

Shishi-odori

One of Yamadera's largest annual events is the Banji Matsuri. This summer festival is held in early August to celebrate the legacy of the larger-than-life hunter, Banji Banzaburo (dates unknown). Banji was the warden of the mountain and played an essential role in the founding of the temple. According to legend, Banji met with the monk Ennin (794–864) on the Taimenseki ("Meeting Rock"), a boulder at the foot of Mt. Hoju. There, Ennin spoke of his goal to establish a place to spread the teachings of the Buddha in northern Japan. Banji was so moved by Ennin's vision that he donated the land, and gave up hunting in the area. Upon hearing this, the animals of the mountain gathered in front of the Taimenseki and danced for joy.

This legend is the basis for the *shishi-odori* lion dance, one of the main events of the Banji Matsuri. Participants gather at the Taimendo, a shrine next to the Taimenseki which houses statues of both Ennin and Banji. Costumed troupes from the area perform lively dances accompanied by traditional music. Forming a procession, they move to the upper reaches of Yamadera, stopping to perform at the Konpon Chudo main hall, and the Kaisando, the hall dedicated to Yamadera's founder.