

## **Togyu Bull Sumo**

*Togyu* is the popular sport of bull sumo, native to Tokunoshima and other Ryukyu islands. Unlike bullfighting in Spain, the bulls are bred and trained to fight each other. It is so popular that some 400 bulls on the island are being trained to take part in *togyu* tournaments, which attract avid supporters and spectators.

### ***The Rules***

The bulls fight in earthen-floored enclosed bullrings approximately 20 meters in diameter. They are accompanied by men called *seko*, who spur them on with gestures, slaps, and shouts. The rules are simple: the bulls can butt with their heads and use their horns, which are sharpened before matches. The first bull who turns away or retreats from the encounter loses the match, which can end in seconds or go on for much longer. With the consent of the audience, the match can be called a draw after 30 minutes. There are a number of complex techniques known to aficionados, from stabbing to knocking the other bull off balance.

### ***The History***

No one knows exactly when the first bullfights took place, but *togyu* is believed to date as far back as the sixteenth century, when they began as a form of entertainment for the islanders to celebrate the joy of completing the harvest. Originally, the bulls were the same ones used for rice cultivation, but they later began to be bred specifically for *togyu*. After World War II, the matches became more organized and started to be held as regular entertainment events. There are seven bullfighting rings on the island; the largest ones have dome roofs and tiered spectator seating.

### ***The Match Schedule***

Three title tournaments are held each year in January, May, and October to decide the strongest bulls on the island. The matches are organized by weight categories—from the open category, which includes bulls over one ton, to a lightweight class for those under 700 kilograms. The open category determines the *yokozuna* grand champion (from the sumo term for the top-ranked wrestler). Other matches are held throughout the year at various rings around the island. Owners sometimes hold informal matches as practice for their bulls.

### ***Raising and Caring for the Bulls***

Today, *togyu* bulls are bred purely for their fighting skills. They are intelligent animals with distinct personalities, the best of whom learn quickly and can even get depressed after a disappointing defeat. They are treated with great attention and kept in special stables, and are often treated as members of the family by their handlers. They are fed large quantities of grass and sugarcane twice a day, and receive other special supplements depending on their needs and stage of development. They are brushed daily and given frequent walks for exercise. It is common to see their handlers leading them across sandy beaches or in shallow reef waters to build up the muscles in their hindquarters. Other regimens target the equally important muscles in their necks. The bulls' horns are shaped as they grow to match their fighting techniques, and are sharpened prior to matches.

### ***Passionate Followers***

Tokunoshima residents of all ages are proud and enthusiastic supporters of their favorite bull(s), and flock to the tournaments to cheer them on. The larger tournaments are social highlights of the island, and the atmosphere at the ring is electric—the cheers of the crowd are accompanied by drums, trumpets, flag-waving and whistling. The bulls wear versions of the decorative loincloths worn by sumo wrestlers prior to their fights, and their supporters keep the mood raucous throughout match day.

### ***Safe for Spectators***

While the bulls are sometimes injured during matches, surprisingly little damage is done, considering the sharpness of their horns and the size of the animals. Though the *seko* work closely with the bulls, sometimes just centimeters away as they cajole and command them forward, they know what they're doing, and how to stay out of harm's way. It is not at all dangerous for spectators; in fact, supporters clamor to pose with their favorites, even posing with their infants sitting on a bull's broad back.

### ***Bull Ownership***

A bull can be owned by an individual, a family, a group of friends, or a company. Raising, training, and especially feeding an animal this size can be expensive. As they generally make their debut at four or five years old, and reach their full size at seven, a considerable commitment of funds, time, and energy is necessary to raise and train them. Unlike bulls used for agricultural purposes, they need regular exercise and lots of attention.

***Match Schedules***

Check with the tourist office for dates and locations.

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