

Nachi Fire Festival

The Nachi Fire Festival is the major annual festival of Kumano Nachi Taisha Grand Shrine, and is held every year on July 14. The festival dates back to the shrine's founding in the year 317, and is considered one of Japan's "Three Great Fire Festivals."

The official name of the festival is Ogi Matsuri (Fan Festival), and the main event is a procession of twelve portable shrines called *ogi mikoshi* (fan shrines) from Nachi Taisha to Nachi Waterfall. Along the way, the shrines are purified by the flames of huge torches.

The Ogi Mikoshi: Waterfalls and Sun Discs

The *ogi mikoshi* are unlike the portable shrines carried at most Japanese festivals. Instead of resembling a palanquin with carrying poles, they are tall and narrow, measuring 6 meters high by 1 meter wide in a shape that symbolizes Nachi Waterfall. Each *ogi mikoshi* is decorated with 32 folding fans bearing the disc of the rising sun. These fans are held in place with eight round mirrors symbolizing the all-illuminating light of the sun. At the top of each shrine is a "sunburst" pattern of wooden slats. Some of the mirrors that were used at the festival in previous centuries, along with a miniature model of an *ogi mikoshi*, are on display in the shrine's Treasure Hall (*homotsuden*). Twelve *ogi mikoshi* are used at the festival in all, one for every month of the year, and each made using precisely 365 bamboo nails.

Rebirth of the Gods

On the day of the festival, twelve of Nachi Taisha's thirteen enshrined deities are transferred to an *ogi mikoshi* to make the journey to Nachi Waterfall. (The exception is Hiro Gongen, the deity enshrined at the falls.) The *ogi mikoshi* are then carried in a procession to Hiro-jinja Shrine, at the waterfall's base, accompanied by flaming torches weighing as much as 50 kilograms each. Surrounded by crowds of festival attendees, the torch- and shrine-bearers chant a distinctive "Harya! Harya!" to keep in step. At Hiro-jinja, the *ogi mikoshi* are purified by the flames and stood in a line facing the waterfall. Prayers are then offered for a peaceful year and a bountiful harvest.

Nachi Waterfall is considered the original home of the deities worshiped at Nachi Taisha, which makes the procession a kind of homecoming. In this ritual of fire and water, the deities are spiritually renewed, even reborn, by the power of the sacred falls—the heart of the Nachi faith.