

Nagaoka Fireworks

Every year, crowds descend on the city of Nagaoka for one of Japan's biggest fireworks displays. The Nagaoka Festival Grand Fireworks Show involves more than 20,000 individual fireworks and ranks among the top three events of its kind in terms of both scope and attendance.

From its humble beginnings over a century ago, the Nagaoka Festival has evolved to become a three-day event representing the ongoing struggle for world peace and honoring the victims of the Nagaoka Air Raid. It takes place in the first three days of August, and the massive crowds it draws usually leave accommodations in the city booked out months in advance. In recent years, over one million people have poured in over the nights of August 2 and 3 to watch the fireworks go off over Japan's longest river, the Shinano. The largest display spans more than two kilometers along the riverbanks.

The earliest form of the festival dates back to 1879. Over time, it grew in popularity and size as technology improved and the festival's reputation spread across the country. By the 1920s, it had become one of the most popular festivals in all of Japan. However, the outbreak of the Pacific War led to the event's cancellation for a number of years.

Most of the city of Nagaoka was destroyed in a bombing attack by the U.S. military shortly before the end of the war in August 1945. The people of Nagaoka declared that, against all odds, they would hold the festival again just one year later. And so a new annual tradition was born, starting on August 1, 1946, when the city held the Nagaoka Restoration Festival.

In its previous form, the festival had served as a symbol of community pride, but it took on a deeper meaning in the aftermath of the war. Currently, day one centers on the Peace Festival (known in Japanese as Heiwasai), which involves a number of events held around the city. These include the Grand Folk Dance Parade, a lively celebration that is reminiscent of other Japanese summer festivals. Active participants wear traditional costumes and perform dances in large groups along the city streets.

Visitors can also enjoy the thunderous beats of the Yukyu Taiko Drumming Show. The Echigo Nagaoka Mikoshi Parade takes place on the evening of August 1. Here, visitors can join in the festive atmosphere as the *mikoshi* (portable shrines), another feature of festivals across Japan, make their way across town.

Day one of the festival closes on a solemn note at 10:30 p.m. This is the exact moment on August 1, 1945, when the Nagaoka Air Raid began. Three white fireworks shoot into the sky to honor the lives lost on that fateful day and offer a prayer for everlasting peace. Temples across the city ring their bells in prayer for the repose of the spirits of the dead.

On the evenings of August 2 and 3, the Grand Fireworks Show takes place. The pyrotechnics include the *Sho-Sanjakudama*, huge firework shells loaded with maximum gunpowder. These shells erupt into a 650-meter-diameter bloom and are accompanied

by the 650-meter-long “Niagara Falls” display of fireworks, which flows down into the river from a bridge.

One of the show’s other major highlights is the “Phoenix” display, which has been a permanent fixture since 2005. Nagaoka suffered extensive damage during the 2004 Great Chuetsu Earthquake, and the Phoenix Fireworks are a three-minute sequence that symbolizes the people of Nagaoka rising and overcoming the damage of the quakes.

This part of the show is also set to musical accompaniment. City residents chose the 2003 hit single “Jupiter” by Ayaka Hirahara as the sequence’s companion song. Its uplifting tone and catchy tune proved popular in Nagaoka, as did its theme of endurance and rebirth.

As the name implies, the *Kome Hyappyo* (One Hundred Sacks of Rice) display involves one hundred fireworks, shot off in swift succession. This creates a cascade effect, filling the night sky with color. It is a fitting finale to this three-day spectacle.

The exact schedule of the fireworks displays and their running time varies from year to year. However, the entire show on August 2 and 3 always begins around 7:15 p.m. and concludes by 9:10 p.m.

As accommodations are limited, visitors are encouraged to make hotel reservations outside Nagaoka if visiting for the show. Be sure to leave plenty of time to get back to the train station from the viewing area, as it will be extremely crowded.

For those unable to make it to the festival, the city of Nagaoka also gives visitors to the area the chance to experience the fireworks through their state-of-the-art 3D cinema. The cinema is located at City Hall Plaza – Aore Nagaoka, a short walk from Nagaoka Station. It offers a video presentation highlighting the best of the three-day event, using the latest in sound and visual technology. As you vicariously experience the fireworks on a 240-inch screen, an audio commentary in Japanese (with English subtitles on request) explains the meaning behind them and their relevance to both Nagaoka’s past and present.

The Nagaoka Festival Grand Fireworks Show is an event that delights and thrills spectators. At the same time, it commemorates the tragedy that befell the city during a devastating war, and serves as a testament to Nagaoka’s strong commitment to peace.