

## **Matsubara Togyu-jo Bullring**

*Togyu* is sometimes translated as “bullfighting,” though “bull sumo” or “bull wrestling” would be more accurate. Unlike the bull versus human battles found in southern Europe and the Americas, *togyu* pitches animal against animal, the two fighting to push the other over or give up and run away. As many as 3,000 people, more than 10 percent of the island's population, come to watch the year's three biggest matches, which decide Tokunoshima's top bull.

### **Historic Beginnings**

Although *togyu* exists in a few other places in Japan, the tradition is preserved with particular passion on the Amami and Okinawa islands. It is hard to overstate the importance of *togyu* on Tokunoshima. It began as a form of entertainment and release for the people after the island came under the harsh rule of Kagoshima's Satsuma clan in the seventeenth century. During the quiet times of the year farmers would hold fights between their bulls. The fights became so popular over the years that the trainers of champion bulls were given considerable status. Today, it is common to see owners on the roads and beaches exercising their prized animals.

### **Pound for Pound**

The bulls are given ranks borrowed from sumo, such as *yokozuna* (grand champion) and *ozeki* (champion). The lightest bulls weigh in at around 700 kilograms, while the heaviest can top 1,100 kilograms. The naming of the bulls has changed with the times: they used to carry the names of the families who owned them, but due to rising costs, these days they usually belong to groups of locals, leading to more flamboyant monikers.

### **The Clash**

The atmosphere at major matches is charged and noisy, beginning with the supporters accompanying their bulls into the 20-meter-diameter ring to the sound of drums, whistles, horns, rattles and shouts of encouragement. A trainer stays with each bull, cajoling it to give its all, in bouts that can finish in tens of seconds, or go on for longer

than twenty minutes. When victory is secured, the supporters of the winning animal rush into the ring, with young men jumping onto its back in celebration.

### **The Real Thing**

Although *togyu* is far less bloody than the bullfights of Madrid or Mexico City, injuries inevitably do occur when these powerful beasts clash, and deaths are not unknown.

Trainers are occasionally injured. While bull sumo may not be to everyone's taste, it is a spectacle, a true slice of island culture that can only be experienced, among the Amami Islands, on Tokunoshima.

### **Getting There**

Matsubara Bullring, which was built by the local community, is less than a ten-minute drive up the coast from the airport and parking is available. Entrance fees to the events, which feature multiple matches, are between ¥2,000 and ¥3,000, and ¥1,000 for schoolchildren.