



# HELLO OKAYA

OKAYA INTERNATIONAL-EXCHANGE ASSOCIATION  
4F Okaya City Hall, 8-1 Saiwai-cho, Okaya City  
TEL : (0266) 24-3226 FAX : (0266) 24-3229  
E-mail : oiea@oiea.jp URL : www.oiea.jp  
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This newsletter is distributed four times a year by the Okaya International Exchange Association, with the aim of providing local foreign residents with information necessary for daily life, as well as insight into aspects of Japanese culture. Please feel free to contact us with your feedback or any questions you may have.

## Shinshu-Suwa Taisha Great Septennial Festival

# Onbashira Festival

This year, according to the Chinese zodiac, is the year of the tiger. It is also the year of the Onbashira Festival: an event dedicated to the deity of Shinshu-Suwa Taisha (or Suwa Grand Shrine). Occurring once every seven years or in the years of the tiger and monkey in Chinese astrology, 16 large trees are cut down in the mountains, carried and placed upright in the four corners of four shrines. This festival, called the "Shikinen Zouei Onbashira Grand Festival," or popularly known as the "Onbashira Festival," will have around 200,000 devotees from the six cities, towns and villages of the Suwa Region celebrating this septennial event.

Suwa Taisha (Suwa Grand Shrine) is divided into Kamisha and Shimosha: Kamisha Honmiya in Suwa City, Kamisha Maemiya in Chino City; Shimosha Harumiya and Shimosha Akimiya in Shimosuwa Town.

Nobody knows for sure when the Onbashira Festival started, but according to the records written in the Muromachi Period, it is said that the origin dates back to the early Heian Period (781

to 806) when shrines were built in the year of the tiger and monkey (of the Chinese zodiac) during the time of the Emperor Kanmu.

During the festival, big trees measuring around 20 meters in length, 1 meter in diameter and weighing more than 10 tons are cut down, and manually dragged into a Shinto Shrine and finally erected around its four corners. "Yamadashi" or carrying the logs from the mountain down to the village happens in April while "Satobiki" occurs in May, usually accompanied by men riding the logs, and dancers wearing bamboo hats decorated with artificial flowers parading the streets. The logs are pulled either to Kamisha and Shimosha and the ceremonial group of log bearers from Suwa will be in charge of raising up the 16 logs (4 logs X 4 shrines). The Onbashira festival is said to be a yearlong spectacular event as it is also celebrated in Autumn at the shrines (Komiya) of each district.



## ☆Japanese Traditions ~One point Japanese culture~

### Mount Fuji

Fuji-san is Japan's highest mountain, known throughout the world for its beauty. It is 3,776 meters high, located almost in the middle of Japan, and in the past erupted frequently. Since 1707 volcanic activity has ceased, but geologically it is a dormant volcano.

Fuji-san is one of Japan's three sacred mountains and has been an object of worship since ancient times. In the Edo Period (1603-1867) in particular, it was frequently climbed as an expression of faith.

Its grandeur and beauty have fascinated many Japanese artists, who have left behind outstanding works of art. There is, for example, the outstanding work called the "Fugaku Sanjūrokkei" by the ukiyoe artist Katsushika Hokusai, which contains masterpieces like "Akafuji" that are known throughout the world.



### Sushi

A typical Japanese cuisine. Originally, it referred to fish pickled to be preserved from spoiling, but in the Edo Period (1603-1867) vinegar came to be used in the preparation, and they were put together with boiled rice for eating.

However, in Edo (present-day Tokyo), sushi was made by laying slices of raw fish, freshly caught in Edo Bay, on rice and rolling it by hand. That "Edomae-zushi" (Edo-style sushi) is what is known throughout the world as Japanese sushi. In fact, throughout Japan there are many different kinds of sushi shaping a region's food culture. In Kansai, so-called "oshi-zushi" (pressed sushi) is not rolled by hand, but instead, rice mixed with vinegar is put into a wooden container, with slices of fish on it, and pressed from the top to shut tightly.



