

Japan Tourism Topics by JNTO

Japan National
Tourism Organization

December 11, 2025

Festival and Event

1. Watch giant paper balloons light up the winter sky in Akita Feb 10



The Kamihinokinai area of Nishiki town in Akita Prefecture hosts a colorful festival every year on Feb 10. At the Kamihinokinai Paper Balloon Festival, paper balloons measuring three to 12 meters in height are illuminated and released into the winter night sky. Each balloon is hand-painted with designs of samurai warriors and, in recent years, even anime characters. Residents come together to cut paper, design motifs, and paint the balloons — a tradition that not only provides a creative outlet during the long, harsh winter, but also strengthens their community ties. The balloons are then released into the sky with prayers for good harvests, good health, family safety, business prosperity, and other wishes. Constructed like hot air balloons, they are released between 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. Visitors who arrive before 5:00 p.m. can write their personal wishes on the side of a balloon and take part in the mass launch. Kamihinokinai is about 30 minutes by train from Kakunodate, a castle town popularly known as “Tohoku’s Little Kyoto.”

[Paper Balloon Festival of Kamihinokinai](#)

Festival and Event

2. Relive the Edo era at Fukushima’s Ouchijuku Snow Festival Feb 14-15



Ouchijuku in Fukushima turns into a picturesque winter scene on the second weekend of February every year. The former post town lies along the Aizu-Nishi Kaido route, once taken by daimyos (feudal lords) on their way to Edo (the old name for Tokyo). The town flourished in the 17th century, offering lodging and food for travelers. Today, its buildings with traditional thatched roofs lining the town's main street have been preserved. They house a variety of shops, restaurants, and minshuku (small traditional Japanese inns). During the winter festival, locals place handmade snow lanterns along the town's main street and light them at dusk. Combined with the snow-covered thatched-roof houses, the lanterns create a cozy atmosphere that transports visitors back in time. Those who attend on Saturday can also watch fireworks illuminate the night sky. While the 2026 activities have yet to be confirmed, past festivals have included taiko (Japanese drum) performances, a show by the local "Yosakoi" dance group, and a soba-eating competition.

[Ouchijuku Snow Festival](#)

Festival and Event

3. Join the excitement as thousands vie for sacred sticks in Okayama's Naked Festival Feb 21



On the third Saturday of every February, Okayama's Saidaiji Temple becomes the stage for one of Japan's most dynamic winter festivals — the Saidaiji Eyo, or Naked Festival, designated as a "National Important Intangible Folk Cultural Asset." With a history of more than 500 years, the festival draws 30,000 visitors from around the world to see up to 10,000 men wearing white loincloths compete for a pair of Shingi (Sacred Sticks) tossed among them. The man who manages to catch a Shingi is called the Fuku-otoko (Lucky Man). It is said that he will be blessed with good health and prosperity throughout the year. During the festival, excitement builds from early evening as participants shout "Wassho!" and purify themselves in ice-cold water. Meanwhile, a group of

female drummers performs taiko (Japanese drum) to boost the men's morale and pray for their safety. Visitors can safely witness the dramatic climax at 10 p.m., when all the lights within the shrine grounds are turned off at once, and the sacred sticks are thrown into the crowd. In addition, fireworks light up the night sky, adding a festive touch to the historic temple grounds.

[Eyo Naked Festival Saidaiji Temple](#)

Festival and Event

4. Admire a spectacular display of colorful hot air balloons over Niigata's snowy landscape Feb 21-22



©Ojiya city

Held over two days in late February, the Ojiya Fusen Ikki (Hot Air Balloon Festival) transforms the snow-white landscape of Ojiya into a scene of floating colors. Ojiya is located in Niigata Prefecture's Echigo region, known as "snow country" for its heavy snowfall. On the first night, a "glow balloon" event illuminates the sky with hot air balloons and fireworks, creating a spectacle of color and warmth in the crisp winter air. During the festival, teams compete in the Japan Sea Cross Country Cup by throwing a marker from their hot air balloons as close as possible to a designated target. The skies above Ojiya come alive with brilliant hues as the hot air balloons drift over the snow-blanketed Echigo Plain. For visitors gazing up from below, the vivid colors seen against the backdrop of the mountain range create a breathtaking scene — one unique to this city nestled deep in the mountains of central Niigata. Between the competitive events, visitors can ride a hot air balloon and enjoy a bird's-eye view of the winter scenery (advance reservations required). On the ground, they can sample local specialties from various food stalls.

