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STARS AND STRIPES

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OKINAWA

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STARS AND STRIPES
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INSIDE INFO



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CELEBRATE THE SEASON

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Nab some great souvenirs at Yachimun market Dec. 13-14

BY SHOJI KUDAKA,
STRIPE OKINAWA

Yachimun is a traditional product of Okinawa with a long history of more than 600 years. Tsuboya District in Naha was the Ryukyu Kingdom's primary source for pottery, but in the 1970s, Yomitan Village started to gain prominence in the earthenware world.

Yomitan Village is the host municipality of Torii Station and also home to Yachimun no Sato (pottery village) where a total of 19 studios and six kilns operate.

On Dec. 13 and 14, four studios of the village will gather to present their work at their annual pottery market in Yachimun no Sato.

The four studios operate Kitagama, a climbing kiln with 13 chambers, which is one of the biggest in

Okinawa. This annual market in December draws many visitors who look to discover the signature craft of Okinawa, which is known for its unique designs inspired by the island's nature and culture. Many products are expected to be offered at a discounted price as well.

Come to Yachimun no Sato and find your own Yachimun!
kudaka.shoji@stripes.com

Kitagama Toki Ichi
(Kiln pottery market)

LOCATION: Yachimun no Sato
Kitagama Hiroba (26.407965, 127.75358) *Free parking space available at (26.405113, 127.755263) and (26.406203, 127.754268)

DATES: Dec. 13, 14 (Sat, Sun)

HOURS: 9 a.m. – 6 p.m.

INSTAGRAM: @kitagama_baiten



Photo courtesy of Kitagama baiten

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Halloween photo contest winners

We loved all of your spooky and fun costumes for this year's Halloween photo contest! Many Stripes readers sent their submissions. This year, Pauline from Yokota won for Best Pet Costume, Candice Trigg from Yokota won Best Individual and Kristan Brown from Camp Humphreys won the Best Family category. Check out their submissions as well as some other honorable mentions below. Don't forget to follow us at [Facebook.com/StripesPacific](https://www.facebook.com/StripesPacific) and [instagram.com/starsandstripespacific](https://www.instagram.com/starsandstripespacific) for more great contests like this!



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Winners



BEST PET

PAULINE, YOKOTA AB



BEST INDIVIDUAL

CANDICE TRIGG, YOKOTA AB



BEST FAMILY

KRISTAN BROWN, CAMP HUMPHREYS

Okinawa's participants



LINDSEY TUGMAN, KADENA



STEPHANIE, BUTLER



EMMA SMITH, KINSER



TENISHA LYNCH, COURTNEY



FLOR POWER, KINSER



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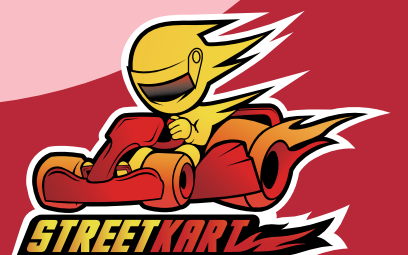
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What's Christmas like in Japan?

6 Unique ways Japanese celebrate the holidays!

LIVE JAPAN

Each December, Christmas is celebrated by people in countries all over the world, and Japan is no exception! Many of the Christmas customs seen in western countries can also be found in Japan, but often reimagined in a different way than you may expect. There are also some new traditions that have been created by the Japanese, making Christmas in Japan a unique celebration of its own accord!

Japanese Christmas: A holiday for lovers?

Christmas is known throughout the world for being a Christian holiday, but in Japan it is treated as a secular celebration and tends to be celebrated regardless of one's religion. In fact, very few people in Japan consider themselves Christian, but the holiday of Christmas is enjoyed by people from far and wide in Japan. One of the key differences is that Christmas in Japan is thought of as a holiday for lovers, rather than a time to gather with family. (In Japan, the New Year's holiday is the time families traditionally gather). Typically couples will plan a romantic date, such as dinner at a special restaurant, or strolling the town to view Christmas lights. However, for those whom

Christmas has particular religious significance attached, churches offering Christmas mass can almost certainly be found in any major city in Japan.

Illuminations and decorations

Winter illuminations are not necessarily related to Christmas, but to many, the two are completely intertwined. Each winter season, cities in Japan become full of twinkling lights, mesmerizing all who cross their dazzling path. In recent years, many business are opting for eco-friendly LED lights, which use significantly less electricity than the traditional varieties. Large scale projection mapping illuminations have also become a popular Christmas time feast for the eyes. While the tradition of putting up a Christmas tree in one's home is not common in Japan, many businesses and shopping centers will display beautifully decorated trees, along with other Christmas-themed displays that turn an ordinary trip to the mall into a magical winter wonderland experience!

Does Santa visit Japan?

Luckily for Japanese children, the concept of Santa Claus is one Christmas tradition that is alive and well in Japan. Like other children worldwide, Japanese kids also look forward to a visit from Santa on



Christmas Eve and a present waiting for them on Christmas morning. Couples also may exchange presents for Christmas, but generally speaking, gift-giving plays a considerably smaller role than it does in Western countries. One unique twist on the lore: in the Western tradition, Santa enters homes by climbing down chimneys - an act difficult to do in a nation where most homes lack this sort of entrance! However, ask most Japanese children, and they'll have an interesting take: Santa is typically seen as some kind of magical ghost that appears with goodies!

A uniquely Japanese Christmas dinner: fried chicken

It may come as a surprise, but rather than feasting on a glazed ham or roast turkey, the most popular choice for Japanese Christmas dinner is fried chicken! In fact, the food is in such high demand during this time, that a certain American fast food chain takes pre-orders of their

popular fried chicken bucket as early as November! However, even if you don't place a special order, you can easily find plenty of fried chicken in convenience stores and supermarkets on Christmas Eve, along with pre-made roast chicken as well.

Japanese Christmas Cakes

For dessert, instead of gingerbread men, other cookies, or pie, it's traditional to eat Christmas cake ('kurisumasu keeki', as it's called in Japanese) with loved ones. While Japan is certainly not the only country to enjoy cake at Christmas time, you might be surprised to learn that what they're eating is not the usual fruitcake that's typically eaten in European and American countries. Instead, kurisumasu keeki is usually a kind of sponge cake-based strawberry shortcake. Japan's love affair with Christmas cake dates back to 1922, beginning with the Fujiya confectionery manufacturer, who marketed the cream-covered cakes with the straightforward tagline, "Let's eat cake on Christmas!" ("kurisumasu ni keeki o tabemashou"). Unlike the humble fruitcake eaten in some other countries on the holiday, Japanese Christmas cakes were beautifully decorated with strawberries, sugar Santas, and other Christmas-themed edible ornaments. At the time, the ornate cakes were considered expensive

and were slow to catch on with the general public. However, by the 1970s, eating kurisumasu keeki had become a Christmas Eve tradition among households in Japan. These days in Japan, while the white cream and strawberry Christmas cake still reigns supreme, you can find Christmas cakes of various types and flavors. Some recent cakes have included chocolate, various fruits, hazelnut, and ice cream among ingredients. You can even find cakes modeled after popular characters.

