

Ebisu Taisai Festival

Every year from November 18 to 20, downtown Hiroshima fills with both local residents and visitors, all hoping to get lucky. This is no normal night out on the town—it is the Ebisu Taisai Festival, dedicated to Ebisu, the happy-go-lucky deity of fortune, fishermen, and commerce. One of the city's three grand festivals, the celebration centers on the Ebisu Shrine, which sits in the covered Ebisu Dori shopping arcade. The arcade is decorated with paper streamers and models of lucky fish, a symbol of Ebisu, while the neighboring Chuo Dori Avenue is lined with food stalls, carnival games, and a stage for taiko drumming and performances of kagura (ritual shrine dancing).

Festivalgoers line up at Ebisu Shrine to receive a blessing and pray to the deity for wealth and prosperity. A large wooden barrel is placed at the front of the shrine, and people throw money in while they wait. Contributions are usually just small change, but some larger notes always find their way into the barrel. Beside the shrine are rows of stalls selling good-luck charms in the form of colorful rakes (kumade) decorated with Ebisu's face, the fish he is often depicted holding, and other auspicious symbols. The bamboo rakes range from miniature to full size, and symbolize readiness to "rake in" the good fortune granted by Ebisu.

Perhaps because of his largesse, Ebisu is one of the most popular of Japan's deities of good luck, and the Ebisu Taisai Festival attracts roughly 300,000 attendees each year. The festival has been held without interruption for more than 400 years. In 1945, the Ebisu Shrine was destroyed in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, but local residents hastily built a temporary shrine so the festival could be held as usual.