

The Town That Dances for Thirty Summer Nights



Gujo Odori dancers circling the yakata tower

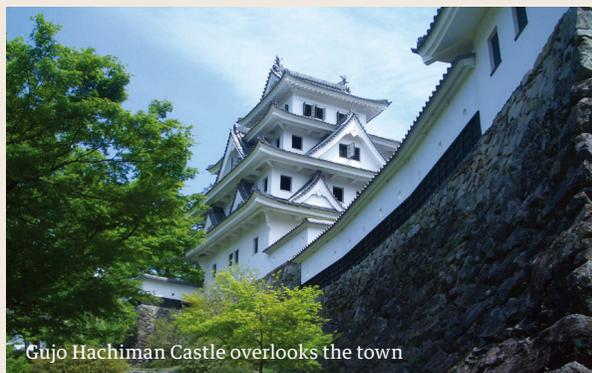
TOMOKO NISHIKAWA

Gujo Hachiman is a castle town in central Gifu that grew up around the fortress of the same name. For the past four centuries, both townspeople and visitors here have danced for thirty nights during the summer at the Gujo Odori.

GUJO Hachiman is a town by the Yoshida River, which flows down from the Okumino Mountains. The Ministry of the Environment has rated these mountain waters—known as Sougisui—as the first on Japan’s 100 Remarkable Waters list. Sougisui is just one of several water sources here, and many waterways run alongside the streets, which is why Gujo Hachiman is also known as “the town of water.”

On the northern side of the Yoshida River, you’ll find many retro *machiya*¹ townhouses. In 2012, part of Gujo Hachiman Castle’s grounds—which include Otemachi, Shokuninmachi, Kajiyamachi, Yanagimachi, and the castle itself—were collectively designated an Important Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings.

Gujo Hachiman’s summer highlight and main claim to fame, however, is the Gujo Odori, one of Japan’s three biggest folk dance festivals and an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property of Japan. It began four hundred years ago during the Edo period (1603-1867) when Endo Yoshitaka, the feudal lord of Gujo, thought a Bon Odori² festival would promote harmony among the people. During the four days of Bon, people were allowed to dance together regardless of rank and class. Even now, both locals and tourists take part in this festival by forming a dance circle around a tower called a *yakata*³. People



Gujo Hachiman Castle overlooks the town

say that this isn't a dance to watch, but rather a dance where you join in.

The festivities are held annually from mid-July to early September, and are traditionally held over thirty days. This year the festival period will go on for thirty-one days between July 14 and September 8. The dances are held in various areas of town throughout the summer, so the venue changes on a daily basis.

From August 13 to 16, dancers take over the city and continue all night celebrating the Urabone⁴ Festival. The dances and music vary, from the elegance of the "Kawasaki" to the fast-beat, mambo-like "Harukoma." There are ten dances in total, but all are easy enough to mimic. During the celebration, Gujo Odori Preservation Committee members provide lessons on the basic steps and tips on dancing well.

According to Gujo Hachiman Tourism Association Secretary-General Reiko Okazaki, approximately 300,000 people attend each year, and the ratio between locals and visitors is about 3:7. "It's popular among visitors from overseas as a casual way to experience Japanese folk customs, and more people are apparently attending the dance lessons each year. One charm of Gujo Odori is the clicking sound *geta* sandals make while you dance. So although there is no dress code, many attendees rent or purchase *geta* sandals and *yukata* summer kimono to take part. Excellent dancers receive a certificate from the Gujo Odori Preservation Committee."

While new leisure activities have drawn the younger generation away from traditional dancing, elementary schools in Gujo Hachiman have been incorporating the Gujo Odori dance into class hours and sports festivals. The city is working to get the local younger generation to protect historical folk culture.



The Soujisui spring's water flows through the town



There are free Gujo Odori classes during weekends throughout the festival

To have people outside of town to learn about the Gujo Odori, the Gujo Hachiman Tourism Association hold events in Tokyo and Kyoto and even at festivals overseas. Each year during the Kannamesai⁵ Festival at Ise Jingu Shrine in Ise City, Mie Prefecture, a Gujo Odori dance is performed for the gods, along with Tokushima's Awa Odori and an Okinawan Eisa dance.

"This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary Gujo Odori event in Aoyama," says Okazaki. "It's held every June, and over two days more than ten thousand visitors take part, so it is getting really popular. Like the real Gujo Odori, anyone can jump in and participate. This has persuaded many people to take part in the real festivities here in Gujo Hachiman."

Aiming to be the top *Bon odori* in Japan, they plan to promote the festival through events and performances worldwide. Starting with dance and ending with dance, Gujo Hachiman will no doubt continue to draw more people wishing to experience the festive summer season. **7**

*1 *Machiya*: Merchant townhouses that face the main road in urban areas.

*2 *Bon odori*: A dance people perform during Bon season events to remember and honor their ancestors, usually held in summer.

*3 *Yakata*: A temporary tower that people dance around during the festival. Drummers and shamisen players are on the second floor, but at times dancers may climb up top to dance.

*4 Urabone: The official name for Bon, the memorial service for the souls of ancestors.

*5 Kannamesai: A festival at Ise Jingu Shrine in which the year's rice harvest is offered to Amaterasu, the sun goddess.