

Yokote Snow Festival

The Tohoku region of northeast Japan has harsh winters and generally heavy snowfalls. At the height of winter, one of the most fun things to do is enjoy the *kamakura* (snow hut) traditional event in Yokote City, Akita Prefecture, which is said to date back some 450 years.

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JAPAN'S snow country is home to a traditional *ko-shogatsu*¹ (Little New Year) event called "Kamakura," in which snow is compacted and the inside hollowed out to create a space in which to worship the deity of water. One such Kamakura event is held in Yokote City, Akita Prefecture, where for 450 years, families have built *kamakura* (snow huts) to pray for abundant harvests and the safety of their households. Today, the tradition continues as part of the Yokote Snow Festival, an annual event held over two nights on February 15 and 16.

During the Snow Festival, more than eighty 3-meter-high *kamakura* are erected at the festival site, with thousands of miniature *kamakura* also set up on the riverbanks and elementary school grounds in Yokote City. In the evening, candles are lit inside them, creating a magical scene.


¹ *Ko-shogatsu* is an event held on January 15, as opposed to *O-shogatsu*, which is a New Year's event held mainly on January 1. Depending on the region, *Ko-shogatsu* may refer to the three days from January 14 to 16.

All photos: Courtesy of Yokote City Tourist Association Co

The many *kamakura* set up at the Snow Festival are built by local *kamakura shokunin* (*kamakura* artisans). They begin by drawing a circle around 3.5 to 4 meters in diameter, then collect and pile up snow inside it, treading down on the snow as they go until the mound reaches a height of around 3 meters. The *kamakura* is then hollowed out starting with the entrance, and a *kamidana* altar (literally, deity shelf) is carved into the wall opposite the entrance to enshrine the deity of water.

"Each *kamakura* is 'hosted' by three or four local children aged between 5 and 12. Children play a leading role in the Yokote Snow Festival," says Konishi Haruna of the Yokote City Tourism Association.

Although *kamakura* are made of snow, they are surprisingly warm inside thanks to the *shichirin* (portable clay cooking stoves) placed within. From inside the *kamakura*, the children call out to festival-goers in the local dialect to "Come in and pay your respects to the gods!" treating those who enter to refreshments of *amazake*, a sweet drink made from fermented rice, and grilled *mochi* rice cakes.

Even on bitterly cold nights, the soft glow from the *kamakura* and the smiles of the children envelop the visitors in a heart-warming embrace. 



Kamakura snow huts in Yokote City, Akita Prefecture



Festival-goers inside a snow hut at the Yokote Snow Festival

Candle-lit miniature *kamakura* in their thousands



Festival-goers walk among candle-lit miniature *kamakura*

