

【Chichibu Night Festival】

History of the Night Festival

The Chichibu Night Festival (*chichibu yomatsuri*) is held on December 2 and 3 to honor and express gratitude to the deities that are enshrined in Chichibu Jinja Shrine. During the festival, six floats are paraded through the neighborhood of the shrine, stopping for live performances of music, dance, and Kabuki theater that take place within the floats themselves. The six floats include two “flower parasols” (*kasaboko*), lantern-covered platforms carrying halberds that act as physical representations of the deities, and four *yatai* floats, which carry musical ensembles. The festival has continued in its current form for over 300 years and is regarded as one of Japan’s “three great float festivals” (*nihon sandai hikiyama matsuri*).

It is uncertain exactly how long ago the festival was established, but it is thought to predate Chichibu Jinja Shrine, which was founded over two millennia ago. The shrine is located in the center of the Chichibu Basin and looks out at Mt. Bukō. The shrine’s sacred grove, Hahaso Forest, was a place to worship the mountain from afar, and it is also regarded as the residence of the Buddhist deity Myōken (Sanskrit: Sudarśana), one of the deities enshrined at Chichibu Jinja Shrine.

According to legend, Myōken (considered a female deity) and the male dragon deity of Mt. Bukō are in love, but the dragon deity is officially married to the spirit of Suwa Jinja Shrine. Each year on December 2, Myōken travels from the sacred grove to Suwa Jinja Shrine to beg for a single night with her lover. By tradition, when the float from Motomachi passes it along the parade route, the musicians quiet their instruments and the onlookers whisper so as not to disturb the negotiations. If all goes well, Myōken and the deity of Mt. Bukō meet at Kamenoko Rock, a statue of a turtle enshrined in Chichibu Park near Chichibu City Hall.

Most elements of the modern festival, such as the floats and fireworks, have evolved or been added over time. During the Kamakura period (1185–1333), around the same time that Myōken was incorporated into Chichibu Jinja Shrine, sacred horses were donated by the shogunal government. This donation is reprised each year with two sacred horses that accompany the floats on their tour of the local shrines and are donated to Chichibu Jinja Shrine at the end of the festival.

The modern Night Festival largely developed during the Edo period (1603–1867). At the time, a festival known as the “Great Festival to Myōken” or “Great Festival of the Eleventh Month” was held in early November. The festival was spurred by the economic success of the “grand silk market” (*kinu no takamachi*) that was held near the

shrine. Silk merchants came from the surrounding regions to sell their wares and then took part in the festivities. As the region blossomed economically, the scale and splendor of the festival increased as well.

For a period of years, the six floats that have come to represent the Night Festival were made illegal. The floats were introduced sometime in the mid-seventeenth or early eighteenth century. During the last century of the Edo period, in response to what was seen as the degeneration of the common people, the government heavily restricted nightlife culture, including float-parades and Kabuki theater. Then, beginning in 1827, religious festivals were halted outright. Six districts in Chichibu resisted the government restrictions, and for 50 years until the ban was lifted, they continued holding annual festivals—three of the districts one year and the other three districts the next. These six towns are represented today by the six floats that circulate during the festival.

The floats are made using traditional Japanese wood joinery techniques, and do not contain a single nail.

Chichibu Festival Exhibition Hall

The second floor of the Chichibu Festival Exhibition Hall, located near Chichibu Jinja Shrine, contains a variety of exhibits detailing the history of the Night Festival, as well as many of Chichibu's other unique festivals and cultural events. The first floor contains replicas of the *yatai* and *kasaboko* floats, as well as a small theater where visitors can watch a short film introducing each of Chichibu's main annual events. The display has a projection mapping system and powerful audio setup that bring the replicas and exhibition space to life, recreating the atmosphere of the Night Festival right inside the building. The Chichibu Festival Exhibition Hall is open throughout the year, including the days of the festival itself, until 5:00 p.m.