences between them is great fun.  
Photo: amanaimages



Yamagata

## Kasedori (Strawbird Dance)

Young people dressed in costumes made of woven straw, called *kendai*, parade through the city, transformed into *kasedori* messengers of the gods dancing and shouting "kakkakaka!" Town residents pray for protection against fire and prosperity in their businesses as they splash the *kasedori* with buckets of cold water.  
Photo: Kaminoyama City, Yamagata Prefecture



Iwate

Miyagi

## Shishi Odori (Deer Dance)

The specific style differs by area, but these dancers typically wear deer-style headdresses, with *sasara* bamboo sticks decorated in white paper extending high above their heads, beating *taiko* drums as they dance. Their pounding steps and head shaking, so fierce that the *sasara* actually touch the ground, is a powerful sight.  
Photo: photolibrary



Mie

## Ise Daikagura (Lion Dance of Ise Grand Shrine)

After touring the country, the Ise-daikagura Kosha (official lion dance troupe) gathers at the end of the year to perform the lion dance at Masuda Shrine, their home shrine in Kuwana City, Mie Prefecture. The audience is treated to such thrilling sights as an acrobatic performance by a dancer wearing a lion-style headdress and spinning umbrellas, all the while balanced atop another's shoulders.  
Photo: Kuwana City Tourism Association



Saitama

## Kawagoe Matsuri Bayashi

This festival is held in Kawagoe, a city in Saitama Prefecture known for its rows of old warehouses. Dancers wearing fox (shown in photo), lion and other masks are accompanied by flutes and drums as they dance atop floats paraded through town.  
Photo: photolibrary



Kumamoto

## Yamaga Toro Odori (Lantern Dance)

Yamaga lanterns made using only handmade Japanese *washi* paper and glue—no wood or nails—are a traditional craft of the city of Yamaga in Kumamoto Prefecture. Every summer, some 1,000 women wear these sparkling golden lanterns on their heads and dance to the traditional folk song, *Yoheho-bushi*.  
Photo: PIXTA



Kyoto

## Hotoke Mai (Buddha Dance)

Dancers dressed in Buddha mask and costume perform a graceful dance to classical Japanese court music called *gagaku*. The dance is held each year on May 8 at Matsunoo-dera Temple in Maizuru City, Kyoto Prefecture.



# Somen

Refreshingly Cool Noodles for the  
Summertime Table

Photos: Arai Akiko  
Cooperation: Ikeri (Senjutei)



Top: Omiwa Shrine in Sakurai City, Nara Prefecture, considered the birthplace of *somen*  
Photo: Omiwa Shrine  
Bottom: A moment from the *Miwa Somen Kake Uta* ("Miwa Somen Hanging Song") dance performance. Strands of wool yarn represent *somen* noodles being stretched long and thin. The dedication is danced on the Omiwa Shrine grounds by local women.  
Left: Dried *somen* noodles sold in bundles. *Somen* dyed green or yellow with vegetable pigment are also available. Photo: PIXTA

*Somen* are fine, thread-like noodles made of wheat flour, water, and salt. To be considered *somen*, the noodles must be 1.3mm in diameter or less. *Somen* are sold dried. They are boiled immediately before serving, rinsed well under cool running water, and served with a cold dipping sauce made from *dashi* broth. *Somen* look refreshing and are easy to slurp, and they are also filling, making them a great dish for when the summer heat dulls the appetite.

To make these fine, tender, yet firm noodles, the dough cannot simply be pulled haphazardly into strands. A more delicate and complex process is required, something like spinning silk thread. First, the flour, water, and salt are kneaded together to form a dough. It is then rolled out into a long, narrow strip, which is oiled and elongated into a single twisted strand. After the stretching and pulling, the dough is left to rest and rise. The process is repeated over and over

until eventually the strand is wrapped around two sticks and stretched even longer and thinner. When the strand reaches some two meters in length, it is hung to dry and then cut into 19cm lengths.

*Nagashi somen* is a summer tradition, often held outdoors, that makes the most of the thin shape and cool, refreshing look of *somen*. The tradition is popular with children, who compete with each other to scoop up the noodles as they stream past in a water-filled trough made of a split bamboo log.

During the cold months, warm *somen* noodle soup, called *nyumen*, is a delicious alternative. Pre-boiled *somen* noodles are simmered in a *dashi* broth and topped with shiitake mushrooms, greens, eggs, and other ingredients.

