



## Winter Festivals in Japan

Few experiences encapsulate Japan's embrace of both celebration and ceremony better than its festivals. While some of us may be familiar with Japan's most famous festivals (such as Obon), fewer realize that Japan's love of matsuri extends to every prefecture and season. Indeed, some of Japan's most amazing carnivals take place in the snowy offseason, warming the body and soul of participants with rich tradition and even richer delicacies. Wherever you venture on your winter trip to Japan, you'll find fantastic festivities just waiting to be discovered.

### Niigata:

The charming city of Tokamachi is known across Japan for two reasons: as home to some of the most beautiful kimono designs in Japan and as the snowiest town on the main island of Honshu. The Tokamachi Snow Festival (February 15 – 17, 2020) celebrates the city's wintry wonders: it features magnificent ice sculptures and a kimono fashion show on what is recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records as the largest ice stage in the world. Alongside the 1,500-year history of traditional kimono, watch for the latest trends and cheer at the inauguration of the newly crowned kimono queen. In addition to awe-inspiring ice sculptures with magnificent illumination, this incredible snow carnival includes live concerts, Japanese folk dancing, fireworks and sweet warm sake.



Photo: Yamagata: The natural sculptures of the Zao Snow Monster Festival (copyright JNTO)

## Yamagata:

The Zao Snow Monster Festival is unique for featuring snow sculptures of a very different kind: rather than being man-made, the intriguing sculptures are entirely natural. Heavy snow completely cloaks the trees to form monstrous figures across the frozen mountainside. Those looking to walk among the monsters should do so with haste: they tend to melt by the end of February. The monsters are illuminated and dot the ski slopes of the famous Zao Onsen Ski Resort, offering a hiking and skiing experience unlike any other! On Saturday nights, skiers glide down the mountain by torchlight under a banner of fireworks.

## Akita:

Akita is a winter wonderland full of quintessentially Japanese activities sure to warm the souls of locals and visitors alike. Make your wish come true (by writing it on a balloon!) at the Paper Balloon Festival of Kamihinokinai (February 10, 2020). Every year, a hundred intricately painted balloons



featuring samurai, women and woodblock prints are lit up and released into the night. Along with their inscribed wishes, they float above the town with ethereal beauty. On the same date in Daisen City, the Kariwano Tug of War Festival is held. This 500-year old tradition is purported to determine the fate of the upcoming rice harvest. It is the largest tug of war event in Japan. Two 10-ton, 100 meter ropes, one for male, one for female, are pulled by thousands of participants. Care to join in?  
Photo: (copyright JNTO)

Elsewhere in Akita, the Hiburi Kamakura Festival (February 13-14, 2020) dancers delight attendees with flaming bales of hay swung over and around their bodies. It is thought that the launching of fireballs around oneself invites good fortune and success and repels bad luck. This might be the world's most literal case of "fortune favouring the bold". The faster you swing, the stronger the flame, and the better the luck!

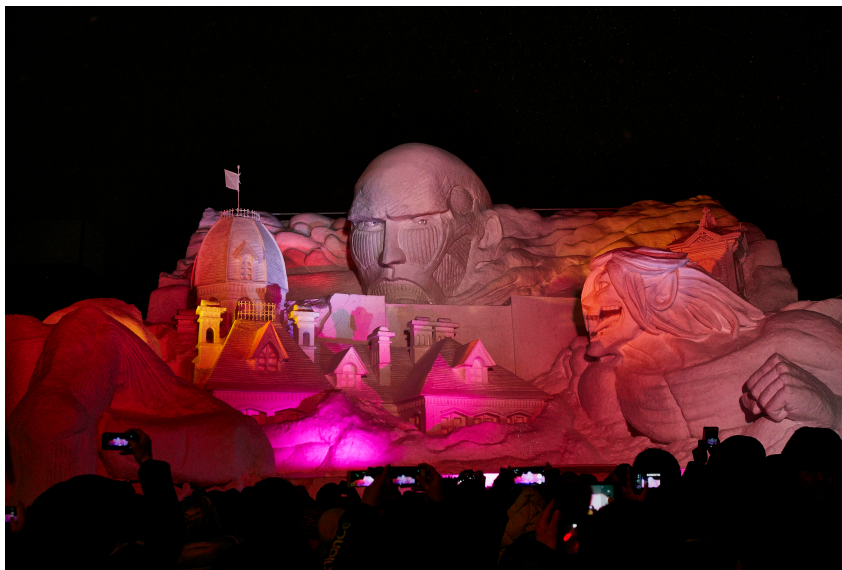
The brave and bold should end their tour of Akita's winter festivals at the Namahage Sedo Festival (February 14-16, 2020). Clad in straw capes, the Ogre-like Namahage are Akita's demon messengers of the gods. Men wearing masks reflecting the demonic features of the Namahage carry torches

through the crowds en route to the Shinzan Shrine in Oga City, where priests will reward their pilgrimage with rice cakes roasted in a giant bonfire.

Finally, for something a little less scary and a little more comfy, seek out the Yokote Kamakura Festival (February 15-16, 2020). Here, large and small igloos rise from the snow, creating glowing orbs across the cityscape at night. Miniature “kamakura” are candle-lit and evoke a mystical ambience. Visitors are invited to enter the kamakura and drink warm, sweet sake, and snack on rice cakes.

## **Hokkaido:**

One of the most popular winter events in Japan is the Sapporo Snow Festival (January 30 – February 11), typically attracting more than two million visitors from Japan and across the world. The snow and



ice sculptures located along a 1.5km stretch of Odori Park, as well as other locations around the city, often measure more than 25 meters wide and 15 meters high and are illuminated into the evenings for the most beautiful winter dreamscapes imaginable. The festival is also a hotspot for classic Hokkaido cuisine and remains a favourite for families: the Tsudome site offers a broad array of slides and courses for snow sledders and rafters.

Photo: (copyright JNTO)



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