Christmas in Japanese pop culture

While Japan has adopted many of the Christmas customs of other countries, over the years they have incorporated them into their own culture so well, they have made them their own. Before December even begins you can hear Christmas music in the air. Traditional and foreign pop songs are popular, but Japan has an abundance of Christmas songs all their own that have become traditional in their own right. Around this time of year you can also find many TV and anime episodes centered around the theme of Christmas. If you are in Japan during the winter, please have a "Merii Kurisumasu!"—the Japanese way!

Speakin' Japanese

Pronunciation key: "A" is short (like "ah"); "E" is short (like "get"); "I" is short (like "it"); "O" is long (like "old"); "U" is long (like "tube"); and "AI" is a long "I" (like "hike"). Most words are pronounced with equal emphasis on each syllable, but "OU" is a long "O" with emphasis on that syllable.

Holiday talk

During the holiday season in Japan, you will see KFCs filled with young couples on Christmas Day, while on New Year's Eve, you will hear bells from temples heralding the arrival of the new year. Here are some useful Japanese words and phrases you can use during the holiday season.

"Kurisumasu wa doo sugoshimasuka?"
= How are you planning to spend Christmas day?
(**"Kurisumasu"** = Christmas day, **"doo"** = how, **"sugoshimasu"** = spend)

"Kanojo to Kentakkii ni ikimasu." = I will go to Kentucky Fried Chicken with my girlfriend.
(**"kanojo"** = girlfriend, **"kareshi"** = boyfriend, **"kentakkii"** = KFC, **"ikimasu"** = will go)

"Kurisumasu keeki wo kaimashita." = I bought a Christmas cake.
"Kanpai shimashoo." = Let's make a toast.
(**"keeki"** = cake, **"kaismashita"** = bought)
"Santakuroosu ga pizza wo haitatsu shiteimasu." = Santa Claus is delivering a pizza.
(**"santakuroosu"** = Santa Claus, **"haitatsu shiteimasu"** = delivering)

"Yoi otoshi wo." = Have a happy new year. (Greetings in the year-end)
"Joya-no-kane ga natte imasu." = The New Year's Eve bells are ringing.
(**"Joya-no-Kane"** = New Year's Eve bell, **"natte imasu"** = are ringing)
"Hanabi ga agatte imasu." = Fireworks are going off.
(**"hanabi"** = fireworks, **"agatte imasu"** = are going off)

"Akemashite omedeto gozaimasu!" = A happy new year! (Greetings in the new year)
"Kotoshimo yoroshiku onegai shimasu." = I ask for your continued goodwill.
"Hatsumode wa dokoni ikimasu ka?" = What shrine/temple are you going to visit during the first of the year?
(**"hatsumode"** = first visit to a shrine/temple for the year, **"dokoni"** = to where, **"ikimasu"** = will go)

WHEN ON OKINAWA –
You can also say it in **"Uchinaaguchi"** (island dialect) like this:
"Iitosshi mukaikimi soori." = Have a happy new year.
"Iisoogu wachi deebiru." = A happy new year! (greetings on Jan. 1)

– Takahiro Takiguchi,
Stripes Okinawa





Photo courtesy of Metropolis Magazine



How KFC became a Christmas tradition

BY CEZARY JAN STRUSIEWICZ,
METROPOLIS MAGAZINE

Despite the oft-repeated myth, Coca-Cola did not in fact invent the modern image of a fat, jolly, red-and-white-clad Santa Claus. Kind of a moot point though, now that the soft drink has become virtually synonymous with Christmas. For many people, the holiday season just wouldn't be complete without commercials featuring the now iconic Cola trucks delivering their black syrupy drink to every corner of the globe in time for Jesus' birthday. Well, almost every corner.

Despite Coca-Cola being one of the biggest beverage manufacturers in Japan, they never managed to make December 25 a part of their corporate identity over here. That's less inspiring than it sounds like because Christmas in Japan is still connected with a fast food brand that's bad for your health. But instead of Coke, it's KFC.

That's right — every Christmas in Japan, millions of people sit down to a holiday dinner of fast food chicken that comes in a cardboard bucket. The demand for Christmas KFC is so high in Japan that it must be pre-ordered months in advance; in some parts of the country, family packs have to be reserved in November or even October. How did this happen? Is it because Colonel Sanders is an overweight old man with white facial hair, and that reminds people of Santa Claus? Or does it have something to do with the recipe of KFC chicken? After all, if you add "grease" to KFC's 11 herbs and spices, you get 12, as in the Twelve Days of Christmas. Is that how the tradition got started?

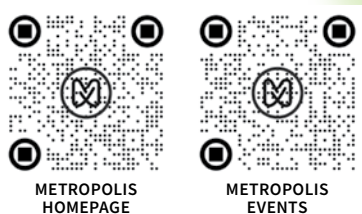
There are two likely explanations for Japan's Christmas obsession with KFC. It's possible that, many years ago, American expats living in Japan were looking for turkey for a traditional Christmas dinner, but not being able to find any (as they are rarely sold in Japan) decided to settle for chicken. But then, after realizing that the country also lacks Western-style ovens, they instead mobbed their local KFCs come Christmas time, and were eventually emulated by the locals. Japan does have a long tradition of taking cultural cues from the United States, so this theory definitely has some merit.

However, the much simpler answer is that the end of the year

is a time for splurging and treating yourself for pretty much everyone around the globe. As it so happens, meat is notoriously expensive in Japan, as you would expect from a country that gave us Kobe beef, the most expensive meat in the world. Therefore, it stands to reason that Christmas time would be when many Japanese people spend a little more on tasty animal flesh — within reason of course. Seeing as chicken is one of the more affordable kinds of meat in Japan, naturally most families would choose to stuff themselves with feathered dinosaur descendants year after year, thus creating this modern Japanese tradition.

You also have to consider the fact that Christmas is not a public holiday in Japan, and it is anything but sacred over here. For many people, it's really no different than, let's say, Valentine's Day. In fact, a lot of young Japanese people have co-opted the holiday for themselves, turning it into a kind of unofficial sequel to February 14th, only with cake and chicken instead of chocolate. KFC is fully aware of it, too, which is why their Japanese restaurants also serve cake during Christmas time, becoming the full-service stop for all of your Christmas needs. And why not? Without the religious aspect, December 25 is just another day in Japan, so why not celebrate it with animal fat in the shape of a drumstick?