While there are many explanations of where *somen* came from, the story of Miwa Somen, from the Miwa district of Sakurai City in Nara Prefecture

known for its specialty Miwa Somen, is particularly interesting. Legend has it that, some 1,200 years ago, the second son of the chief priest at Omiwa Shrine, located in the Miwa district, let the famine-stricken people there make wheat, and it was from that flour that the production of *somen* began.

Every February to this day, a ritual is held at Omiwa Shrine to divine the wholesale price of the year's *somen* noodles. The ritual is followed by a dance performed by local women to the song *Miwa Somen Kake Uta* ("Miwa Somen Hanging Song"). Though the lyrics and gestures describe the difficulties of making *somen* noodles, the dance itself is heartwarming and cheerful, a favorite that leaves the audience uplifted. *Somen* and dance have long been closely connected with history, and all indications suggest they will continue to be celebrated for many years to come.



Top: Cold and easy to slurp, *somen* is a popular summer noodle dish. The noodles are served with a dipping sauce (pictured in the wooden cup behind the noodles). It is made from *dashi* broth, soy sauce and *mirin* rice wine.

Right bottom: *Nyumen*, or *somen* noodles served in warm *dashi* broth, is the way to enjoy these noodles during the colder months.

Left bottom: People scoop up *nagashi somen* noodles with chopsticks as they stream by.

Photos: PIXTA





## A Town of Pristine Waterways and Traditional Dance

# Gujo Hachiman

In a quiet town of pleasantly murmuring waterways, the Gujo Odori — a summer festival featuring lively dance events every evening — fills the town with an air of festive fervor. A sacred place of dance, Gujo Hachiman is an outstanding destination for anyone who wants to experience the riches of Japanese traditional dance.

Photos: Kurihara Osamu, PIXTA, photolibrary



1. The Yoshida River flows through the heart of town.
2. The Nagaragawa Railway goes to Gujo Hachiman.
3. Gujo Hachiman Castle is the oldest reconstructed wooden castle in Japan.
4. The Gujo Odori festival's dancing (Gujoh-odori) has been inscribed on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity of UNESCO as a form of *Furyu-odori*.  
©Fukuda Koji
5. *Geta* clogs (left; photo courtesy of Gujo Mokuri) and *tenugui* hand towel (photo courtesy of Tourism Division, Department of Commerce, Industry and Tourism, Gujo City) are essential items for taking part in the Gujo Odori festival.
6. An instructor demonstrates the *Kawasaki* dance, one of the ten Gujo Odori dances.







7. During the night dances, the street is filled with people ready to join in.  
©Gujo Tourism Federation



12



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8. Koi carp and other river fish swim in the walkway-lined Igawa Komichi canal as it flows behind local residences.  
9. A mizubune basin provides drinking water in the upper level and water for rinsing and washing in the lower. ©Gujo Tourism Federation  
10. At the Watanabe Dyehouse, fabric is immersed in flowing waterways, part of the time-honored traditional Gujo Honzome dyeing technique.  
11. Koinobori carp streamers are immersed in the Kodara River in winter, a practice called koinobori no kanzarashi. (Photo courtesy of Watanabe Dyehouse)

Located in Gifu Prefecture, the city of Gujo Hachiman can be reached in about two hours, taking train connections north from Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture, the largest city in Japan's Chubu region. Once a stopover for travelers on the pilgrimage route to the holy mountain Mount Hakusan, Gujo Hachiman developed into a flourishing castle town frequented by throngs of merchants after Gujo Hachiman Castle was built in the latter 16th century. As in days of yore, the pleasant burbling of the Yoshida and the Kodara, a pair of rivers that flow through the mountain-encircled town, still soothes visitors' hearts and minds.

In summertime, this quiet town undergoes a drastic transformation with the advent of the Gujo Odori dance festival. A *bon-odori* event with a 400-year history held at various locations throughout the town over the course of 31 days from July into September, the festival inspires everyone from locals to sightseers to dance together in unison. The climax comes with all-night dance events held from August 13 to 16. This period, when participants dance through the night from eight in the evening until five the next morning, attracts visitors numbering in the tens of thousands and fills the town with an air of fervor.

The Gujo Hachiman Hakurankan museum offers demonstrations performed by instructors, providing opportunities to experience the dances even in the off season. The sights and sounds of performers singing and dancing in step with the traditional musical accompaniment, clapping their hands together and occasionally stamping the ground with their *geta* clogs, may compel viewers to start dancing along.

A stroll through Gujo Hachiman reveals a network of canals, including the Igawa Komichi, stretching across the town.