### Talismans

Omamori are said to summon good fortune and expel evil, so divinities' names or prayers or temple and shrine names are written on pieces of wood or scraps of paper. They are usually sold at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. Answers to prayers include a variety of things, such as traffic safety, passing a school's entrance exam, business prosperity, good health, and easy childbirth.

Omamori are put in pouches and carried all the time or hung in cars, placed in the home or attached to pillars or gates. It is common to present them to family members or to a lover who are leaving for travel or doing dangerous work and also to pray for their safety and health.



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# A: Kamisha Onbashira Festival

Schedule: Yamadashi [Kiotoshi & Kawagoshi] April 2(Fri) , 3(Sat), 4(Sun)  
Satobiki [Tate Onbashira] May 2(Sun), 3(Mon/Holiday), 4(Tue/Holiday)

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## ★Flow and Highlights 【 Yamadashi 】

### ① *“Call to be of one heart”*

In the first few days of April, the high-pitched kiyari (or workmen’s shouts/song while pulling a heavy load) can be heard in the cold wind. The Onbashira will kick off from a place called Harayama, where a big rope is kept.

Devotees wearing the same workmen’s apron over their uniform-happi coat can be heard chanting loud “Yoisa, yoisa” (in one voice) while they pull a thick rope.

The distinguishing characteristic of the Kamisha Onbashira is the V-shaped “Medodeko,” formed when the two logs are tied together at one end resembling two horns. Young people will then ride the log and sing kiyari or the workmen’s songs.

### ② *The major attraction called “Anayama’s Oomagari:” the crucial point on the first day of Yamadashi*

From the Anayama district of Chino City, the path of the Onbashira will suddenly come to a very narrow road. Maneuvering the “Medodeko” (the v-shaped conjoined logs) so that its protruding ends do not hit any of the houses in the neighborhood is the toughest challenge one has to face coming down the streets of Anayama’s Oomagari as the road hits a sharp bend and the logs are big in size. At the sound of the kiyari chants/songs, moving of the logs through this tricky area continues at a slow pace.

### ③ *The technique of sliding the trees down the hill and the courage that goes along with it*

The crucial point on the second day is the 27-degree downward slope along the Chino City Miyakawa Elementary School. When the kiyari song goes “this is where we drop the tree,” the “Mekodeko” along with the many young people riding it, is dropped from the steep slope, followed by a thunderous roar of cheers and applause from the crowd. Kiotoshi is where men show off their guts as they slide down the hill riding the logs amidst the great cheers.

### ④ *Cleansing by crossing the river (Kawagoshi)*

Awaiting the trees sliding down the hill is the final crucial point of Yamadashi which is the “Kawagoshi” or crossing the Miyakawa River and it is said that the Onbashira is purified as it goes through the melted snow water of this river. The sight of people scrambling to be the first to plunge into the water, biting cold and lower than 10 degree Celsius, is one spectacular moment that should not be missed. Shaking from left to right, the “Medodeko” quietly dips into the water and once released, splashes the crowd with water as it moves to the other side of the river. After the 8 logs of Onbashira have gone through the “Kawagoshi,” it will be kept at a designated place (Onbashira Yashiki) until the “Satobiki” in May.



## ★Flow and Highlights 【 Satobiki 】

### ① *Unfolding of the festival spectacle*

One month after “Yamadashi,” “Satobiki” is poised to take over the Onbashira stage in spring. As the Onbashira logs leave the Yashiki, a large throng of devotees and spectators tag along, as they carefully and elegantly make their way to the shrines.

### ② *The road to Onbashira*

“Satobiki” changes the Onbashira tone from the excitement felt during the “Yamadashi” to a whole new different level. Its appeal comes from the splendid traditional parade where men will be riding the logs, and the others carry “nagamochi” (special chest boxes) on their shoulders, followed by dancers wearing flower hats and dragon dancers. Lively traditional songs will be sung as the colorful parade progresses.