The KFC (Kentucky Fried Christmas) Phenomenon has been such a hit in Japan that convenience stores are now trying to get in on that juicy racket. Most huge chains like Lawson or Family Mart now offer their own Christmas family packs of deep-fried chicken in an attempt to make a dent in KFC's monopoly. Will they succeed? It doesn't seem likely, but then again, neither does the idea of an American fast food chain becoming synonymous with Christmas in an East Asian island nation. When you think of it like that, I suppose anything is possible.



STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHOJI KUDAKA,
STRIPES OKINAWA

Given that it's made from sticky rice, just like the Japanese rice cake, and how similar the names are, it's understandable to assume mochi and Okinawan muchi are the same.

But, although they are close, you'd be wrong.

Muchi is an Okinawan sweet with a unique look and background. One distinct feature is how it is presented.

Unlike mochi, which is most typically made by pounding sticky rice, muchi is made by kneading dough made of powdered sticky rice and water. Once the dough is ready, it is wrapped in a Gettoui leaf (galingale) or a leaf of Bilow (Livistona), a kind of palm leaf

before being steamed.

The leaves are common items in traditional Okinawan cooking. According to "Okinawa no Dentou Ryouri", a book by cooking expert Kayoko Matsumoto, galingale is used as a repellent because of its strong smell, which is thought to be effective in driving away bad vibes. Likewise, Bilow palm was believed to be a sacred tree where a god resides. Since it is wrapped in a leaf, muchi is also called "kasa muchi", which means "leaf mochi" in Okinawan dialect.

Every year on Dec. 8 of the lunar calendar, many Okinawans eat muchi as part of their local tradition. Eating the local rice cake on that specific day is meant to be a ritual to ward off bad luck and pray for health and longevity.

This has its roots in a legend where a woman fed her brother a rice cake which contained piece of metal or tile. The brother

was rumored to have become a demon and eaten people. Witnessing that he could eat a rice cake containing a hard tile convinced the sister that her brother really became an evil one, and she killed him by pushing him off a cliff. Some think that this episode symbolizes the strength of women.

Dec. 8 of the lunar calendar will be Jan. 26, 2026. Around that time, winter is expected to be in full swing on Okinawa, and people describe the chill as "muchibisa" (chill of muchi).

Leading up to that day, many Okinawans get busy preparing muchi to start a new year with good luck. Families who have newly born babies commonly make extra muchi to share the sweets with their friends and relatives. It takes some time and effort to make, but the confection is available at some local stores as well, coming in flavors like brown sugar and sweet potato and white sugar. Recently, flavors such as cocoa and squash have been introduced, as well.

When a new year rolls around and it feels chilly on the island, it's time to make your pick and try this sticky and chewy treat for a happy new year.

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Make your own

- Mix 4 oz. of powdered brown sugar and 10 oz. of powdered sticky rice.
- Add 8 oz. of water by adding 2-3 oz. at a time and knead the dough until it feels as soft as an earlobe.
- Cut the dough into small pieces so that each fits a galingale leaf. Wrap each one with the leaf and tie it with a string. (The leaves need to be washed and dried beforehand)
- Steam the wrapped dough for 30 to 40 minutes.

- Source: Goyah.net





File photos

My faves Year-end traditions

BY TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,
STRIPES OKINAWA

Just like in the States, the holiday season is the most cheerful - and busiest - in Japan. With endless bonenkai celebrations heralding the season in the beginning of December, the party doesn't end until early the following year. Throw in countless lights, gifts and greeting cards, and The Land of the Rising Sun sure does finish the year with a flurry. Despite the busy schedule, the holidays bring a lot of joy; here are a few of my favorite traditions of the season.

■ Winter Illuminations

There is nothing more heartwarming than winter illuminations to promote holiday spirit in Japan. From the end of November to Christmas day or throughout the winter, elaborate and colorful light displays throughout the nation amaze with dazzling brilliance. In addition to promoting the holiday spirit, there are more practical reasons for winter illuminations in Japan. There are less daylight hours, the air is becoming drier and clearer, the temperature difference between day and night decreases - are all factors that enhance the illuminations viewing.

Check out event listings at Stripes Japan and find Illumination attractions near you!



VIEW VIDEO!

■ Bonenkai

The arrival of the holiday season at the end of November reminds me of Bonenkai - a traditional Japanese year-end party. The party is more of a Japanese ritual, dating back hundreds of years, and is considered as one of the most important parties of the year. bonenkai can be enjoyed with anyone, but typically is done so with coworkers. We can see well-trained entertainment at work-arranged party where we often wear neckties on our heads to show how much we are enjoying or into the party. I'll usually enjoy bonenkai with at least five or six groups every year. It always provides a good reunion opportunity for friends who many not see each other as often as they'd like, as well. For many of us, the month of December means unlimited bonenkai.

■ Kurisumasu

Just like in America, Christmas goes together with gifts in Japan. Japanese children will hang up large stockings decorated

Speakin'
Japanese

Let's ring in
the New Year!

BY TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,
STRIPES OKINAWA



We are finally in the holiday season. Towns and streets are covered in beautiful winter illuminations. They look very brilliant in the cold air.

"Totemo kirabiyaka desu!" • totemo = very
• kirabiyaka = brilliant
= They look very brilliant! • .. desu = it is.. / they are..

This is a great phrase to describe the holiday illuminations as you stroll on a nice evening. Try it out as it will surely promote the holiday spirit!

Stay safe and warm and don't catch a cold this winter season.

"Kazewo hikanaide!" • kaze = a cold
= Don't catch a cold! • .. wo hiku = get/catch/draw..
• naide = don't be/get

It's cold, but I wish you a nice, heartwarming winter in Japan!

The old year is finally coming to an end. Let's hope the upcoming year will be one filled with happiness, safety, and prosperity.

"Yoi otoshi wo!" • yoi = good
= Have a happy new year! • otoshi = a year
• .. wo = have a ...

With wish for a happy new year, let's exchange our greetings in Japanese. I wish you a very, very happy new year! Yoi otoshi wo!

Check out how to visit shrines and temples



In the next few weeks, Japanese will be headed to shrines and temples to usher in the new year. There are certain things you need to know if you plan on doing the same. This video will help you out.

There are thousands of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in Japan. So, visit one or some to feel such a wonderful, sacred feel yourself!

takiguchi.takahiro@stripes.com



VIDEO
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guitar! Santa really came through that year. When I became a father, I became Santa to my daughter. Although some of my friends dressed up as Santa and presented a gift to their children by hand, I would hide my daughter's gift somewhere in the house and put a letter written in old northern European characters into her stocking to tell her where her gifts were.