[Ojiya Hot Air Balloon Festival](#)

[Ojiya Balloon Festival](#)

Seasonal Topic

5. Step into spring at Mito's Plum Blossom Festival Feb 11-March 22



While cherry blossoms are often associated with spring's arrival in Japan, plum blossoms are also a much-loved herald of the season. Each year from mid-February to late March, Mito City in Ibaraki welcomes spring with the Mito Plum Blossom Festival. Marking its 130th anniversary in 2026, the festival will be held from February 11 to March 22 across two main venues. One is Kairakuen Garden, which is said to be one of Japan's Three Great Gardens, where visitors can admire around 3,000 plum trees of more than 100 varieties. The other is Kodokan, a school established in 1841 by the ninth feudal lord of the Mito domain. Renowned alongside Kairakuen as a plum blossom hotspot, Kodokan boasts approximately 800 plum trees across 60 varieties. During the festival, visitors can stroll among the blossoms and enjoy seasonal events, including the Japan Umeshu Festival, which features more than 100 types of plum liqueurs from across the country available for tasting. Amid the sweet scent of the blossoms, the festival offers a lively atmosphere for visitors to welcome the arrival of spring.

[Mito Plum Blossom Festival](#)

[The 130th Mito Plum Blossom Festival and Japan Umeshu Festival 2026](#)

Seasonal Topic

6. Discover Toyama's famed delicacy: Himi Kanburi (Winter Yellowtail)



©Toyama Tourism Organization

While many coastal areas in Japan are known for winter yellowtail, none quite rival Himi in Toyama Prefecture. Yellowtail caught in Toyama Bay's fixed nets between late November and February and unloaded at Himi Port — weighing over eight kilograms — are branded as Himi Kanburi (Winter Yellowtail). Renowned for its rich, well-balanced fat, the fish owes its exceptional freshness to a traditional set-net method developed in Himi. A visit to the lively Himi Banya-gai Harbour Market is the best way to savor freshly caught Himi Kanburi and other seafood. The seasonal Toyama Buri-

Kani Bus runs from October 3 to March 30, taking passengers from Toyama Station to Himi Banya-gai in about 1 hour and 25 minutes. A “free ticket” option allows hop-on, hop-off access to stops along the route, including Shinminato Kittokito Market, where visitors can further enjoy Toyama’s coastal flavors. Himi Kanburi can be enjoyed as sashimi, buri shabu (yellowtail hot pot), and buri daikon (simmered yellowtail with radish). Even the gills are savored as a fried dish. For those eager to delve deeper into Himi Kanburi, Matsumoto Fish Wholesaler offers a premium 2-day/1-night “ocean gastronomy tour” when conditions permit. Running from November to February, the tour includes the chance to observe from a distance a fish auction that is normally closed to the public. Participants will learn about local fishing methods, cutting techniques, and the ecology behind this celebrated yellowtail. The tour includes a full-course dinner prepared by a Paris-trained chef, showcasing flavors unique to Himi’s winter catch. English and Chinese interpretation may be available upon request. As tour details are subject to change, please contact the operator for the most up-to-date information.

[Himi Banya-gai Harbour Market and Soyu Onsen Village Ocean Gastronomy Tour](#)

Cultural Discoveries

7. Craft a handmade lantern with a history of over 400 years in Nagoya



©Discover Nagoya Tours

At Nagoya’s Japan Culture Village, visitors can step into the role of a lantern craftsman and learn about the art of Nagoya Chochin — traditional lanterns with over 400 years of history. Discover Nagoya Tours offers a hands-on lantern-making experience at Wazamon Chaya in the village. The “Light of Nagoya” program invites participants to step back in time and see through the eyes of artisans. In the early Meiji era, Nagoya was Japan’s leading producer of paper lanterns, even exporting them overseas. These lanterns are celebrated for their lightweight yet sturdy bamboo frames and the soft, translucent glow of washi (traditional Japanese paper). From selecting delicate washi to carefully pasting it onto the bamboo frame, participants are guided by skilled artisans to create their own lanterns — the same kind that have illuminated Nagoya’s festivals and streets for centuries. After the nearly two-hour experience, completed lanterns can be folded for easy transport and taken home as souvenirs. Set within the atmospheric Japan Culture Village, about a 10-minute walk from Nagoya Station, the workshop is surrounded by historic shrines, century-old shops, and charming cafes that participants can explore after completing their creations.

[Light of Nagoya](#)

Special Experience

8. Spend five days to experience nature, tradition, and slow living in Wakayama



©Ryunohara

Ryunohara Retreat in Wakayama Prefecture, part of the Kii Peninsula, welcomes travelers seeking a deeper connection with nature and traditional life. The all-inclusive retreat invites guests to slow down, rediscover what it means to live in harmony with nature, create with their hands, and care for all that surrounds them. While programs are offered throughout the year, its 5-day/4-night winter program provides a particularly mindful, restorative experience. Guests will stay in a restored farmhouse equipped with wood-fired outdoor onsens (hot springs), while meals will be served in a different restored farmhouse located next door, which has an irori (sunken hearth) fireplace. During their stay, they will also visit other outdoor springs — some facing the open ocean, others nestled deep within the forest. Meals feature grilled wild-caught river fish and other seasonal ingredients cooked in cast-iron pots, served with pesticide-free rice grown in the retreat's own fields. Winter is also the peak season for washi (traditional Japanese paper) production, and guests can make washi from scratch under the guidance of a craftsman who builds his own tools, harvests his own materials, and uses no electricity or chemicals in his work.

