

## **Awa Odori (Awa Dance)**

The city of Tokushima attracts more than a million visitors from August 12 to 15 for its annual Awa Odori, one of the largest festivals in Japan. Awa is the former name for Tokushima Prefecture and Odori means “dance.” The term Awa Odori can refer both to the festival and the dancing itself.

The festival’s roots date back more than 400 years, but the name “Awa Odori” was coined when Tokushima started promoting the event to attract tourists during the prewar Showa era (1926–1945). Dance events take place in various locations throughout the prefecture every summer but the city of Tokushima is the main base.

During the festival, the city takes on a carnival-like atmosphere. Troupes of dancers called *ren* parade through the streets, accompanied by musicians playing traditional instruments. The spirit of Awa Odori is perhaps best captured in these words from the popular festival song *Awa Yoshikono*: “Dancing fools and watching fools! Everyone’s a fool, so why not dance?”

### **Teamwork at Its Finest**

While the basic steps of Awa Odori are the same for men and women, they are executed in two distinct styles. The men adopt a low posture with their knees and feet pointing outward when they dance. The women usually perform in tight formation, balancing on the front of their wooden *geta* sandals with their hands held high in the air. Men usually wear *happi*, a short festival coat, while women dress in colorful kimono and *amigasa*, a braided straw hat with a distinctive half-moon shape.

Children have been participating in Awa Odori since the 1970s, performing at the festival alongside adults. In recent years, some women have taken up the traditional men’s style and costume. Some troupes feature a dynamic freestyle form known as *yakko-odori* (kite dancing), in which a single male dancer performs acrobatics.

Musicians play an important role in Awa Odori. An ensemble of traditional Japanese instruments, collectively called *narimono*, provides lively music in double-time for the dancing. *Narimono* may include bass and rhythm drums, a flute, a shamisen, and a handheld gong that sets the tempo.

Around 800 *ren* of varying skill levels perform at the Awa Odori each year. These teams may represent family members, colleagues, or groups of university students. They parade through the streets with one or more members in the lead carrying a bamboo pole with *takahari chochin* (paper lanterns), which bear the troupe’s name. While professional troupes practice year-round, Awa Odori is a folk dance and open to all. There is even an allocated time when the *niwaka-ren* (drop-in team) appears and everyone is invited to join in the dancing.

### **Origins of Awa Odori**

Some researchers suggest that Awa Odori has roots in the nationwide tradition of Bon Odori dancing, which is performed across the country each summer. One story about its origin connects it to celebrations surrounding the completion of Tokushima Castle in 1586. The first lord of Tokushima, Hachisuka Iemasa (1558–1638), is said to have distributed free sake to residents, encouraging them to dance. The custom must have caught on, as later records show that in 1671, the following rules were issued to control the festivities:

1. Dancing to last three days only.
2. Samurai not allowed to participate.
3. Strictly no dancing on temple grounds.

### **Modern-Day Awa Odori**

Tokushima's flourishing indigo industry supported the festivities during the Edo period (1603–1868), and throngs of happy dancers depicted in nineteenth-century artwork suggest that Awa Odori was a lively spectacle. However, indigo cultivation began to decline in the early twentieth century with imports of cheaper, synthetic dyes from abroad. Tokushima then turned to tourism as a means of driving interest in the event and the name "Awa Odori" was born.

In 1931, the geisha and singer Tada Koyurugi (1907–2008) helped promote Awa Odori with her hit rendition of *Awa Yoshikono*. No festival was held during the years just before and during World War II, but it resumed in 1946. The Osaka Expo in 1970 enabled the dance to be seen widely by international audiences for the first time. As a result, some troupes even traveled abroad to perform.

The Osaka Expo was also the catalyst for changes to the dance itself. Performers at the Expo sought to actively draw their audience into the fun of dancing. In subsequent years, a more sophisticated style of Awa Odori developed, evolving it into the phenomenon that it is today.

Visitors to the city of Tokushima can watch performances year-round at the Awa Odori Kaikan (Awa Dance Festival Hall). Four to five shows are staged daily by the resident *ren* and various guest teams. The audience has a chance to join in the dancing at the end, and to view costumes and instruments. After your visit, ride the ropeway from the building's fifth floor up to the summit of Mt. Bizan, a well-known symbol of the city.