■ Preparing Nengajo

Even with the recent trend of using email to carry the greetings, exchanging New Year's cards, called "nengajo" (New Year's Greeting Card), remains very popular in Japan. Just like Christmas cards in the States, preparing nearly 100 nengajo always reminds me of just how blessed I am. In this time, however, I also often receive "mochu hagaki" (mourning-notification cards) to decline exchanging New Year's greetings. The cards are sent by someone in mourning as a way to notify others of a significant death in their life, and to politely decline taking part in the tradition for that year. Why not try sending a New Year's card to your Japanese friends? And when you do, be sure to hand-write names and addresses, even if you used your computer to make the cards. Then, mark the postcard with the word "NENGAJO" in red and send it out before Dec. 25. This way, the postman will be able to deliver them on time.

■ Omisoka (New Year's Eve)

Just like others, I can't help but get excited when New Year's Eve arrives. Anticipated for a happier and better New Year, we are usually awake overnight on the day. With my wife and daughter, I usually visit a large market, such as the Ameyoko Street in Ueno, and join the people flocking to buy tuna, lobster, salmon and other expensive foods for New Year's parties. In the evening, the nation-wide "Red and White" singing contest can't be missed while sampling "toshikoshi soba" (over-year noodle). When the program has ended just before midnight, we visit a temple to hear the rings of 108 "joyanokene" bells to cleanse humanity of the 108 sins recognized by Buddhism. Our family tradition, which has slowly changed, involved everyone in the family going to a Shinto shrine after the temple visit on Jan. 1 between 1 and 3 a.m. for "hatsumode," a traditional first temple or shrine visit of the year. After that, we would visit a beach, mountain or tall building, such as Tokyo Skytree, to enjoy the first sunrise of the year.

takiguchi.takahiro@stripes.com

in green, white, red and gold colors on the wall of their bedroom on Christmas Eve, expecting Santa to deliver a gift while they sleep. Like American children, many write letters to Saint Nick, although you won't find Japanese children baking cookies for Santa. I remember believing in Santa Claus

until sometime in my junior high days, about 50 years ago. When I was a 6th-grader, I wished the Norwegian saint for a guitar. I hung up the largest stocking I could find, although it seemed too small for a guitar, and to my joy, the next morning I found my stocking tied to a shining, brand new

My faves New Year's customs

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,
STRIPE OKINAWA

Japan is home to countless seasonal events throughout the year. Among them, however, New Year holidays, called “Oshogatsu,” are still the most important.

After preparing for the new year by cleaning up the house, cooking festive dishes and writing New Year's greeting cards, most Japanese take three days to a whole week off in the beginning of January. During the time, the bustling Japanese economy practically comes to a standstill while schools, companies and shops close down. The closings bring cities to an almost eerie quietness until the great rush back home and return to work the second week of January.

While you're in Japan for the holiday season, take part in some of the New Year's traditions. Here are a few of my favorites:

■ Omisoka

Oshogatsu begins with various events on Omisoka (New Year's Eve), and I like the day more than any of New Year's days, as I can see people - young and old - excited and full of anticipation for a happier new year.

On the day, I usually visit a large market with my wife in search of high-end festive foods, such as bluefin tuna or premium wagyu beef. The list prices of many things drastically drop, as shops look to sell off as much as possible before closing down for the holiday. The prices might start at 30 percent off, but they go up - 50, 60 and even 70 percent off or more. Trains run

all night, so crowds of people are walking on every street towards shrines and temples for their New Year's visit. The lights are on at every house in town, showing how everybody is awake in anticipation for a happy turn of the calendar. All of it together makes me extra cheerful and happy.

■ Everything is new!

In The Land of Rising Sun, everything is reborn with the new year! In the early days of January, we often call any action and event by using the prefix “Hatsu-,” “-hajime,” or “-zome,” which literally mean “first time”. Hatsumode is the first visit to a temple or shrine, Kakizome is the first writing or drawing and Shigoto Hajime is the first day of working. I like the tradition as it has a refreshed feeling - as if I was doing things for the first time in my life. We believe Hatsuyume (first dream of the year) tells the fortune of the upcoming year. In hopes of having a good dream, we traditionally lay a classical drawing of “Takarabune” (treasure ship) under our pillow before going to sleep. Tradition says that the Seven Gods of Fortune on the treasure ship drawing come out of the drawing and present us with a great dream while we are sleeping. Mount Fuji, a hawk and an eggplant are considered the best three dreams traditionally, as they bring great luck for the year. I always prepare a

pen and a memo pad near my pillow to jot down the first dream when I wake up. Traditionally, we consider the dream we see on the night of Jan. 2 as the first dream, so give it a shot this year.

TAKARABUNE



NEW YEAR'S EVE



FUJISAN



HATSUMODE



KAGAMIWARI



Photo courtesy of U.S. Navy

FUKUBUKURO



■ Strolling in a vacant city

Different from the extremely cheerful New Year's Eve, New Year's Day is very quiet, as most people stay at home enjoying sake and food. Shops and restaurants in town are closed and you see very few cars and pedestrians passing through the streets. I feel the day is the perfect time to enjoy checking out fascinating decorations without the hustle and bustle of a normal day. While strolling, you can see unique traditional New Year's decorations, such as Kadomatsu (gate pines made of bamboo stalks and pine branches) and Shimekazari (straw rope strung with small angular strips of white paper) installed at the entrance of houses, office buildings, supermarkets or shopping malls. They are believed to purify the entrance and invite new life into the home and workplace. You may also find temporary booths installed next to convenience stores. They are for onenga (gift of new year's greetings) - cakes, cookies or towels in traditional Japanese wrapping paper. We bring the gift when we visit relatives and friends for our New Year's greetings. It's really a fun experience strolling in town on New Year's Day!



■ Otoshidama and Fukubukuro

When I was a little boy, a wonderful tradition kept driving me to visit my grandparents' home every year. It's Otoshidama - when parents and relatives traditionally give cash in a decorated envelope to children after New Year's greetings. The amount of money given to a child depends on the age, but it is around 1,000 yen to 10,000 yen. So, middle or high schoolers who have many relatives can make a lot of money! While most of the money is put into the bank, some would find its way to Akihabara. I can remember buying a radio-controlled car, cassette recorder and the latest Walkman with the newfound money. I remember that my 33-year old daughter would often go clothes shopping with her otoshidama. She always purchased fukubukuro (lucky bag), which is a mystery bag filled with unknown contents that sells for 50 percent off or more. Although she couldn't tell what she was going to get, she said it is one of the great chances to obtain luxurious clothes or goods at a special price.



