



Summer in Japan is synonymous with celebrations.  
Many festivals take place in August as Summer draws to a close.

School children gather at Summer Festivals wearing Yukata  
as if to ward off the start of the second semester.

Traditional music fills the busy streets, drown out only by  
the booms and crackling of fireworks filling the night's sky.

Although each region of Japan may celebrate differently,  
within each you will find people making memories  
that will last a lifetime.

## Japan Now: August 2024

*Japan Now* is the email newsletter of the Consular Office of Japan in Anchorage

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## Prefecture Spotlight: Obon in Okinawa

Obon is a traditional Buddhist festival that has been celebrated in Japan for well over half a

millennium. It is said that during Obon, the spirits of ancestors and deceased relatives descend from the spirit world to visit. Unlike western holidays like Halloween, however, this is not seen as something scary or spooky, but rather something to be celebrated and revered. Although exact traditions vary from prefecture to prefecture, most Obon festivals last three days long, taking place somewhere between mid-July and August.

One prefecture in particular has very unique traditions for their Obon festival—Okinawa. The southernmost prefecture of Japan was at one time its very own country, complete with its own language, food culture, and religious history, so it's no wonder their traditions around Obon would be different as well. In Okinawa, the three days of Obon are called **Unke**, **Nakabi**, and **Ukui**.

One of the biggest traditions for Okinawan Obon is to prepare food for the ancestors that come. A set menu of food is cooked and arranged around an altar in the home for each of the three days, three meals a day! Just like any living person! That's a lot of cooking...

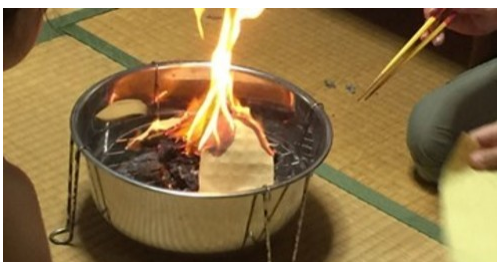
### **Unke**

The first day of Obon, Unke (お迎え), means “Greeting” and is a day to welcome the spirits back home. Common things to do during Unke is to hang lanterns to guide spirits, arrange an altar with lots of food for the spirits, and to leave all your doors and windows open so the spirits can easily come in! I'm sure the idea of leaving your doors and windows open to the elements may come as a shock to most Alaskans! Bug spray is definitely a must for the summer.



### **Nakabi**

The second day is called Nakabi (中日), or Nakanuhi, which means “the day in the middle!” This day is for family gatherings and is especially important for households that don't have altars prepared for the festival. Nowadays, it's very common for younger people with apartments not to have space for altars, so they will return home or visit multiple households in their family, bringing with them Ochugen (お中元), small gifts to the household, usually not with too much monetary value.



### **Ukui**

The final day is called Ukui (お送り), which means “Sending off.” On this day, families get together to celebrate and say farewell to their lost loved ones. Usually, aside from the food that is served, alcohol is also poured into glasses for the spirits as tales of the past are told during the meal. There is also a tradition of celebrating out

in front of the house, as if to walk the spirits out and see them off on their journey back to the afterlife. The festival ends with some of the spirits' food, drink, letters from surviving friends or family, and memorabilia of the departed mixed into a bowl outside. These are things for the spirits to take with them. Last but not least, money is added to the bowl before the entire contents of the bowl are burned. Not real money, of course, but a yellow paper money called Uchikabi (ウチカビ) you can buy at any convenience store or supermarket around that time.

Not all Obon traditions happen in the home, of course. As with any other part of Japan, no Obon would be complete without Obon Odori (obon dances).

### Eisa

Obon is the start of Eisa (エイサー) season in Okinawa. Eisa is a sort of choreographed dance/music performance with many unique traditions and styles throughout the island. Simply put, there is a group that sings and plays the Sanshin (Okinawan banjo) while a troupe of dancers beat drums in three different sizes.



In many Eisa troupes, drummers tend to be men, while women perform a traditional dance, characterized by minimal bodily movement but lively and elegant hand motions. Arguably the most popular member of the Eisa troupe, however, is the one known as the Chondara (チヨンドラー). A Chondara is a fool or jester character that walks around during the performance. Often, the Chondara will make fun of the other performers, excite the crowd, make them laugh, or encourage crowd participation like clapping, whistling, or dancing. You can never mistake the Chondara, as they are often wearing makeup to look funny or ugly, wearing strange clothes or even a strange headdress!



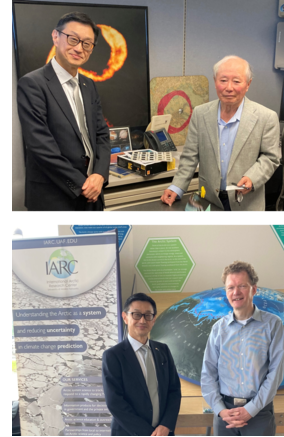
Some Eisa festivals in Okinawa feature as many as 10,000 performers at once! What do you think? Would you like to see Obon for yourself in Okinawa next year?

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## Head Consul Hamada Visited Fairbanks

Always looking to meet with Japanese and Alaskan leaders, Head Consul Hamada visited Fairbanks on July 10 and 11. On July 10, Head Consul Hamada met with founder of the International Arctic

Research Center, Dr. Syun-Ichi Akasofu, and Director of the IARC, Dr. Hajo Eicken. Head Consul Hamada was able to learn the history of bilateral cooperation between Japan and the US in establishing the renowned research center as well as the monumental achievements scientists have made at the IARC. He was given a tour of the IARC and was able to see the work of Japanese and American scientists.



While on the campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Head Consul Hamada was able to meet with President Pat Pitney of the University of Alaska system and her staff. President Pitney spoke about several projects the university has advanced such as Alaska's Arctic leadership initiative, student led work researching new sources of energy, and the future of freight being delivered by unmanned flights. Head Consul Hamada was also able to meet with the Japanese language professors at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and thank them for their work in teaching and producing future Japanese Exchange Teachers.

On the final day, Head Consul Hamada was able to meet with Fairbanks Mayor David Pruhs. Head Consul Hamada was thrilled to learn about the history of Japanese people in Fairbanks, as well as to hear the vision Mayor Pruhs has in increasing tourism for the city. Head Consul Hamada spoke about the history of sister city relations between Monbetsu and Fairbanks and expressed his gratitude for the mayor's willingness to revitalize sister city relations between the two cities.



Head Consul Hamada wants to thank everyone he met with. Also, a special thank you to all of the staff members who helped plan and setup the meetings. The city of Fairbanks was quite an enjoyable experience and very receptive. Head Consul Hamada appreciated taking in the scenery from the campus of UAF and learning more about the history of Fairbanks. He looks forward to not only visiting Fairbanks again but seeing other parts of Alaska.

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## School Program



The Consular Office of Japan in Anchorage conducts in-person school visits by sending members of our staff to local schools.

Some of our past events have promoted cultural exchange through PowerPoint presentations about Japanese culture, origami and calligraphy events, and

even traditional Japanese games like Kendama (known to many Americans as Cup-and-ball).

Our office performs visits to schools from elementary to high school level. If you would like to contact us about conducting a visit, please reach out to us.

Email: [inquiry-ak@se.mofa.go.jp](mailto:inquiry-ak@se.mofa.go.jp)

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