

The Warmth of Winter Festivals

In Tokamachi, the winter season is marked by many traditional festivals and events. The region's heavy snowfalls impact nearly every facet of its culture, from local agriculture to diet and handicrafts. Tokamachi's winter festivals celebrate this life-giving aspect of snow. They are also important opportunities to draw communities together, reinforcing the bonds of friendship and cooperation that make survival in snow country possible.

Here are just a few of Tokamachi's winter events:

Tokamachi Snow Festival

This popular event is held in mid-February at venues throughout Tokamachi. It features large snow sculptures, as well as art installations, performances, and a fireworks display. A modern addition to the winter calendar, the Tokamachi Snow Festival began in 1950 after Emperor Hirohito (1901–1989) suggested a festival to help residents enjoy the winter and celebrate the beauty of snow.

Muko-nage (Groom Tossing) and Sumi-nuri (Soot Smearing)

These unique events are part of New Year's celebrations in the hot spring town of Matsunoyama. On January 15, men who married during the previous calendar year are literally thrown from a hill-top shrine into a snowdrift some five meters below. The custom originated as a kind of ceremonial revenge against grooms from outside the village who were "stealing away" a daughter of Matsunoyama. Today, any local groom can receive the heave-ho. Afterward, the past year's good-luck charms are burned on a straw pyre. Participants in this event grab soot from the bonfire, mix it with snow, and scramble to rub the mixture on each other's faces. The soot is considered good luck, so the more one receives, the better—and the messy melee provides a singular bonding experience.

Oshirakura Baito Huts

For around 300 years, the villagers of Oshirakura have gathered each January 14 to build a conical hut called a *baito*. The structure is made of zelkova wood and straw, measuring roughly 10 meters high and 8 meters in diameter. In the evening, residents gather inside the hut to eat, drink, and sing traditional songs, celebrating community ties and praying for good health and a bountiful harvest in the coming year. Around 9 p.m., the empty structure is set on fire, creating a bonfire some 30 meters high. The shape of the flames is said to foretell crop yields for the year.

Torioi and Honyarado Snow Huts

A winter event called *torioi* ("bird chasing") is held on the night of January 14 in many towns in snow country. As with a lot of winter festivals, this custom is related to agriculture. Children parade through town, clapping wooden blocks together and singing a song to scare away pest birds that might eat crops in the coming year. Adults reward the children with mochi rice cakes and other sweets. The children then eat the snacks and play deep into the night in a specially constructed snow hut called a *honyarado*.