■ Otoso and Kagamiwari

Oshogatsu means the time to eat, drink and sleep for many Japanese. And sake is important in celebrating the New Year's holiday! Celebrations begin by sipping Otoso (New Year's spiced sake). It is made of sake and various herbs and spices. We make it by dipping a small paper bag of spices and herbs, such as bark, pepper and bellflower, into a sake bottle for a couple of days. The herb-flavored sake is thought to be effective in preventing illness, expelling evil influences and inviting good health for the coming year. In public facilities, various firms and local communities, New Year's is traditionally celebrated with Kagamiwari (barrel opening ceremony). During the ceremony, participants open the sake barrel with a wooden hammer before distributing the drink in hundreds of square wooden cups called masu. After everyone has received their drink, they shout “kampai” (cheers) and take a sip. With ceaseless Shinnenkai (New Year's parties), this is the time to enjoy sake with relatives, families and friends.



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Omamori, Ema, and Omikuji

Why Japanese lucky charms are amazing!

BY NAO,
LIVE JAPAN

Nowadays, Japanese temples and shrines are widely known by travelers from all over the world, so many people have an idea of what they are like. But what about a colorful tiny drawstring-bag-looking stuff that are found for sale there? Or pentagon-ish shaped boards hanging together? Or, a paper that some visitors tie up onto a string? Have you got any ideas about what they are?

In this article, you'll find the meanings of these characteristic religious charms, when and how they came into existence, and how the Japanese today take them.

OMAMORI: About Japan's traditional talismans

These colorful tiny drawstring-bag-looking items are called omamori (written with the Japanese character for "protection").

BRIEF HISTORY OF OMAMORI

The idea of talisman already existed in Japan 14,000 -1000 BCE. Then it became the shape of "omamori", in the Heian era, about 1000 years ago.

Back then, temples and shrines had growing power and influence. So, the people called "Oshi", who belonged to and working for temples/shrines, traveled all over Japan to acquire more believers. However, although people wanted to visit the introduced temple/shrine, in many cases, it was impossible to do as there was little choice as a means of transportation.

Therefore, omamori was born. It gave the people, who lived far away from the temple/shrine where the spirit of omamori belonged to, peace and protection.



File photos
① Hukuro mamori ② Suzu mamori ③ Omamori ya

THE KINDS OF OMAMORI

- **HUKURO MAMORI:** A bag type.
- **OMAMORI YA:** An arrow type, most commonly called "Hama-ya". Hama means "to beat evil spirits".
- **OFUDA, MAMORI FUDA:** A wooden type. Also, what is inside of hukuro mamori is this ofuda. It's always wrapped with a white paper as it is believed that the paper protects ofuda's power and cleanness.
- **SUZU MAMORI:** A bell type. It is believed that the clear sound of this Japanese tiny bell scares away evil spirits, hence it protects you.
- **OTHER:** A temple/shrine sometimes has its unique mamori, generally using what it's deeply connected, its symbol, etc. For example, Mikami shrine in Kyoto that symbolizes 'hair' has a small Japanese comb-shaped omamori.

WHAT ARE THEY?

Basically, omamori is what protects you. However, some of omamori are for a specific purpose.

COMMON TYPES OF JAPANESE OMAMORI

- **GENERAL:** To support you to live peacefully and healthily.
- **HADAMAMORI:** To protect you both physically and mentally. You need to carry it with you all the time. In the past, people sew it onto their hada-gi (underwear), so it is called hadamamori. It is said if something as bad as hurt you happens, hadamamori will sacrifice itself to save you, so it gets cracked or broke.
- **YAKU YOKE:** To protect you from evil spirits, bad people/accidents/etc. yaku = sufferings, yoke = to avoid.
- **KENKO (HEALTH) MAMORI:** To protect your body from disease, injury, etc.
- **SHIGOTO (WORK) MAMORI:** To support you to get a nice job, to succeed in your job/project, etc
- **RENAI (ROMANCE) JOJU:** To support you to fulfil your love.
- **EN MUSUBI (WORK, ROMANCE, ETC.):** To support you to connect with others. It is generally believed to help you with matchmaking. However, it can also lead you to good friends or even a nice company as 'en' in Japanese means connection, chance, and any sort of relationship.
- **KIN UN (FINANCE):** To enhance your luck with money.
- **GAKUGYO MAMORI, GAKUGYO JOJU, GOKAKU KIGAN (STUDY):** To support you to achieve the learning target or to pass the exam.
- **KOTSU ANZEN MAMORI (TRANSPORTATION SAFETY):** To protect you from accidents



→ during transportation. The most common use of this omamori is to keep it on a vehicle you drive.

- **ANZAN (EASY DELIVERY):** To support you to deliver a baby with no trouble.
- **PET MAMORI:** To support your pet to live healthily.

WHERE CAN YOU GET AN OMAMORI?
You can get them at Jimusho (at a temple)/Shamusho (at a shrine)/Juyosho, which are stands selling a variety of amulets and other items.

It is important to know that while omamori may be cute in appearance, they are religious items and not something that you ‘buy’ per se. Omamori is given by Hotoke (Buddha) or Kami (Shinto deities). Hence, the money you pass to staff is not a payment but a dedication.

HOW TO TAKE CARE OF OMAMORI?
Supposing you acquire a hukuro mamori, you should always have it on you, ideally; this can be seen as similar to a St. Christopher’s medallion or similar. However, if it is a bit difficult, you can keep it at home at a place that’s bright and clean. Also, if it’s possible, you should put it somewhere higher than level with your eyes.

Ofuda and Omamori ya are to keep at home. For these kinds of omamori, it is essential to put them at a bright and clean place that’s higher than level with your eye.

Another important thing to remember is that ofuda is ideally placed facing a bright direction, which is to the south or the east. As for Omamori ya, keep it close to Ofuda if you possess one, and never put arrowhead up to the sky, which is believed to belong to Kami.

OMAMORI ETIQUETTE
Is it okay to open the bag?
No. To be precise, this bag is just a thing to protect the omamori. What omamori really has is fuda (a holy wooden piece) inside of it. And, as all fuda are blessed by hotoke/kami, it is believed that to remove it from the bag or to see it directly is disrespectful towards hotoke/kami.

Is it okay to throw it away when it gets old/dirty or when I don’t need it anymore?
No. You can’t just bin it. The Japanese believe that items such as this must be returned to hotoke/kami, as they filled omamori with sacred power.

- There are several ways to give omamori back to hotoke/kami.
- 1) **Simply bring it back to where you got it.**
All temples/shrines have a place to gather omamori that are no longer needed. You can leave your omamori there with some osaisen (money to dedicate to hotoke/kami) to show your appreciation.
 - 2) **Send omamori back to where you got it.**
If it is difficult for you to come back to Japan, it is worth checking if the temple/shrine accepts returning omamori via post.
 - 3) **Ask a temple/shrine nearby.**



Enma File photos

If there are temples/shrines near to you, you might want to ask if they are the same denomination (Buddhism) or sharing the same Kami (Shintoism). If so, they may be able to take care of your omamori on behalf of where you originally acquired it.