12. Salt-roasted sweetfish (*ayu*) is enjoyed for its appetizing aroma.  
©Gujo Tourism Federation

13. A refreshing, flavorful carbonated "cider" beverage is made with natural Gujo Hachiman water.

14. 15. Parfait served at the matcha cafe Sogi-an in a historic, renovated *kominka* residence with "matcha art" on the surface depicting Gujo Odori dancers.

16. Local workshops allow visitors to try their hand at making food replicas themselves.  
(Photo courtesy of Sample Kobo)

17. A food replica shows an attempt to twirl pasta around a fork.

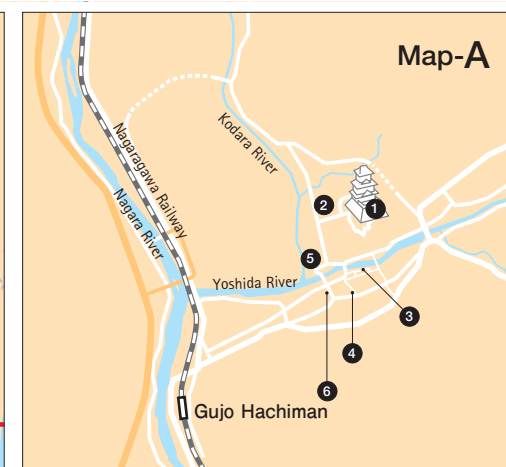
Put in place to help prevent fires following the outbreak of a large blaze in the 17th century, the waterways still form an indispensable part of life in the town today. Set up along the canals are multiple *mizubune* (literally "water boats"), which are basins filled with water drawn from the mountain springs, where the locals get drinking water and rinse off their vegetables.

The waterways are also essential for a traditional, local handicraft called Gujo Honzome. Immersing the indigo-dyed crafts in running water brings out more vivid color and has a tightening effect on the fabric. In wintertime, a practice called *koinobori no kanzarashi* takes place, in which decorative *koinobori* (carp-shaped windsocks), which are displayed in celebration of boys' growth, are immersed

in the clear-flowing rivers. The sight of the brightly colored streamers floating on the water's surface is a uniquely distinctive scene of winter in Gujo Hachiman.

Visitors can also enjoy salt-roasted sweetfish (*ayu*), a local delicacy sold at food stalls at the waterside, while taking in the gentle murmuring of the water's flow, or take a short break at a cafe serving sweets in a renovated *kominka* residence. Another special, memorable experience may be visiting a crafting studio to try one's hand at making replicas of food items, a practice with roots in Gujo Hachiman.

From festive, lively dancing to strolls along gurgling waterways, Gujo Hachiman—a town of contrasting faces, peaceful and dynamic—offers a variety of charms visitors are sure to enjoy.



## Gujo Hachiman Area Map

- ① Gujo Hachiman Castle
- ② Gujo Hachiman Hakurankan
- ③ Igawa Komichi
- ④ Watanabe Dyehouse
- ⑤ Sogi-an
- ⑥ Sample Kobo

### •Access

From Nagoya Station, the trip to Gujo Hachiman Station on the JR Limited Express and Nagaragawa Railway takes approximately 2 hours.

### •Contact information

Gujo Tourism Federation official website TABITABI Gujo  
<https://tabitabigujo.com/>





A final touch of splendid flair

## Kanzashi



*Kanzashi* are made in a wide variety of materials and designs. Some examples include (1, 3) flower sprigs crafted in metal and adorned with pearls; (2) silk ornaments decorated with flowers; (4) a stylized hydrangea as easy to wear as a bobby pin; (5) an elegant and refined ornament featuring birds crafted in lacquer and gold; and (6) a single cherry blossom made of silk. For a special touch on this one (7), the pearls hanging from the *kanzashi* sway as you walk, giving a tiny thrill with each step.

*Kanzashi* are hair ornaments traditionally worn by Japanese women. Even today, when dressed in kimono for *nihon-buyo* or *bon-odori* festival dances, dancers add a *kanzashi* as a final touch to traditional upswEEP and topknot hairstyles meant to expose the kimono collar.

Ornamental hairpins are said to have been around since the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Later it became fashionable for women to wear their hair down, and *kanzashi* were obsolete for some centuries. It was not until the Edo period (1603–1868) that these hair ornaments became

widely popular with the general public. With most women wearing their hair up, the *kanzashi* came to be an essential fashion accessory. New designs followed one after another, featuring elaborately crafted flowers and birds made of metal, stone, wood, fabric, and paper, among other materials.

Today, with less expensive *kanzashi* made of plastic and glass also available, these traditional accessories are no longer limited to special days, but can be worn as a decorative touch in everyday hairstyles, as well.

Photos courtesy of Kazura Sei

