

# Gion Matsuri

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Throughout July, at the height of summer, the areas of Sanjo and Shijo in Kyoto hold the *Gion Matsuri*, filling the city with a festive mood. Considered one of Japan's three greatest festivals, *Gion Matsuri* originated from a ritual performed in Yasaka Shrine about a thousand years ago where 66 halberds (*Hoko*) were put up as a prayer for protection from the plague.

The symbol of this festival is *Yamaboko*, composed of *Yama* and *Hoko*, which are both Japanese floats (*Dashi*). *Yama* is the one with dolls whereas *Hoko* is the one with a tall, portable Shinto shrine and a pike-like ornament. Built manually every year, these floats, which are several times taller than humans, are paraded to "purify" the streets. One will surely be astonished at their elaborate and grand design.

*Gion Matsuri* is divided into *Sakimatsuri* (former festival) and *Atomatsuri* (latter festival), featuring many events and rituals. The most exciting events are *Yoiyama* (Eve of Parade) and *Junko* (*Yamaboko* Parade).

*Yoiyama* is arranged around July 15 (*Sakimatsuri*) and 20 (*Atomatsuri*) on the eve of the climax (*Yamaboko Junko*). Rows of street stalls are placed on temporarily vehicle-free promenades where a sea of people come. A specialty here is *Shimidare-Butaman* (pork bun with sauce). Many people get excited in such a festive mood as *Yamabokos* are illuminated by lanterns and stand out fantastically in the nightshade against the crowd.

As *Yoiyama* dawns, *Yamaboko Junko* arrives, and the atmosphere drastically changes. Showing refined decorations under brilliant daylight, *Yamabokos* are exactly "moving museums" shining splendidly in fine raiment together with their powerful shapes.

Just visiting and witnessing this festival is certainly exciting, but one can enjoy it more deeply, learning its stories as each *Yamaboko* is designed from historical events.

Here, I introduce *Hashi-Benkei-Yama*, which features two dolls on a float fighting each other. This is derived from the famous Japanese classical war chronicle *Heike Monogatari* (The Heike Story), which is mainly about the battles between two military families: Heike and Genji.

One member of the Genji family is Yoshitsune, a battlewise ninth son. When he was a baby, Genji was once beaten by Heike, and he was banished to a temple far away from the capital. As he grew up, he decided to fight back against Heike. As he was crossing a bridge in Kyoto, he encountered a rude monk soldier, Benkei, who tried to attack Yoshitsune violently but was easily neutralized. Benkei was soon defeated and swore to serve Yoshitsune. *Hashi-Benkei-Yama* was designed after this struggle.

Yoshitsune had contributed so much to the defeat of Heike, but as his elder brother Yoritomo came into power, Yoshitsune's fighting skills were thought to disrupt his new government. The two brothers clashed, causing Yoshitsune to self-exile in a distant place. Benkei protected him all the way, risking himself. In the end, as Yoshitsune was attacked by a large army, Benkei fought back and, as a shield for Yoshitsune, received all enemy arrows, staying upright even after his last breath. Benkei was truly a faithful servant of Yoshitsune until his death. This story of loyalty has been handed down as a legend. It all began with the struggle between young Yoshitsune and Benkei on the bridge.

In the summer sunshine, feel the festive atmosphere throughout the town, listen to Japanese traditional music, and look at the beautifully standing *Yamabokos*. You should visit Kyoto someday to experience Japan's largest festival, *Gion Matsuri*!