

Annual Events at Aoi Aso Jinja Shrine

There are regular festivals held at Aoi Aso Jinja to celebrate good fortune, health, and the harvest, and to express gratitude to the enshrined deities who protect the region. The largest and oldest celebration is the Okunchi Matsuri, or Okunchi Festival. It marks the anniversary of the shrine's founding and runs from October 3 to 11. Rituals performed over the course of the festival include ceremonial processions and Kuma Kagura, a regional form of *kagura* dance offered in worship to the deities.

The Okunchi Festival

The highlight of the festival is the procession on October 9, the anniversary of the shrine's founding. The shrine's deities are transferred to *mikoshi* portable shrines and carried through the streets of the town, accompanied by Shinto priests, flag bearers, and lion dancers. On the eve of the shrine's founding, Kuma Kagura is performed in the *haiden* worship hall on a stage designed to symbolize the cosmos. This ancient form of *kagura* is unique to Hitoyoshi Kuma. It is designated a Nationally Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property.

Other annual celebrations at Aoi Aso Jinja

The Nagoshi Matsuri is a period for purification that has been observed at Aoi Aso Jinja since the fourteenth century. Purification rituals include passing through a standing circle made of bamboo. The rituals provide participants with an experience of spiritual cleansing and are typically held at the end of June.

The Hatsuuma Taisai is generally held in early March at the Inari Shrine on the grounds of Aoi Aso Jinja. People come to pray for bountiful harvests and commercial success in the year ahead. The tradition began at Aoi Aso Jinja in the eighteenth century when the Inari Shrine was founded.

The dates of the Nagoshi Matsuri and the Hatsuuma Taisai vary in accordance with the lunar calendar.