

Kumagaya Uchiwa Festival

Downtown Kumagaya is filled with sound and color for three days in July during the annual Kumagaya Uchiwa Festival. Participants from twelve local neighborhoods pull decorative wheeled floats through the streets, accompanied by live music.

Fans for soaring temperatures

The Uchiwa Festival began in the mid-eighteenth century as a series of Shinto ceremonies at Kumagaya's Atago Yasaka Shrine to ward off disease. By the mid-nineteenth century, the festival also included a procession through the streets of Kumagaya. Families and shops would make and hand out *sekihan*, rice cooked with red adzuki beans, an auspicious food believed to keep away evil. Around the start of the twentieth century, local merchants began to give out *uchiwa* fans instead of rice. Kumagaya is one of the hottest places in the Kanto region, and the fans have become very popular. Over time, the focus of the festival has shifted from disease prevention to praying for good harvests and commercial success, and the parades of decorated floats are now a characteristic feature of the festival.

Three days and nights of colorful floats and revelry

Each of Kumagaya's twelve neighborhoods parades an elaborately carved and decorated wheeled cart-style float through the streets of the city in a display of community pride. Seven of these are *dashi*, tall floats that can reach a height of 9 meters, decorated with models of ancient deities and historical figures. The other five floats are called *yatai*. All the floats have musicians playing drums, cymbals, and flutes, and are accompanied by a procession of supporters carrying lanterns.

Around noon on July 20, a group of people drawn from all twelve neighborhoods carry a portable shrine from the Atago Yasaka Shrine to the downtown area. The *dashi* and *yatai* floats are then wheeled through the streets to the festival square near Kumagaya Station, around dusk. They are pulled with long ropes by teams wearing the colors of their neighborhood. As the sun sets, the floats are illuminated with paper lanterns.

Adjustable floats and passionate musicians

On the second day, National Highway No. 17 around Kumagaya is closed to traffic around noon for a procession of *dashi* and *yatai* floats. Pedestrians stroll the highway, enjoying food from stalls along the route. The *dashi* floats are adjustable so as to fit under pedestrian overpasses on the parade route. In the evening, the floats are lined up in front of the station in a fan formation.

On the final day, the floats are lined up in front of the Kumagaya Station for the festival's climax. The music reaches a fever pitch, as the teams of musicians compete for their float to be selected to lead the festival the next year. The festival is an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property of Kumagaya.