



Festivals (Matsuri)

The historical Yamato area has many festivals dating from ancient times. Of these, we've taken care to select the largest and the most unique to introduce here. We chose only those festivals that draw people in from across the country. If any of them happen to match your itinerary, make sure to squeeze them into your schedule!

January

January 1
Nyodo-Sai
Omiwa Jinja Shrine

February

February 11
Otsuna-Matsuri
Ettsumi and Onishi district

February 14
Dadaoshi
Hasedera Temple

March

April

April 8 to 10
Haru no Omiwa-Sai
Omiwa Jinja Shrine

Mid-April to early May
Botan-Matsuri
Hasedera Temple



January 1

Nyodo-Sai

Omiwa Jinja Shrine

繞道祭 大神神社

This festival offers prayers for peace in the nation and a bountiful harvest. A flame set on the taboo lands of the inner hall of worship that Mount Miwa constitutes is transferred to torches about three meters in length. The torches are then taken around and used to set fires at the 19 auxiliary and secondary shrines at the foot of the mountain. It's a stirring and splendid sight. These fires are called kami-no-hi ("flames of the deities"), and there is a custom in the area of using these for fires on household altars or to cook zoni, a rice cake soup traditionally eaten on New Year's Day.



February 11

Otsuna-Matsuri

Ettsumi and Onishi district

お綱祭り 江包・大西

During this festival, straw is carried in from both districts to make an ozuna (male rope) at Ettsumi's Kasuga Jinja Shrine and a mezuna (female rope) at Onishi's Ichikishima Jinja Shrine. These ropes are then bound together in a tsuna-no-kekkonshiki (wedding of the ropes) ceremony at Susanoo Jinja Shrine. The festival has its origins in a myth where the deity Susanoo-no-Mikoto and the deity Inada-Hime were caught in the river and carried downstream. It is said that Ettsumi district saved Susanoo and Onishi district saved Inada; afterwards, the two deities were married on New Year's Day. This is a festival offering prayers for a good harvest and familial prosperity.



February 14

Dadaoshi

Hasedera Temple

だだおし 長谷寺

In this powerful, awe-inspiring festival, oni (a type of Japanese ogre) run around the temple precincts carrying torches while temple-goers struggle and compete for the torches. It is believed that taking a torch home with you brings health and well-being.



April 8 to 10

Haru no Omiwa-Sai

Omiwa Jinja Shrine

春の大神祭 大神神社

This grand festival boasts a tradition dating back over two thousand years. The festival has its origin with the reign of Emperor Sujin, when an epidemic disease raged. It is said that peace returned and the land prospered after the festival's presiding deity was worshiped with appropriate reverence. On the 9th, people dressed in traditional garb parade through the towns of Miwa. From noon on the 10th there are gorgeous performances of Noh.



Mid-April to early May

Botan-Matsuri

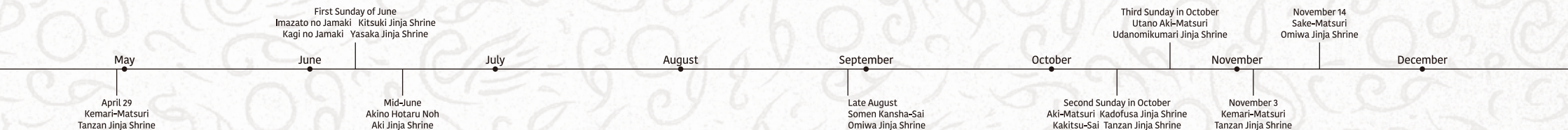
Hasedera Temple

ばたん祭り 長谷寺

This festival takes place just around when the 7,000 peonies ("botan" in Japanese) begin to bloom in full glory on the temple grounds. One legend says that the temple's peonies were originally planted as gifts from a Chinese empress of the Tang dynasty.

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April 29/November 3 Kemari-Matsuri Tanzan Jinja Shrine
 けまり祭 談山神社

Kemari is a game played in Japan since the 7th century. A sport of the nobles, players would kick and strike at the ball to prevent it from touching the ground; it is a game not unlike soccer. Fujiwara no Kamatari and Prince Naka no Oe met for the first time playing kemari. Moreover, consultations regarding the Isshi Incident (an assassination of a noble rival by Prince Naka no Oe prior to his coronation as Emperor Tenchi) were held at Tanzan Jinja Shrine. For these reasons, the festival dedicates a kemari game to the shrine's deities.



