

Seihakusai Festival

The Seihakusai Festival, which takes place annually on May 3–5, is famous for its enormous wheeled floats. Floats of this style (called *hikiyama*) are common in festivals throughout Japan, but these—called “dekeyama,” or “giant mountains”—are the country’s biggest, standing 12 meters tall and weighing 20 tons.

Three districts—Uomachi, Fuchumachi, and Kajimachi—each parade their *dekeyama* around downtown Nanao. The *dekeyama* are handmade anew each year and topped with life-size, handcrafted figures that portray scenes from famous Kabuki plays. Multicolored flags bearing the crest of the district adorn each float.

Volunteers pull the *dekeyama*, harnessed with thick ropes, through Nanao’s narrow streets to the accompaniment of ritual chants and music. Visitors are encouraged to help pull the floats, even as they reach running speeds. When the *dekeyama* are parked, local children can enter from the bottom and climb the inner beams to the top.

Corners are highlights of the *dekeyama* route. Whenever one needs to be turned, the float’s front wheels are lifted using huge wooden wedges and a secondary, perpendicular wheel is quickly locked into place. Then the combined strength of the volunteers rotates the entire *dekeyama*.

The floats are accompanied by many of the standard trappings of Japanese festivals, such as traditional dances, street food, and game stalls.