

The Culture of Oku Asakusa

To the north of Kaminarimon and Sensoji and further away from the Sumida River lies an area local residents refer to as Oku Asakusa. On the surface, Oku Asakusa may seem like a sleepy residential neighborhood, but ask any Asakusakko—a person born and bred in Asakusa—and they will explain that the streets may seem empty because everyone is inside one of the area's many hole-in-the-wall restaurants or *izakaya* pubs.

These narrow streets have a vibrant nightlife that has flourished since the Edo period (1603–1867), when Oku Asakusa was a booming entertainment district. There was a thriving kabuki community with many theaters, performers, and restaurants. The three Edo kabuki theaters (also called the Saruwaka Sanza)—the Nakamura-za, Ichimura-za, and Morita-za—were a huge draw for customers. The theaters were moved elsewhere during the Meiji era (1868–1912), however, and now only the Saruwaka Sanza Stone Monument commemorates their legacy.

Another essential entertainment destination in Oku Asakusa was the Yoshiwara, Edo's licensed pleasure quarters. While very little remains of the red-light district, its cultural impact lives on even now in the form of the Edo Yoshiwara Oiran Dochu, also known as the Asakusa Kannon-ura Ichiyo Sakura Festival. Held yearly on the second Saturday of April, this event features a re-creation of a procession of high-ranking Yoshiwara *oiran* (courtesans). Local women dress in the ornate kimono of the *oiran*, and with the help of professional kabuki hairdressers and makeup artists, recreate the elaborate aesthetic of the courtesans who were at the pinnacle of their profession in days gone by. The festivities also include a parade by local elementary-school children, stage performances, and a large flea market.

The area is home to one of Tokyo's six *kagai*, or geisha quarters. Thanks to the Asakusa Kenban, an association in Oku Asakusa dedicated to preserving the rich culture of the professional geisha who entertained at restaurants and teahouses in the area, visitors are able to witness the charms of geisha firsthand. The association hosts events throughout the year at which visitors can enjoy elegant dances accompanied by traditional music, or interact with geisha while playing a variety of traditional games. Some restaurants in Oku Asakusa also offer dining with geisha in attendance; while exploring this unique area, a traveler might even encounter geisha strolling the streets of where these entertainment establishments are clustered.