

# How to Spend a Summer in Japan



Hirota Chieko arranging flowers  
Photo: Courtesy of Hirota Yukimasa

**B**Y and large, Japanese summers are hot and humid. And since ancient times, Japanese people have devised a variety of ways to survive those hot and humid summers. We interviewed Hirota Chieko, who holds workshops in which she teaches about traditional Japanese events and seasonal decorations, regarding these unique Japanese ways of getting through the summer.

**Japanese summers are extremely hot and humid. What kinds of things did Japanese people come up with in the past to get through the summers comfortably?**

Back before there was air conditioning, Japanese people got creative in a variety of ways with houses, clothing, and food to cope with the severe heat. For example, they elongated the eaves on traditional Japanese homes to keep the sun from reaching deep into rooms. This made it harder for

the temperature of the room to rise. *Sudare*, screens made by weaving the stems of finely cut bamboo or reeds, were hung on the eaves. This was to block the sunlight while also maintaining air flow. Japanese people also do *uchimizu* (sprinkling water on the paths and gardens in front of their homes) to prevent dust from rising and, through the effect of vaporization, to keep the temperature from increasing.

It's my habit to often wear kimono, a type of traditional clothing, and in summer I choose kimono made from gentle-on-the-skin materials such as hemp or cotton. Kimono are highly breathable and, because they cover the entire body, they keep the skin from coming in contact with sunlight directly. Recently, *yukata*, which are simpler than ordinary kimono, are becoming popular among young people as stylish summer clothing.

Japanese people also came up with ways to feel cool through stimulating hearing, sight, taste, and other senses. For example, *furin*, wind chimes. These were originally meant to ward off evil, as people believed that bad things wouldn't happen anywhere you could hear the chimes. Over time, they came to be a feature of summer that offered a sensation of coolness. *Furin* themselves do not produce a cool breeze. Yet, hearing the sound of wind chimes swaying in the wind, we do get a sensation of coolness by using our imagination.



A *furin* wind chime and *sudare* screen  
Photo: Nara Kanko/PIXTA



Tokoroten noodles dressed with soy sauce and vinegar  
Photo: masa/PIXTA

### What are some unique and traditional Japanese summer foods and drinks?

Since today we have refrigerators, we are now able to eat and drink everything all year round. Even so, there are certain foods that many Japanese people eat during the summer. For example, *tokoroten*, noodles made from a type of red algae, is a food that cools down a body that has become hot. The sight of the transparent noodles is refreshing, and the noodles go down so smoothly. They can be enjoyed sweet with brown sugar syrup drizzled over the top or with the refreshing flavor of soy sauce and vinegar.

For summer, I also recommend *amazake*, a sweet drink made from rice. Many Japanese people think amazake is a



Amazake rice drink  
Photo: CORA/PIXTA

warm winter drink, but it is quite delicious when served chilled in summer. It is full of glucose, amino acids, and other nutrients, so has been called a “drinkable intravenous drip.” In the Edo period (early 17th to late 19th century), it was actually popular as an “energy drink” that was consumed to regain one’s strength in summer. *Biwayoto*, loquat leaf tea, was also consumed in summer at the time just like amazake. Biwayoto is a drink made by mixing and brewing loquat leaves with cinnamon and other leaves, and it is also said to aid recovery from fatigue. We don’t see it anymore, but itinerant merchants selling amazake and loquat leaf tea were a typical summer sight during the Edo period.

### Tell us about some traditional Japanese summer events.

The precise date differs by region, but the Obon festival takes place in the middle of July or August. Obon is a festival held once a year where the spirits of ancestors are welcomed back to this world, entertained, and then sent off again. There are many Obon festival practices, differing by region and household. It has become rare to do this in cities in recent times, but for example, a fire is lit in front of the gates to each house as a guide to keep the spirits from getting lost. And inside the house, decorative vehicles for the spirits to ride made from materials such as seasonal vegetables are displayed. For these vehicles, cucumbers are often made into horses to have an ancestor’s spirit return quickly while eggplants are often made into cows so the spirits can return slowly. During the Obon season, *bon-odori* dances are held in each region and people dance to the music by forming circles or walking in formation down the street. The dances have become entertainment today, but originally they were



During Obon, “horses” made from cucumbers and “cows” made from eggplants are displayed to carry home and later return the ancestral spirits  
Photo: Seamo/PIXTA





People wearing light yukata robes perform a bon-odori dance  
Photo: Kokorsha

meant to entertain the ancestral spirits that returned then send them off having spent time together.

In summer, many festivals are held across Japan. Once in Japan, many people died from epidemics and natural disasters in summer. It is said that summer festivals began as a way to prevent these disasters and to pray for a good harvest in autumn. At these festivals, it is common to see people carrying *mikoshi* - the deities' vehicles - in parades through the town. The people carrying the mikoshi shake it violently, which is said to increase the deities' strength, leading to a good harvest and warding off disease.

**Please tell us about some things you hope overseas visitors can experience when visiting Japan in the summer once COVID-19 subsides.**

While I would want a visitor to experience the festivals, fireworks displays, and other lively events with crowds of people, I also hope they can get a sense of the quietness of summer. One place to experience this quietness is at Buddhist temples. I live close to Kamakura in Kanagawa Prefecture, a place with many old temples. I often visit these temples, and in summer we can experience a somewhat different quietness compared to other seasons. As I said before, traditional Japanese buildings have deep eaves and so, even during the day, rooms inside are dim. In summer, when the rays of sunshine are strong, the rooms appear even more dim. The shadows cast by buildings and trees also appear even darker. It may be the contrast between the light and these shadows that offers a unique quietness to summer.

When walking among temples with bamboo forests and beautiful moss gardens, you feel a sense of coolness even



At a festival, people carry aloft a mikoshi shrine  
Photo: masa-0624/PIXTA

in the harsh heat. At some temples, you can try out *shakyo*, hand-copying sutras, a Buddhist training practice. As you focus on writing the text, it can help you forget about the heat. 📖

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Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU

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*Shakyo*, the practice of hand-copying or tracing Buddhist sutras  
Photo: Ystudio/PIXTA