

# hokkaido *Life*

## FESTIVALS

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One of many exciting things about Japan is the sheer number of festivals. There are two kinds of festival, or *Matsuri*. The first is held as worship to *Kami*, with sacred music and dancing after ceremonial Shinto services. The second, is the *Matsuri* of *Ujigami* or local shrines. Every district has its *Ujigami* or local guardian deity, and each shrine has a festival each year. Thus, many festivals are region-specific. However there are many national celebrations, a few of which I will touch upon.

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## BON-FESTIVAL

Originating in India, Ullambana was held as a Buddhist service on the 15th day of the seventh month, as a means to express gratitude to deceased relatives. It was introduced into Japan in the third year of Empress Regnant Saimyo, 657AD. By 733, in the fifth year of Tempyo, it had come to be an annual court event. As the Buddhist faith spread, the festival soon became popular with people of all classes. The name Ullumbana was changed to *Urabon-e* in Japan and then to just *Obon*.

After its introduction into Japan, the festival itself changed in character. No longer just a solemn religious ceremony, the Bon festival is also a joyous occasion. It is believed that the spirits of the dead will return to their homes, so lanterns are lit to guide them. Food is offered to the ancestors so they will have enough to eat in the afterlife. Also, special foods are also served to guests, in the spirit of giving food to fellow people.

*Bon-odori* is another feature of *Obon*. On an evening around July 15th many communities participate in a dance around the town or temple. Dances and songs differ according to district, but they are always colourful and well attended. City Hall employees will dance in the *Bon-odori*, so take the opportunity to take part, it will be a unique experience for you.

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## BOYS' FESTIVAL / CHILDRENS' DAY

*Tango-no-sekku* (Boys' festival) is held on May 5th - Children's Day, and is an occasion to give thanks for the healthy growth of boys. It originated as a rural custom when the insects first begin to harm plants. Farmers tried to drive the insects away with bright banners and figurines placed around the farm. Gradually the dolls were made better and as they became more artistic, were displayed indoors - not to scare away the insects but to teach young boys manliness and to keep them from evil.

However, the most striking display is that of the *Koi-nobori*, or carp streamers, that are erected outside. Flying from tall poles, these often huge cloth carp symbolises courage and power to achieve high goals. The *Koi-nobori* are now a symbol for all children, not just boys, and fly proudly before and on May 5th.

Of course, no festival is complete without special food. In this case, sweet rice cakes wrapped in oak leaves called *Kashiwa-mochi*, are distributed among neighbours and friends.

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## HINA MATSURI

The original *Hina Matsuri* - Dolls' Festival, was held on March 3rd, when on the lunar calendar the warm spring was just beginning and farming families had a little leisure time. They would make dolls from paper and in doing so would transfer any bad will or sickness to the dolls. The dolls would then be cast into a nearby river taking the evil with them.

However, with the change to the solar calendar, March 3 occurs almost a month earlier, when it is still cold. Eventually, this original dolls' festival was combined with the courtly custom of *Dairi-bina*. *Dairi-bina* - court dolls, were elaborately made and richly costumed to represent life in the Imperial court.

The present *Hina Matsuri* is a combination of the *Dairi-bina* and the original *Hina Matsuri* without the seasonal significance of the old days. The regular set of hina dolls consists of 15 dolls - two *dairi-bina* (Emperor and Empress), three *kanjo* (ladies in waiting), five musicians, two retainers and three guards. The male *dairi-bina* is placed to the right of the female doll, with bowls and plates of food below. Families often pass the doll sets down through the years, with brides taking their own dolls to their new homes.

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## SETSUBAN

*Setsuban* (Change of Season) marks the end of the winter season under the old calendar and the new spring starts the next day - called *risshun* (birth of spring). Because of the popular idea that a new year begins with the new spring, *Setsuban* came to have the same significance to people as New Years Eve.

*Setsuban* is also known as *mame-maki* (bean throwing), *oni harai* (devil chasing) and *tsuina* (evil dispersing). More than 1000 years old, *daizu* (soya beans) were offered to Toshitokkujin - a deity who was believed to have taught the people how to cultivate rice. Then they loudly called out "*Oniwa soto fukuwa uchi*" - out with the devils and in with good luck. This is still said today as heads of households, or for public festivities *toshi-otoko* (this years man), scatter roasted beans. Often *toshi-otoko* is a person (not only men) of some note, popular wrestlers, actors etc. It is considered good luck to catch the beans that they throw.

In all households it is not just custom to throw beans, but also to eat them. Each person should eat as many beans as their age with one extra for the New Year. This ensures good health and fortune for the coming year. A dried sardine head and a small branch of *hiragi* (holly tree) is often placed at the house entrance. The thorny leaves of the *hiragi* will stop any evil insect from entering the house and the smell of the fish is said to drive away devils (or maybe at least the NHK guy?).

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## SHICHI-GO-SAN

On November 15th, children aged seven, five or three years are taken to the shrines of *ujigami* or *ubusama* (their guardian deities). They are dressed in their finest and thank them for their growth and good health in the past years and to ask that it continues into adulthood. Long richly decorated bags of *ame* (sweet wheat gluten) are purchased by parents and distributed to friends and neighbours to ensure their childrens' continuing good luck.

These are but a few of the festivals you may experience while in Japan. Please take the opportunity to attend where you can, it will make your stay in Japan even more memorable. My favorite was the Ainu Marimo Festival in Lake Akan - I highly recommend it and it's in a beautiful part of Hokkaido.

The [\[JNTO\]](#) website gives details and a brief explanation of most of Japan's national and region-specific festivals. The excellent [\[Japan Visitor\]](#) website has even more.

By: *Kelly Sutton*

As always, the official [hajat/forum](#) is where you will find all the answers to any questions you may have regarding life in Hokkaido.

*HAJET kindly asks you to use paper wisely and only print this document if you really, really must. LOVE HOKKAIDO, LOVE THE ENVIRONMENT!*

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Hokkaido Association of Japan Exchange and Teaching  
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