

***Hatsumōde* (New Year's Shrine Visit)**

“The year begins at Sumiyossan.” So says an old Osaka adage. Some two million people visit Sumiyoshi Taisha during the first three days of January for *hatsumōde*, the customary first Shinto shrine visit of the year.

Long lines form before midnight on New Year's Eve as people wait to toss a coin in the offering box of Daiichi Hongū and say a short prayer for good fortune in the coming year. Vendors sell food and souvenirs from temporary stalls, creating a festive atmosphere, as people enjoy the brief New Year holidays and contemplate a fresh start. The crowds can be so dense that some worshippers throw their offerings over the heads of those in front—errant coins can be seen stuck between the shingles of the shrine's roof.

The priests of Sumiyoshi Taisha perform a number of rituals to welcome the New Year. At 5 a.m. on New Year's Day, they draw water from a sacred well and offer it to each of the shrine's four patron gods, an act that symbolizes purification and renewal. Around an hour later, at sunrise, they pray for the safety and prosperity of the nation and for good harvests in the coming year.

Other events in early January include the Tōka Shinji on January 4, which features an ancient court ritual performed by two priests, as well as dances by shrine maidens called *kagurame*. On January 7, in the Ao-uma Shinji ritual, a white horse is brought to the shrine to drive off evil spirits.