

## Traditions in Ise-Shima National Park

It is said that there are more festivals in Japan than there are days of the year, and this is equally true of the Ise-Shima region, with its many rich, historical traditions.

More than 1,500 rituals and ceremonies are performed annually at Ise Jingu alone. These are typically carried out by the priesthood, but there are many events in which local residents and visitors participate. The October ritual of Hatsuobiki is one such event, in which people make offerings of newly harvested rice. These are transported by carts to the Geku shrine (Toyouke-daijingu), and by boat to the Naiku shrine (Kotaijingu). There are also festivals in spring and fall where visitors get the rare opportunity to enjoy *kagura*, ritual dances accompanied by music performed as a form of prayer.

Other coastal celebrations venerate the sea gods. *Ama*, the traditional female free divers, pray for safety and a bountiful catch at the Shirongo Festival in July. The divers gather at Shirongo Beach and compete to be the first to harvest both a male and female abalone from the sea floor. The winner is regarded as the head diver for the coming year, and the abalone are offered at nearby Shirahige Shrine.