4) **Burn it at home.**
It might sound a bit barbaric. But, first of all, all the omamori brought back to the temple/shrine are to be burned. So, it might make sense to do it at home when you can’t reach the temple/shrine.

To burn what you have cherished/appreciated is a Japanese religious ritual that can send the item to the top sacred place, akin to heaven in Christianity.

Thus, as a ritual, you must wrap your omamori with a pinch of salt in a clean white paper before putting omamori into a fire. (Salt is believed it can purify evil spirits.)

Is it okay to have many omamori?
Yes. You might come across someone who advises you not to have two or more omamori mostly because, considering omamori is a shared spirit by hotoke/kami, they would fight each other. But the predominant belief is that both hotoke and kami possess a merciful heart and will watch over you as long as you are respectful.

Having said that, you might want to consider whether you are getting more omamori than you can take care of properly.

What do the Japanese think of omamori?
Although it is said that most Japanese people are not overly religious, many of them still have omamori. In fact, they often obtain omamori on New Year’s day when they make the first visit to a temple/shrine, or when they feel they have something out of hand so they need help from hotoke/kami.

It is also common to give omamori to people they care about, especially on the occasion of a life event. For example, parents give their children a “Gokaku Kigan” omamori when they sit for a university entrance exam.

**EMA:
Japanese prayer boards**

Visit most any temple or shrine and you’ll see an area

‘decorated’ with colorful wooden boards. These are ema, Japanese wishing board.

People dedicate ema when they have a wish or when their wish has come true. The E in ema means ‘picture’, so it’s always got a picture on it. There are not only pentagon-shaped ema but also square-shaped one or other sorts depending on the area or temples/shrines.

BRIEF HISTORY OF EMA
In ancient times, people dedicated a live horse to kami when their wish came true. However, not all people were rich enough to prepare an actual horse, and shrines weren’t able to look after all the horses that were brought in. Therefore, this custom gradually changed from a live horse to clay figures of horses and wooden horses, then to a board with a picture of a horse.

And, this is why this wishing board is called ‘ema’ (e=picture, ma=horse).

Nowadays, the picture on the board varies, and you can see the personality of the temple/shrine from the sorts of ema they offer.

HOW TO WRITE ON AN EMA
First of all, you might wonder, does your wish have to be written in Japanese? The answer is no. If you write it from your heart, hotoke/kami will understand even though you write it in your own language.

There is not a rule when you write ema apart from to be polite and respectful. It is preferable to write your full name, address, and birthday plus year, so hotoke/kami can know whose wish it is. However, most people only use their name or initials for safety reasons.

Is it okay to bring them back to home?
Yes, on condition that you haven’t written your wish on it. Treat it the same as omamori: keep somewhere clean, bright, and higher than your eye level.

Do the Japanese write ema?
Yes. Especially before a university/school entrance exam, many students will go to a shrine that has kami of studying as their symbol and write their wish on an ema. Adults also go to a temple/shrine to dedicate ema when they have something they want to achieve.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

OMIKUJI: How to draw your fortune



Omikuji paper version File photos

OMIKUJI: Japanese fortune slips

Omikuji is a type of Japanese fortune that is written on a strip of paper. These days, some temples/shrines may also have English omikuji.

The list below shows the most common kinds of luck they will tell you.

MEANING OF OMIKUJI SYMBOLS

大吉 (Dai-kichi): Super lucky

吉 (Kichi): Lucky

中吉 (Chu-kichi): Lucky enough, okay

小吉 (Sho-kichi): So-so

半吉 (Han-kichi): Half-good

末吉 (Sue-kichi): It might not be your time for now, but your luck will come later (in the year)

凶 (Kyo): Bad

小凶 (Sho-kyo): Little bad

半凶 (Han-kyo): Half-bad

末凶 (Sue-kyo): Bad luck will come later (in the year)

大凶 (Dai-kyo): Very bad

WHERE TO GET (DRAW) AN OMIKUJI?

Before you try your luck with an omikuji, you should have something specific in mind - a hope, dream, or something else that you would like insight into.

There are typically two styles of omamori at a temple/shrine.

1) Omikuji stick version

You'll find this at the Jimusho (at a temple)/Shamusho (at a shrine)/Juyosho. If you ask staff for an omikuji, they will pass you a tubular box. Draw a stick and tell (or show) staff the number on it. Then, they give you a fortune slip with the corresponding number.

2) Omikuji paper version

You'll find a box with full of omikuji in the site of a temple/shrine, usually somewhere close to the Jimusho (at a temple)/Shamusho (at a shrine)/Juyosho. In this case, it is simple. Put a coin into Saisen-bako (a separated box attached along with the omikuji box) and draw a folded paper yourself. This will have a number on it which corresponds to a series of drawers. Then take a fortune slip from the drawer with your number on it.



Omikuji stick version

WHAT TO DO WITH OMIKUJI?

Now that you have your omikuji, have a look at it. It's said these will provide some insight into your question.

When your omikuji tells a good fortune: You should keep it.

When your omikuji tells a bad thing: You should leave it at the temple/shrine, so that hotoke/kami can take care of your omikuji and no bad thing will happen to you. This is why people tie up their fortune slips onto a string.

WHEN TO GET AN OMIKUJI?

Many people draw their fortune on New Year's day to see their fortune for the year. However, it is okay to draw an omikuji whenever you want. Just remember to say hello to hotoke/kami first before you dash straight for omikuji!

Is it okay to draw omikuji several times until I get a good one?

This is not advisable. Omikuji is a message from hotoke/kami to you. Accordingly, it can be considered disrespectful to draw omikuji again and again until you get one you like, as it equally means you are rejecting or having doubt about what they told you.

Also, even though you may have drawn a 'bad' fortune, be sure to read the whole omikuji. They always include advice from hotoke/kami as well. So, you might want to listen to their advice instead of turning a blind eye and give it another shot.

Having said that, it is okay to draw an omikuji on another day as your fortune may have changed after a while.

WHAT DO THE JAPANESE THINK OF OMIKUJI?

As stated above, many Japanese people draw omikuji on New Year's Day. However, it is more of a part of an event of visiting a temple/shrine, that gives you a special atmosphere.

In general, they don't take the result too seriously especially when it tells a bad fortune. Though, at the same time, many Japanese still have religious respect for omikuji, so they bear in mind what they are told.

You might think it is a little bit challenging to try a religious thing when visiting Japan, or might be worried about being disrespectful somehow. Temples and shrines are very inviting and welcoming to people of all backgrounds. Do not hesitate to dive into a whole new culture!

Naminoue Shrine

BY SUSANN SCHUSTER,
JAPAN TRAVEL

Naminoue Shrine is a Shinto shrine in Naha City, Okinawa Prefecture. It is located on a high cliff overlooking Naminoue Beach and the ocean. Any boat that enters and exits the trading base of Naha Port looks to the shrine on top of the high cliff and prays for a safe journey, the shrine has always been revered and people pray for a rich fish catch and a rich harvest as well.

