

Eiheiji Floating Lantern Festival

The Eiheiji Floating Lantern Festival is an event held annually in late August. During the festival, monks from Eiheiji Temple, local residents, and guests join together to float approximately 10,000 illuminated lanterns down the Kuzuryū River. It is an opportunity for the community to express gratitude to their deceased relatives and pray for lasting peace and happiness.

The festival is connected to Obon, an annual Buddhist event for commemorating past ancestors. Obon is primarily observed from August 13 to August 15. It is believed that during this period, the spirits of the deceased return to this world to visit their relatives, and people frequently travel back to their hometowns to make offerings at their family's graves. At the end of Obon, floating lanterns similar to those used in the Eiheiji Floating Lantern Festival are often released to guide the spirits back to the other world.

During the day, the atmosphere of the Eiheiji Floating Lantern Festival is lively, with various musical performances, food stalls, games for children, and *bon odori*, a folk dance to welcome the ancestor spirits. The festivities promote friendship, harmony, and community. In the evening, the mood grows more solemn. Monks from Eiheiji Temple chant sutras, and groups of local volunteers sing *baika-ryū eisanka*, a type of hymn accompanied by bells that is unique to the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism. Finally, the lanterns are released into the Kuzuryū River. Most of the lanterns are offered as memorials for the dead, but some are launched to carry the hopes and wishes of individual participants. Once all the lanterns have been sent off, a fireworks display marks both the end of the event and the approaching end of summer.

The festival was first held in 1988 with the support of the local chamber of commerce, and it has been held every year since. The event grew tremendously in 2006, when two nearby towns, Matsuoka and Kamishihi, were merged into Eiheiji. Matsuoka's floating raft festival and Kamishihi's garlic festival were also merged into the Eiheiji Floating Lantern Festival, and today it is the largest festival of its kind in Japan. Combining the three festivals has helped residents to move past old administrative divisions and create a unified community sustained by the spirit of Zen.