

## **Tsuyazaki Gion Yamakasa Festival**

The Tsuyazaki Gion Yamakasa Festival dates back over 300 years. The main event is a colorful race between three teams carrying ornate wooden floats through the narrow streets of the Tsuyazaki district in Fukutsu. The teams, representing Fukutsu's three neighborhoods, begin at Namiori-jinja Shrine and then follow different routes before their paths converge, and a battle to the finish line ensues.

### *Towering floats*

Each float (*yamakasa*) is around 5 meters high, weighs about one ton, and is carried by a team of 30 community members. Floats are decorated with elaborate battle scenes featuring fearsome warriors on horseback, castles, and sprays of blossoms and painted waves. The warrior figurines are traditional *Tsuyazaki ningyo* dolls, made from clay and painted in vivid colors. Each neighborhood builds their float by hand, using traditional construction techniques passed down through generations.

The three rival neighborhoods are identified by their colored headbands (*hachimaki*): Kita, the fishing port, wears pink; Shinmachi, the commercial district, wears yellow; and Oka, the agricultural area, wears red.

### *Prayers against epidemics*

The festival was adapted from the Hakata Gion Yamakasa Festival, which has been held in Fukuoka for over 780 years. Both festivals are held to protect the city against epidemics and disasters. The festival was halted during World War II, but fully resumed, after some stops and starts, in 1975. The Tsuyazaki Gion Yamakasa Festival is held on the weekend closest to July 19, starting with a Saturday evening lantern procession through the streets, followed by the main race on Sunday morning. At the end of the festival, the teams give decorations from the floats to local households to protect them from disease and disaster. These hand-painted talismans are attached to the doorways of many houses in the Tsuyazaki Sengen merchant district.