

## Handa Spring Festival

The Handa Spring Festival's origins are unclear, but there are records of simple float parades and marionette performances dating to 1755. At the time, Handa was a bustling port town and producer of sake, which was shipped mainly to Edo (now Tokyo). By the early 1800s, Handa's merchants and brewers had become very wealthy, and they built large, lavish floats with intricate carvings for the local Shinto spring festivals held as prayers for abundant harvests.

Today, the Handa Spring Festival encompasses multiple spring festivals held in Handa. A total of 31 floats are pulled through Handa during these festivals. The smaller floats weigh 4 tons, and the largest weigh 6 tons and tower 7 meters tall. From them hang tapestries embroidered with designs of flowers, birds, and mythical creatures that have become increasingly elaborate over the centuries. Each float also has carved adornments, relief carvings, and diorama depictions of scenes from Japanese and Chinese legends and history. Marionettes perform on 20 of the floats, accompanied by festival music, chanting, and the sounds of shamisen and *biwa*.

The floats are paraded in small numbers through the streets of 10 districts in Handa from mid-March to early May. Participants from each neighborhood wear uniquely designed *happi* coats and play distinctive festival music with flutes and drums. The Kamezaki Tidal Flat Festival, a registered UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, is held on May 3 and 4 and is particularly striking: At low tide, five floats are pulled out to the seashore where legend says that Emperor Jimmu made landfall during his campaign to conquer eastern Japan in the seventh century BCE.

At the end of the festival, the floats are disassembled and put in storage, with the exception of those displayed at the Handa Municipal Museum. Every five years in autumn, all 31 floats are paraded together near City Hall for the Handa Floats Festival.