### ③ *The finale: enshrinement of the pillars by raising up the logs*

Putting up the onbashira logs on the grounds of each shrines is called “Tateonbashira.” After the Onbashira logs reaches the Shrines of Honmiya and Maemiya, the “Mekodoko” is split, and the tip of the log will be sharpened to a cone (like a very big pencil tip). This is called the “Kanmuri Otoshi,” signifying the pruning of the sacred tree into greatness.

After completing the “Kanmuri Otoshi,” the log will be tied with wires and ropes and will be raised up accompanied by the loud cries of devotees. The devotee standing on the topmost portion of the log will nail a 1.5-meter long tassel at the tip. It is said that gods dwell in this tassel and that this large momi fir tree taken from the remote mountain will

be a god.

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# B: Shimosha Onbashira Festival

Schedule: Yamadashi [Kiotoshi] April 9(Fri) , 10(Sat), 11(Sun)

Satobiki [Tate Onbashira] May 8(Sun), 9(Mon), 10(Tue)

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## ★Flow and Highlights 【 Yamadashi 】

### ① *“Becoming a god upon its descent”*

“The large tree from the remote mountain will become a god upon its descent. Yoisa.” This reverberating “kiyari” song signaling the start of Shimosha Onbashira along the Higashi Matagawa in Shimosuwa Town from “Tanakoba” on the hillside awakens the Onbashira logs which have been silently sleeping for a year and starts the procession. In the lingering cold of April, the “awakened” Onbashira turns toward the hill on its first and second day.

### ② *Impressive “trees sliding down the hill”*

Once the procession gets past the curve at Hagikura, a tricky bend before sliding the tree from the mountain, the onbashira will come to a clear area. This is the famed hill where the trees are dropped with at most a 35-degree downward slope and a 100-meter distance but taking a peek from above would somehow give the impression of an almost vertical drop.

Thunderous cheers from the huge throng of spectators will welcome the onbashira as soon as it appears before the crowd. The sight of the devotees waiting to slide down this steep slope keeps the audience in suspense. Everyone awaits the tension-filled moment when death-defying young men brave the log ride down the hill.

### ③ *“Satobiki” waits at “Shimekake”*

The intense crowd roars and tumbling down of the onbashira logs from the hill may lead one to think of a conjured up dragon or giant serpent, but once the log reaches the bottom, it reverts back to its tranquil state. Around one kilometer down the road is “Shimekake” where the log is towed and kept until the “Satobiki” in the month of May.



## ★Flow and Highlights 【 Satobiki 】

### ① *Shimosha Satobiki: Adorning the finale of the Onbashira Festival*

Finally, in the month of May when the hills and fields turn into a more vivid green, the last installment of the Onbashira Festival, the Satobiki in Shimosha, begins when the eight logs of Onbashira leave “Shimekake.” The Suwa Taisha Onbashira will have a city parade from Akimiya to Harumiya. From Route 142 (National Road), the onbashira logs enter the Former Nakasen Road where it will descend a steep slope and will be brought inside the Harumiya grounds. On the first day, only one log will be raised up. The first day of towing ends with the four Akimiya logs passing through the grounds of Harumiya and brought to the front of “Gebabashi” (a roofed bridge built during the Muromachi Era).

### ② *An elaborate traditional picture scroll of a journey*

In contrast with the feeling of excitement during “Yamadashi,” Shimosha’s Satobiki has a more eye-catching atmosphere. Some people will be riding the logs, some will carry “nagamochi,” and some will dance with flower hats on. The dazzling parades color the town as it welcomes the spring season. Even in town, the “nagamochi” from the Higashi Yamada District of Shimosuwa is a traditional piece having the feel of the Edo Period. Because it goes from Harumiya to Akimiya, and making the city its major towing route, the Onbashira attracts a large number of visitors, only fitting for its grand finale.



