

GO TO TOKYO

A Visitor's Guide to the Festivals of Edo

ENJOY THE CULTURE OF THE OLDEN DAYS

~ TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS OF EDO ~



Illustration credits

Ochiai Yoshiiku, "The Tenno Festival" (Tokyo Metropolitan Central Library)

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Festivals Born of an Age of Peace

The Grand Festivals That Flourished in the Edo Period

The origins of festivals in Japan reach all the way back to the age of myth. When Amaterasu Omikami, the sun goddess and divine ancestor of the imperial line, shut herself away in a rock cave, the other deities performed rites and danced to bring light back into the world. This legend of the Heavenly Rock Cave is regarded as the wellspring of Japanese festival culture. The Shinto belief that gods dwell within natural phenomena and in all things, together with the many ceremonial traditions introduced from abroad—chiefly from China—during the Nara and Heian periods (710–1185), then gave rise to the extraordinary variety of festivals that took root across the country.

With the coming of the Edo period (1603–1868), lasting peace helped fuel a fervor for festivals, and a number of magnificent celebrations emerged. The most famous were the Sanno Festival of Sanno Gongen (today's Hie Jinja) and the Kanda Festival of Kanda Myojin. Both were held under the patronage of the Tokugawa shogunate and drew enthusiastic crowds from every walk of life, from samurai to townspeople. Each neighborhood vied with the next to produce ever more ingenious floats and costumed processions, and the spectacle grew more lavish year after year. The festivals of Edo were, in a sense, the purest distillation of the townsman's sense of style known as *iki*.

At both festivals the procession of floats passed right into the grounds of Edo Castle, where it was reviewed by the shogun himself. This exceptional honor earned them the name *tenka matsuri*, or “festivals of the realm.”



Utagawa Kunitaru, "The Sanno Festival"
(Tokyo Metropolitan Central Library)



Utagawa Hiroshige, "Cherry Blossom Viewing at Ueno in the Eastern Capital:
Kiyomizu Hall" (National Diet Library)



Yoshu Chikanobu, "The Sanno Festival in the
Sixth Month," from Twelve Months of Edo
Customs (National Diet Library)



Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, "Sacred Rites Under
a Waning Moon: The Old Sanno Festival,"
from One Hundred Aspects of the Moon
(National Diet Library)

Seasonal Pleasures That Refreshed the Spirit

Alongside the tenka matsuri and other grand festivals, a wealth of smaller events also became fixtures of life in Edo. Flower viewing and horticulture were especially characteristic. One catalyst was the Kyoho Reforms of the eighth shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684–1751). While he cracked down on public morals in the name of frugality and restraint, he also created places where people could unwind, developing cherry blossom spots on the outskirts of the city. Trees were planted on Mt. Asuka and along the banks of the Sumida River, and from then on blossom viewing became the great springtime outing for ordinary Edoites.

From the latter half of the 18th century, a gardening boom took hold, led by the morning glory. Cultivating rare specimens with unusual colors and shapes became a passion, and competitive shows were held throughout the city. That culture is the foundation of today's Iriya Asagao Market. Many of the festivals and events that have come down to us from the Edo period were, from the very start, enjoyed by samurai and townspeople alike, across the boundaries of rank and occupation.

The Three Great Festivals (Matsuri) of Edo

The two tenka matsuri—the Sanno Festival and the Kanda Festival—together with the Fukagawa Festival (today's Fukagawa Hachiman Festival), which began at the command of the shogunate, make up the Three Great Festivals of Edo. All three remain hugely popular today as the signature festivals of Tokyo.



The Shinkosai procession, led by the horen phoenix palanquin, with the shrine's portable mikoshi and its festival floats.



● Hie Jinja

Tel: 03-3581-2471
2-10-5 Nagatacho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo

In the Shinkosai procession, around 500 participants in courtly costume parade past the Imperial Palace and through the modern high-rise district.

● June 7–17

Sanno Festival



The festival hailed as the finest in the Eastern Capital

Foremost among the Three Great Festivals, the Sanno Festival was reviewed by every shogun from the third, Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–1651), onward. It is held annually, but the Shinkosai procession staged in even-numbered years is the most splendid of all. Stretching some 300 meters, the procession winds through the heart of the city—past the Imperial Palace and on through Ginza and Nihonbashi—in a truly breathtaking display. Bon dancing and a children's procession are also held, while sacred kagura dances and festival music (matsuri-bayashi) are performed within the shrine precincts.

A Traditional Festival
on a Par with the Three
Great Festivals of Edo

● Friday to Sunday of the third weekend in May

Sanja Festival



A festival that fills the old downtown with excitement

This is the annual festival of Asakusa Jinja, known affectionately as “Sanja-sama.” Its origins lie in a boat festival of 1312, when its deities were carried across the Sumida River by vessel. Highlights include the binzasara dance, designated an Intangible Folk Cultural Property of Tokyo, and some 100 portable shrines borne through the streets of Asakusa.



