

Dosojin is a guardian deity in Shinto, and usually to be found near roads, village boundaries, and mountain passes, protecting travelers and towns from harm. Generally, it's a human-like figure carved into small stones, but Nozawa Onsen has its own interpretation of Dosojin. It comes in pairs, hand-carved from two matching cylindrical pieces of wood, and painted to resemble a married couple; local custom celebrates them as the deity of fertility, happy marriages, and healthy children. Legend has it that the couple the figures are based on were not particularly attractive, but decided to get married and were blessed with a baby boy. Walking through Nozawa Onsen, you can't miss these adorable wooden Dosojin, which come in a variety of sizes and designs. Locals often have small versions of these figures enshrined at home, but sometimes you can spot them outside their front doors. During the annual Dosojin Fire Festival, which takes place on January 15th, people bring their Dosojin in pairs to the festival site, place them in a big basket, and pick up somebody else's set to take home with them in the morning. The idea is that the adopted figurines will then help their new owners find a partner for life. If you need some friendly assistance in that area, you can pick up your own Dosojin set at the many souvenir shops sprinkled around town.