Each new year the king himself visited the shrine on behalf of his

people to pray for the peace and prosperity of the nation. The Naminoue Shrine is admired as the "main shrine of the kingdom". It was classified as a Kanpei-shousha (Shrine of National Significance) and Okinawa Sochinju (Shrine that protects all of Okinawa) in the Meiji era, but it was destroyed during the war.

After the war, the shrine office (Shamusho) and the main shrine (Honden) were rebuilt in 1953. The church (Haiden) followed a little later and was rebuilt in 1961. In 2006 the Naminoue Shrine was declared a Historic Heritage Site of the City of Naha.



From Naha Airport, it's a 10 minute monorail ride to Asahibashi Station, followed by a 15 minute walk.

A direct taxi ride from the airport takes about 10 minutes (~1200 yen).

Monorail passengers could alight at Kencho-mae station, and catch a bus (2, 5, 15, 45) from Paletter-kumoji-mae to Nishinjo stop, leaving a 3 minute walk to the shrine.

ADDRESS: 1-25-11 Wakasa, Naha, Okinawa

HOURS: 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

PHONE: 098-868-3697



(We are open this month please check our website for December business hours and details.)

Open 9:00-17:30 (Last entry 16:15)
Tel. 098-965-3400
961-30 Ishikawa Kadekaru
Uruma City Okinawa
www.bios-hill.co.jp
Please check our calendar
(<https://www.bios-hill.co.jp/price/>)

Bios Orchids Garden Bios no Oka



*Please check the QR code for rates.

*Discount for Okinawa residents only.





File Photos

New Year's foods

Traditional New Year's foods are prepared in advance to minimize cooking and household chores during the holiday.

Osechi-ryori, a special selection of food, is prominently featured at most New Year's sittings. This includes boiled "konbu" (seaweed), "kamaboko" (fish cakes), "kurikinton" (mashed sweet potato with chestnut), "kinpiragobo" (simmered burdock root), "kuromame" (sweetened black soybeans) and "ebi" (shrimp). Many of these dishes are sweet, sour, or dried, so they can keep fresh without refrigeration.

Mochi, a thick, gooey rice cake, is prepared so that it can be served as ozoni (soup with mochi and vegetables) for breakfast, lunch or any other time during the holidays.

Sashimi and sushi are often eaten, along with various non-Japanese foods. To let the overworked stomach rest, "nanakusagayu" (seven-herb rice soup) is prepared on Jan. 7 when the New Year's decorations are removed.

On Okinawa, dishes with seaweed and taro, such as "kubuirichi" (stir-fried seaweed) and "kubumaki" (seaweed roles), along with "nakamijiru" (stewed offal) are popular as New Year's foods.

— Takahiro Takiguchi,
Stripes Okinawa



Ozoni

Celebrate New Year's in the Oshogatsu fashion

BY TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,
STRIPES OKINAWA

New Year's, or oshogatsu, is one of Japan's most important and longest holidays. Although oshogatsu originally referred to the whole month of January, most people associate it with the first three days (sanganichi) of the month. On these days, people go to shrines or temples, spend time with friends and relatives while drinking sake and eat special New Year's dishes.

Throughout these days, the bustling Japanese economy practically comes to a standstill. Schools, companies and shops close down, and trains, planes and highways are packed as millions make their way to their hometowns or other travel destinations.

This year, most Japanese office workers will take at least nine consecutive days off from Dec. 27 to Jan. 4.

Keep this in mind if you do decide to travel. According to the Japan Association of Travel Agents, while many are heading to their hometowns, others will be taking

trips to some popular domestic destinations, including Okinawa, Tokyo, Kyushu, Tokai and Kyoto.

Huge cities like Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya take on an almost eerie quietness until the great rush back home and return to work. Although most shops and restaurants are closed in these big cities, some foreigners may find it the perfect time to check out the landscape. A walk down any quiet street in these cities reveals a fascinating blend of old and new. You can see "kadomatsu" (gate pines made from bamboo stalks and pine boughs) standing beside the shuttered entrances of skyscrapers and "shimekazari" (straw ropes strung with little angular strips of white paper) hanging across the front of parking lots, supermarkets or shopping malls. Both Kadomatsu and shimekazari are believed to purify the entrance and invite new and fresh life into the home and workplace. On New Year's Day, it is believed that Toshigami, the god of time and fertility, will enter homes and bring good luck for the coming year.

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Celebrate the new year with Yoseue

BY SHOJI KUDAKA,
STRIPES OKINAWA

Fireworks, parties, gifts and musical events may be the first things that come to mind for a New Year's celebration. But for many people in Okinawa or mainland Japan, it is also means a time to get hands on with a traditional craft.

Yoseue (group planting) is a form of gardening where different plants are put in a single pot or a container. It is also sometimes referred to as bonsai art.

In Japan, it is common to celebrate each season by putting together several seasonal plants for a Yoseue. Especially when January rolls around, it becomes a perfect item for a New Year's celebration.

On mainland Japan, a Yoseue for the new year is most typically made with Shou Chiku Bai (pine, bamboo, Japanese apricot), which are known as a trio of plants valued in celebrations. On Okinawa, there are subtropical plants that live up to such happy moments.

Wherever you are located, the tradition of Yoseue makes for beautiful New Year's holiday.

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Yoseue



Cape Chinen Park



Mt. Fuji

Hatsuhinode

Viewing and wishing upon the rising sun is "hatsuhinode," one of the most popular New Year's traditions. If weather allows, you should check it out. In Tokyo, observation decks on the Tokyo Tower and Sunshine City are two of the most popular hatsuhinode spots. On these observation decks, you can see the sun rising around 6:51 a.m. on Jan. 1. If you want to enjoy it in a quiet atmosphere, take a three-hour drive down to Cape Inubo-saki in Choshi City, Chiba Prefecture, where you can view the earliest sunrise (6:46 a.m.) on the Kanto Plain.

On Okinawa, Cape Hedo-misaki (kunigami-gun) and Kaichu Doro (Uruma City) and Cape Chinen Park are the three most popular spots for hatsuhinode. Sunrise at these spots will be between 7 a.m. and 7:30 a.m.

Nengajo & Otoshidama

Even with the recent trend of using email to carry the greetings, exchanging New Year's cards, called "nengajo", remains very popular in Japan. Try sending one to your Japanese friends. Be sure to handwrite names and addresses, even if you used your PC and printer to make the cards. Then, mark the postcard with the word "NENGAJO" in red and send it out before Dec. 25. This way, the postman will be able to deliver them on time.