Second Sunday in October Aki-Matsuri Kadofusa Jinja Shrine
 秋祭り 門僕神社

This Soni lion dance has now been an ongoing tradition for roughly three centuries, and is an elegant dance with a rich program dedicated to the deities of the shrine. One dance to watch out for in particular is the Tsugi-jishi, an acrobatic performance where children ride and dance on the shoulders of adults.



First Sunday of June Imazato no Jamaki Kitsuki Jinja Shrine / Kagi no Jamaki Yasaka Jinja Shrine
 今里の蛇巻き 杵築神社 / 鍵の蛇巻き 八坂神社

This festival is held in hopeful prayer for the health of boys. Starting at 1 PM at Imazato's Kitsuki Jinja Shrine, young men over junior high school student age bundle together straw to form a snake 18m in length. Carrying this snake around Imazato in a parade, they stop at every household to cry out their congratulations. In the morning at Kagi's Yasaka Jinja Shrine, they make a snake with a head of straw weighing 300 kg or more. Starting in the afternoon, they carry the snake around Kagi district, stopping to visit any households that had something to celebrate during the year.



Second Sunday in October Kakitsu-Sai Tanzan Jinja Shrine
 嘉吉祭 談山神社

This festival is famous for its beautifully decorated and uniquely arranged offerings made up of cereals, fruits, and vegetables. In 1438, the whole mountain caught fire during a battle. In order to avoid the unrest, the divine repository was moved to Asuka; three years later in 1441 (first year of the Kakitsu era), it was returned to the shrine. Joyous over the homecoming of the deity, the people of the area decorated their offerings of fall crops beautifully. Since then, this tradition has continued without interruption for six centuries.



Mid-June Akino Hotaru Noh Aki Jinja Shrine
 あきの蛍能 阿紀神社

Takigi Noh (performed in darkness by firelight) was a dedication of noh theater to the gods that had continued for hundreds of years. It was revitalized with the help of local volunteers as Hotaru Noh, a style without parallel in Japan. The performance happens on a stage set up inside the grounds of Aki Jinja Shrine. At the climax, hundreds of fireflies ("hotaru") are released, creating an enjoyable duet alongside with the Noh performance.



Third Sunday in October Utano Aki-Matsuri Utanomikumari Jinja Shrine
 うたの秋まつり 宇太水分神社

This festival has history of more than one millennium. Once every year, in order to visit Hayaakitsuhiko-no-Mikoto (male deity) of Utanomikumari Jinja Shrine, Hayaakitsuhime-no-Mikoto (female deity) of Sosha Mikumari Jinja Shrine rides a mikoshi (portable shrine) on the 12km round-trip to his shrine with an entourage of tasseled spears, flower baskets, and mikoshi taiko drums. One of the most powerful sights during the festival is seeing the six taiko drum platforms - each weighing around one metric ton - marching in from every part of Utano district to be paraded around the shrine grounds with cries of, "Chosaya!"



Late August Somen Kansha-Sai Omiwa Jinja Shrine
 素麺感謝祭 大神神社

During this festival, somen noodle makers and sellers gather at the shrine to give thanks ("kansha") to the patron deity of somen making of Omiwa Jinja Shrine for summer somen sales. After the festival, a performance of Miwa Somen Ondo, a unique dance song that imitates the Somen-making process can be seen in front of the worship hall.



November 14 Sake-Matsuri Omiwa Jinja Shrine
 酒祭り 大神神社

This festival offers prayers to the presiding deity for safety and security during the brewing of new sake. This deity has been worshiped as a god of sake brewing since ancient times. Brewers and sake makers from across the nation attend the ceremony, and the festival features a devotion of kagura (sacred theatrical dance) performed by miko (shrine maidens). There are also exhibitions by famed sake makers as well as complimentary cask sake. The day before, the o-sugidama (massive sphere made of cedar needles, symbol of the deity of sake brewing) at the worship hall is exchanged for a new one, and after the festival smaller sugidama are sent out to brewers and sake makers throughout Japan.