The sight of mikoshi from many different neighborhoods gathering in the shrine precincts is unforgettable.

● Asakusa Jinja

Tel: 03-3844-3183
2-3-1 Asakusa, Taito-ku, Tokyo

©Asakusa Jinja



The festival traces its origins to 1600, when Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) prayed here for victory in battle.



Kanda Myojin, said to have been founded in 730, is the general guardian shrine of Edo.

● Kanda Myojin

Tel: 03-3254-0753

2-16-2 Sotokanda, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo

Around 200 portable shrines of all sizes take part in the miyairi, when the mikoshi return to the shrine—accompanied by rousing chants from the bearers.

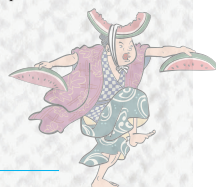
● Mid-May, every other year

Kanda Festival

P7 map B

The grand Shinkosai procession and the return of the mikoshi are not to be missed

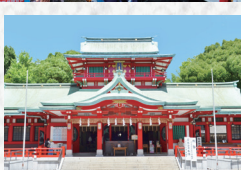
One of the tenka matsuri, the Kanda Festival matches the Sanno Festival in both history and scale. The full festival takes place in odd-numbered years, while even-numbered years center on rites within the shrine grounds. The full festival is by far the more spectacular: in the Shinkosai, portable shrines process through 108 neighborhood associations across Kanda, Nihonbashi, and beyond, with a procession several hundred strong making its way to Kanda Myojin.



The highlight is the mikoshi rengo togyo, a joint procession of portable shrines through the old downtown.

Anyone is welcome to join in the “water throwing,” in which purifying water is showered over the mikoshi bearers.

Founded in 1627, this is one of the largest Hachiman shrines in Edo.



● Tomioka Hachimangu

Tel: 03-3642-1315

1-20-3 Tomioka, Koto-ku, Tokyo

● Five days including August 15

Fukagawa Hachiman Festival

P7 map C

A water-throwing festival in the true spirit of old Edo

The annual festival of Tomioka Hachimangu began as a celebration marking the birth of an heir to the third shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu. At the full festival, held once every three years (next in 2029), spectators drench more than 50 portable shrines of all sizes with water—a much-loved seasonal sight. In the years before and after, lively events such as the children’s festival keep the tradition going.

A Seasonal Festival Map of Tokyo

Festivals that carry on the traditions of the Edo period can still be found all over modern Tokyo, from vast celebrations to intimate events rooted in the rhythm of the seasons. Visit one, and you can feel the atmosphere of old Edo for yourself.

Spring



● Mid-March to early April Ueno Cherry Blossom Festival

Ueno has been famous for its cherry blossoms since the early Edo period. The tradition began when saplings brought from Mt. Yoshino in Nara were planted in the grounds of Kaneiji.

● **Ueno Park**
Tel: 03-3833-0030 (Ueno Tourism Association)
Ueno Park, Taito-ku, Tokyo

Other major cherry blossom festivals:

② Bokutei Cherry Blossom Festival

● Late March to early April

③ Asukayama Cherry Blossom Festival

(Kita City Sakura SA-KASO Festival)

● Last Saturday and Sunday of March

Spring



● March 3-4

Jindaiji Daruma Market (Yakuyoke Ganzan Daishi Grand Festival)

This event has been a cherished herald of early spring since the Edo period. Counted among Japan's three great daruma markets, it fills the grounds of Jindaiji with around 100 stalls lined with vermilion daruma dolls.

● **Jindaiji**
Tel: 042-486-5511
5-15-1 Jindaiji Motomachi, Chofu-shi, Tokyo

Spring



● Early to late April

Kameido Tenjinsha Wisteria Festival

Kameido Tenjinsha is one of Tokyo's most celebrated wisteria spots, immortalized in Utagawa Hiroshige's woodblock series One Hundred Famous Views of Edo. In spring, more than 50 wisteria plants trail their blossoms across the precincts, and the flowers are illuminated after dark.

● **Kameido Tenjinsha**
Tel: 03-3681-0010
3-6-1 Kameido, Koto-ku, Tokyo

Summer



● July 6-8

Iriya Morning Glory Festival (Iriya Asagao Market)

Iriya was a noted center of morning glory cultivation from the late Edo period. Revived after the Second World War, the festival carries on that tradition, with more than 100 stalls filling the streets around Iriya Kishimojin (Shingenji).

● **Iriya Kishimojin (Shingenji)**
Tel: 03-3841-1800
1-12-16 Shitaya, Taito-ku, Tokyo

Summer



● July 9-10

© Sensoji

Shimanrokusennichi and the Hozuki Market

● **Sensoji**
Tel: 03-3842-0181 2-3-1 Asakusa, Taito-ku, Tokyo

Established around the middle of the Edo period, this is known as the temple fair that grants a lifetime's worth of merit in a single visit. Some 100 stalls selling hozuki (Chinese lantern plants), long prized as a cure-all, line the grounds of Sensoji.