[Ryunohara Retreat](#)

Special Experience

9. Immerse yourself in the sacred rhythms of Kagura in Oita



©OUGI Inc.

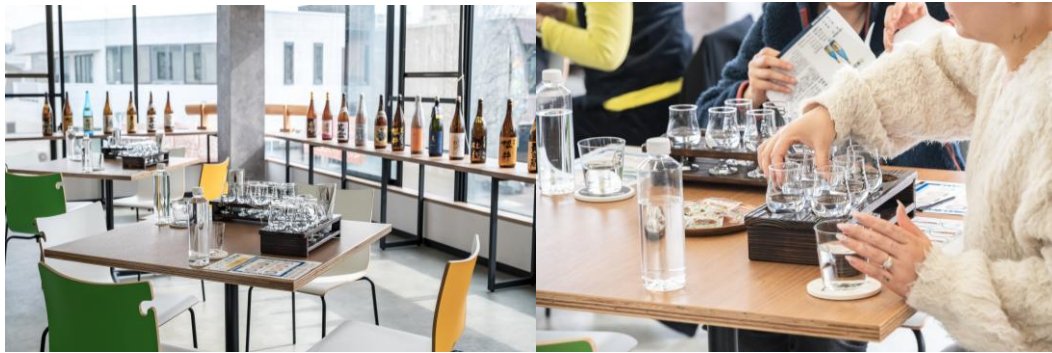
Imagine taking a journey that lets you shed your everyday identity and step into a completely different role to connect with the core of Japanese culture. A seven-day program in Usa, Oita Prefecture, offers exactly that — an immersive experience in Kagura and other related aspects of local culture. Kagura is a sacred dance in Shinto (Japan's indigenous religion known as “way of the gods”) with a history of more than 1,300 years. Located on the Kunisaki Peninsula, Usa is known as

the birthplace of Japan's fusion of Shinto and Buddhism. Participants receive training in Buzen Iwato Kagura, a dance traditionally performed only by local practitioners. This program guides participants not only through the physical movements of the dance with Kagura masters, but also through the history and spiritual mindset that underlie it. After four days of dedicated practice, participants make a Gohei (Ceremonial Wand) and don a Kagura performer's costume to take the stage at Asou Shrine. Between practices, expert guides lead excursions exploring the region. Activities include hiking the pilgrimage trail of Mt. Omoto and visiting sites such as Rokugo Manzan — a group of Buddhist temples scattered across the mountains — the ancient Tashibunosho rice terraces, and the wall Buddha statues of Kumano Magaibutsu. Throughout the program, participants stay in a traditional Japanese inn (ryokan) and house (kominka), nourishing both body and soul with special dishes prepared by local chefs for the Kagura performers.

[The Folklore of KAGURA](#)

Special Experience

10. Explore shochu and taste its many expressions in Kagoshima



©Minamisatsuma City Tourism Association

In southwestern Kagoshima, Minamisatsuma City invites visitors to explore the rich traditions of shochu through a carefully crafted tasting experience. Shochu is a traditional Japanese distilled spirit made from a variety of ingredients, including sweet potatoes, barley, and buckwheat. Known as the birthplace of Japan's two renowned shochu masters, Kurose Toji and Ata Toji, Minamisatsuma is home to seven historic distilleries that continue to uphold techniques passed down through generations. Visitors can join a guided tasting session offering a rare chance to sample shochu from each of the seven distilleries and compare their unique flavor profiles. The taste varies depending on the production method, ingredients, and storage process. During the 1.5-hour program, participants create their own "taste chart," a personalized record of their sensory journey. The session also reveals how the drink evolves with the addition of water — an essential part of appreciating shochu's depth. To round off the experience, participants take part in a blind tasting challenge to identify one of the seven shochu varieties. For visitors confident in their sense of taste and smell, this challenge could be a memorable experience.

[Shochu Tasting Experience](#)

Notes:

- The above details are correct as of the time of publication, and are subject to change.

If you'd like to download photos and videos of Japan's tourist attractions, please visit the [Japan Photo & Video Library Links](#)

For media inquiries, including requests to use photographs, please contact JNTO at media_inquiry@jnto.go.jp



Copyright ©2025 Japan National Tourism Organization. All Rights Reserved.

※If you no longer wish to receive our email newsletter, please click [here](#) to unsubscribe.