

Sumiyoshi Festival

Hiroshima's second big summertime celebration, the Sumiyoshi Festival, is one of the city's three major traditional festivals. Its focus is the water that flows throughout the city. The festival is officially called Nagoshi no Oharae, or Great Purification of Summer, and offers participants the chance to do away with any bad luck and negative feelings or thoughts from the past year. Originally, however, the festival also served as a kind of mid-year health checkup—a time for curing ailments and protecting oneself against disease. As water is a key part of Shinto purification rituals, the festival is centered on the city's Sumiyoshi Shrine, which is dedicated to the deities of the sea.

There are several traditional rituals to take part in during the festival. First, the priests set up a 3-meter-wide chinowa (ring of woven grass) in front of the shrine. People who walk through and around the ring in a figure-eight pattern are said to be cleansed of sickness and protected from any ailments and misfortune for the rest of the year. The shrine also offers small hitogata, paper dolls meant to take on a person's worries, mistakes, and misdeeds from the past year. People think of their sins as passing into the dolls, unburdening them for the year to come. The dolls are a key part of one of the festival's highlights when they are collected and released into the water from boats floating down the river.

In the evening, people flock to the water to see wooden row boats (kogi-denmasen) set off from the shrine on a circuit of Hiroshima's rivers. Filled with priests, chanting rowers, taiko drummers, and mikoshi (portable shrines), the procession of boats is quite a spectacle, even before their lanterns are lit at sunset. One of the festival's two days includes a performance of kagura, a Shinto ceremonial dance with a history spanning over 1,000 years. Hiroshima is known for its lively kagura displays, and at the Sumiyoshi Festival, a special kagura performance features dancers and musicians who are all around 8 years old.