Autumn



● Mid-September

Akasaka Hikawa Festival

● **Akasaka Hikawa Jinja**
Tel: 03-3583-1935 6-10-12 Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tokyo

This is the annual festival of Akasaka Hikawa Jinja, whose history stretches back more than a thousand years. It developed under the patronage of the shogunate, and today offers the rare chance to see genuine Edo-style festival floats.

Akabane Sta.

254

Ikebukuro Sta.

Hie Jinja
Treasure Hall
Gallery
Sanno Festival

map 2
map A

10

Shinjuku Sta.
Tokyo Metro Marunouchi Line
Chofu Sta.
Fuchu Sta.
Tokyo Metro Chiyoda Line
Shibuya Sta.
Jr. Yamanote Line

1



The Food of Edo, Still on the Menu Today

From the middle of the Edo period, the city's population swelled with single men who had come from the provinces—samurai, apprentices, and migrant workers—and the restaurant trade grew to feed them. Quick, affordable dishes served from street stalls proved especially popular.



The Big Four of Edo Cuisine

Soba was the great staple, with countless permanent shops throughout the city. Tempura took hold as street-stall fare, skewered and eaten standing up. Sushi caused a sensation in the late Edo period with the arrival of fist-sized nigiri. As for eel, a sweet-savory sauce was devised in the mid-Edo period and the rice bowl known as unadon appeared in the late Edo period, making eel a defining taste of Edo-mae cuisine.

Soba



Tempura



Sushi



Eel

Edo and Sake

During the Edo period, most sake was brewed in the Kamigata region around Osaka and Kyoto and shipped to Edo. Rocked by the sea breeze on the voyage, the kudarizake that reached the capital was said to taste better than it had at the brewery itself. Another drink much coveted by ordinary people was mirin—today used as a seasoning, but then prized as a premium tippie. Highly nutritious and thought to ward off summer fatigue, it was usually chilled in well water before drinking.



Winter

On the Days of the Rooster in November Asakusa Tori-no-Ichi

Held at Chokokuji and Otori Jinja, this fair has continued since the Edo period. Stalls selling kumade—ornamental bamboo rakes said to bring prosperity in business and good fortune—stretch along the approach in one of the largest gatherings of its kind in Tokyo.

● Chokokuji Tel: 03-3872-1667
3-19-6 Senzoku, Taito-ku, Tokyo, and other venues



Other major Tori-no-Ichi fairs:

10 Hanazono Jinja Otori Festival

● On the Days of the Rooster in November and the day before

11 Okunitama Jinja Tori-no-Ichi

● On the Days of the Rooster in November

Festivals All Year Round: Exhibitions



Most festivals come around only once a year. Visit one of the exhibitions where floats and portable shrines are displayed and you can savor the atmosphere and craftsmanship of the festival at any time.



The floats on display change according to the season.

Akasaka Hikawa Jinja Akasaka Hikawa Festival Dashi (Festival Float) Showroom

Tel: 03-3583-1935
(Akasaka Hikawa Jinja)
6-10-12 Akasaka, Minato-ku,
Tokyo
Open daily 9:00 AM-5:00 PM
Admission free

Here you can view, at close range, the floats that actually take part in the Akasaka Hikawa Festival. Among them are "Yoriyoshi," with a three-tiered structure rarely seen anywhere in Japan, and "Saru," whose upper tier is hexagonal in shape.



The lion-head mask was donated by the third shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu.

Hie Jinja Treasure Hall Gallery

Tel: 03-3581-2471 (Hie Jinja)
2-10-5 Nagatacho, Chiyoda-ku,
Tokyo
Open daily (occasional
temporary closures)
9:00 AM-4:00 PM
Admission free

Located within the grounds of Hie Jinja, the treasure hall displays swords designated as National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties, along with heirlooms connected to the Tokugawa shoguns. Exhibits relating to the festival are plentiful as well, including the lion-head masks used in the Sanno Festival during the Edo period.



Look out for the unusual float crowned with a samurai helmet.

Kabutocho • Kayabacho Machikado Museum

No telephone
Sakamotocho Park, 15-3
Nihonbashi Kabutocho,
Chuo-ku, Tokyo
Open daily 8:00 AM-8:00 PM
Admission free

This facility showcases the traditional cultural properties of the Kabutocho and Kayabacho area. Alongside four portable shrines and one festival float, it offers a rich display on the Edo machi-bikeshi, the townsmen's fire brigades closely bound up with festival life.



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For those who would like to know more about Edo:
<https://www.gotokyo.org/en/see-and-do/history/>



Journey Through Edo's Legacy

"Journey Through Edo's Legacy" introduces 100 sightseeing spots across Japan where the history and culture of the Edo period can still be experienced, produced in partnership with regions nationwide.
<https://edolegacytravel.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/>

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TokyoTokyo Old Town New EdoTokyo The Spirit of Tokyo