

Kakunodate Festival's Battling *Yama*

From September 7 to 9, the annual Kakunodate Festival brings a whirlwind of color and energy to the historic streets of Kakunodate. First mentioned in the North Satake clan's historical documents in 1799, the festival is a call for prosperity, good harvest, and health.

The festival has taken place every year for centuries, virtually unchanged from when it began. It was designated a National Important Intangible Folk-Cultural Property in 1991, and was one of 33 festivals from around Japan added to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2016.

During the festival, large wooden carts decorated with elaborate tableaux (*yama*) are paraded through the city's preserved Edo period streets. The tableaux feature samurai and kabuki dolls, which have their roots in the Genroku era (1688–1704), and are arranged around a *mokko*, a symbolic mountain made of black cotton.

Dancers dressed in deep purple kimono, and musicians playing drums, flutes, *shamisen* three-stringed lutes, and small gongs ride on the carts. The *yama* first stop at Kakunodate Shinmeisha Shrine and Jojuin Yakushido Temple, where the dancers and musicians perform for the gods. Originally, they also performed for the head of the North Satake clan, Kakunodate's ruling family for most of the Edo period (1603–1867). This tradition continues to the present day, as they now perform for a descendent of the Satake family.

The *yama*'s routes are not fixed, and so they occasionally meet as they proceed through the streets. However, Kakunodate's streets are too narrow to allow two *yama* to pass, requiring negotiations to decide which float will be allowed to continue, and which will need to go back. Inevitably, negotiations fail, and the *yama* engage in tremendous mock battles called *yama-buttsuke*, in which the floats are forcefully driven into each other. The battles are the highlight of the festival, and generally take place during the night of September 9. It is impossible to predict when and where the spontaneous battles will take place, but there are also prearranged *yama-buttsuke* performances for visitors to watch.