### ③ *Towing until the Akimiya Shrine on the second day*

On the second day, the logs depart from “Gebabashi (a roofed bridge).” This is the place, within the grounds of the shrine, where feudal lords (many centuries ago) got off from their horses and carriages. The logs going to Akimiya depart from this bridge and slowly make their way to the town center climbing up a long hill (Taisha Doori). The four Onbashira logs will be kept for a night within the compound and transported to Akimiya for Tateonbashira (raising up of the logs), which is the final day of the Onbashira festival.

### ④ *Splendid staging of the Onbashira Festival*

Just like the Kamisha, the tip of the log will be sharpened to a cone tip. After this (“Kanmuri Otoshi”), the log will be tied with ropes and with the use of a tool called “Kurumaji,” the devotees will manually wind up the ropes to raise up the Onbashira logs. Some of the devotees will then climb atop the log and proudly wave tassels. The enshrinement of the trees happens in the middle of the resounding applause and thunderous acclamation and finally completes the staging of the Onbashira Festival. Beginning with “Yamadashi” until the raising up of the logs, the curtain comes down on the two months of the Onbashira Festival.

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## ☆Access

### A: To Suwa Taisha Kamisha Honmiya/Maemiya

Train: 10-minute taxi cab ride from Chino Station (JR Chuo Honsen)

Bus: Shinjuku to Suwa/Okaya (Chuo Expressway Bus): 10-minute taxi cab ride from Chuo Expressway Chino (Chuo-do Chino) bus stop.

Cars: 10 minutes from Chuo Expressway Suwa I.C.

### B: To Suwa Taisha Shimosha Harumiya/Akimiya

Train: 10-min walk from Shimosuwa Station (JR Chuo Line)

Bus: Shinjuku to Suwa/Okaya (Chuo Expressway Bus): 7-minute walk from Shimosuwa Bus Stop

Cars: 15 minutes from Nagano Expressway Okaya I.C.



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# INFORMATION

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## ☆Change of Operating Hours (Closing Time) for OIEA, Okaya City Hall and all its branch offices

Starting April 1, the City Office and all its branch offices will change its closing time for all office transactions.

■ (Before) 8:30 AM to 5:30 PM → ■ (After) 8:30 AM to 5:15 PM

After 5:15 PM, tax and water bill payments and filing of all family register-related documents can be made at the “Eki-mae” branch office inside Lala Okaya in front of Okaya Station or at the after office hours on-duty window (located at the west ground floor entrance of the city hall).

Copies of the family register and residence certificate and issuance of seal registration certificates can also be processed at the “Eki-mae” branch office.

Okaya Eki-mae Branch Office Operating Hours: 10:00AM to 7:00PM (Closed every 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday of the month and the year-end and new year’s holiday (December 29 to January 3))

## ☆From the Okaya City Tax Division

① Starting April 1, to ensure the privacy of information, when releasing all kinds of tax certificates or examining such application, the person-in-charge will ask the applicant to show his/her foreign resident’s card for verification.

② Tax for Light Vehicles

As of April 1<sup>st</sup>, all owners of light vehicles (kei cars) and motorized bicycle (issued in Okaya City) will have to pay taxes.

If you change car ownership or dispose of a car on or after April 2<sup>nd</sup>, you will not receive a refund for that fiscal year car tax payment, unlike the Prefectural car taxes. And if you buy a kei car and motorized bicycle on or after April 2<sup>nd</sup>, you will not incur any kei car taxes for that fiscal year.

③ Tax Exemption for light vehicles (yellow plate)

Owners of light vehicles with permanent physical or mental disabilities or the people living with them can apply for kei car tax exemption. But in some cases, exemptions may not be applicable depending on the disability. One can apply after sending the payment until the week before the payment deadline.

## ☆From the Okaya City Environment Division

Okaya City switched from free garbage collection to paid service starting April.

If you have questions regarding the new garbage bags, or the certificate stamps you can stick to use the old garbage bags, or for separating garbage and any other inquiry, call the Environment Division 0266-22-7040 or OIEA 0266-24-3226.

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