Japanese give money in small decorated envelopes called "pochibukuro" to children on New Year's Day, which is called "otoshidama" (literally New Year's present). The

amount of money given depends on the age, but it is uncommon for amounts greater than 10,000 yen to be given.



Pochibukuro for otoshidama

Heavy traffic during holidays

Every holiday season, drivers can expect heavy traffic before and after winter vacations. Plan ahead and avoid areas where there may be crowds. Last year, the East Nippon Expressway Company (NEXCO) forecasted that heavy traffic would peak on various expressways around big cities between Dec. 28 – 30 and Jan. 2 – 3 (outbound) and Jan. 2 – 4 (inbound). The NEXCO EAST also said motor vehicles would likely congest the Tomei Expressway around the Yamato Tunnel near Naval Air Facility Atsugi Dec. 31 (outbound) plus Jan. 2 and 7 (inbound).

Those commuting on trains can also expect busy stations and full train cars. Usually the peak of traffic happens from Dec. 29 – 30 (outbound for Tohoku and Hokuriku regions) and Dec. 31 (outbound for Kansai region) and Jan. 2 and 3 (inbound), according to the NEXCO EAST.

So, if you are planning to take a domestic trip during the holidays, it's best to avoid traveling around that time frame. For this year's traffic forecasts and road conditions visit the Road Bureau website: www.mlit.go.jp/road/traffic





CROWD-PLEASING HOLIDAY POTLUCK IDEAS

Indulging in delicious food is one of the best parts of the holidays, and you'll likely be in constant need of something tasty to take along to all those holiday potlucks.

To be ready for any invitation, keep ingredients for your favorite recipes on-hand and use multi-purpose kitchen tools, like a high-performance blender, to expedite prep time, quickly chop veggies or cheese, and blend everything from dips and batters to dressings and sauces.

Not sure what to make for your next potluck? Here are some simple, crowd-pleasing recipes.

Appetizers

Small-bite hors d'oeuvres are perfect potluck fare. Dips or spreads served with veggies and chips are quick to make and travel easily. Try a cashew French onion dip for a non-dairy version of the traditional favorite.

Be sure to soak the cashews ahead of time to achieve a super-smooth texture. If you're able to keep food warm, a hearty spinach artichoke dip with pita bread will satisfy guests' cravings for comfort foods. Or, take a new twist on a conventional recipe with a cauliflower hummus. It's extra creamy and has an added boost of veggies from the addition of roasted cauliflower.

Side Dishes

Casseroles will feed a crowd and most can be served at room temperature. Made with russet potatoes and onions, a cheesy potato casserole with cornflake topping

won't last long at any gathering. It's a satisfying substitute for traditional hash browns at brunch, and is great for all ages. Alternately, a vegetarian butternut squash casserole is a light, sweet complement to

heavier potluck fare. Or, if you're short on ingredients or inspiration, a frittata filled with cheese, veggies and protein (whatever you have on hand) will work. Bake or slow cook the frittata the night before and add

a quick sprinkle of herbs or chives before packing it to go.

Desserts

If you have a sweet tooth, it only makes sense to volunteer to bring your favorite dessert. Save time by using a high-performance blender like the Vitamix A2300 Ascent Series blender to mix batter in advance for a big batch of almond cookies or snickerdoodles. If baking for a cookie exchange or large gathering, start early and freeze the cookies until party day. Cakes, pumpkin and apple pies are also easy to make ahead and freeze. Simply wrap a freshly baked, cooled cake or pie in plastic wrap and place in a freezer bag. Before an event, defrost in the bag at room temperature.

If your dish has multiple components, separate warm and cold items during transport and use insulated carriers to maintain optimal temperatures. Make something that doesn't require a ton of prep time and equipment once you arrive, unless you've asked the host in advance. Bring trivets or serving utensils, if needed, and don't assume the host will have extras.

Don't get caught unprepared this holiday party season. The right ingredients and tools will make you a hit at any potluck, even at a moment's notice.

— StatePoint

File photo

Ho-ho-holiday margaritas

STRIPES OKINAWA

The holidays are quickly approaching and so are the (sometimes much needed) holiday cocktails! This yummy concoction is one my family is anxiously awaiting.

* WHITE CHRISTMAS MARGARITA *

INGREDIENTS (Servings: 2):

- 1 (14 ounces) can coconut milk
- 12 ounces silver tequila
- 8 ounces triple sec
- 1/2 cup lime juice
- 2 cup ice
- 1 lime
- Sanding sugar (for rimming glass)
- 1/2 c. Mint (to make it pretty)
- 1 lime (The pretty thing and to run around the rim of the glass)
- Cranberries, for garnish

DIRECTION:

1. Blend coconut milk, tequila, triple sec, lime juice and ice until smooth.
2. Rim glasses with lime a wedge and then dip in sanding sugar. Pour the blended goodness into a glass and garnish with lime and cranberries. Serve and listen for the chorus of "Mmmm, that's good!"

— Courtesy of delish.com



Illumination season arrives on Okinawa

BY SHOJI KUDAKA,
STRIPES OKINAWA

I can't remember since when Christmas illuminations have become so popular on Okinawa or Japan's mainland. Growing up in the 80s, Christmas was already brightly lit and KFC was a must for many Okinawans, but the Christmas glamour in various colors was not around like they are now.

According to Thu-Huong Ha, a culture critic for the Japan Times, who wrote an article titled "All I want for Christmas is fewer illuminations in Japan," it was in the 1990s that Christmas illuminations became common in Japan. What's behind the rise of its popularity, according to Ha, was the collapse of Japan's bubble economy in the early 90s and the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995. Back then the Japanese needed a ray of hope during an economic recession and the aftermath of the catastrophe that left more than 6,400 dead, noted the critic.

Fast-forward almost 30 years and Christmas illuminations have become somewhat omnipresent. You don't need to be in Tokyo or Kobe to immerse yourself in the blinding lights. Illumination events are taking place across the country and some families even decorate their homes with festive lights.

Okinawa is no stranger to such a glittering Christmas trend. Illuminations begin lighting up many locations on the island in mid-fall. Although white Christmas is unlikely in Okinawa, the colorful lights setting the mood for the holiday season.

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Photo courtesy of Murasaki Mura

Ryukyu Lantern Festival

Murasaki Mura Ryukyu Kingdom Theme Park will host an annual lantern festival dedicated to Okinawa's history. Enjoy the view as lanterns of various, sizes, and styles lighting up the park's Ryukyu-style buildings. Under the lights, buildings and streets in a traditional style will exude a unique mood. Memorable scenes such as a stone-paved road lit with a line of Chinese red lanterns, and traditional Okinawan houses adorned with decorations of various shapes and lights will be waiting for you.

Ryukyu Lantern Festival at Murasaki Mura

DATE: Through Mar. 31
TIME: 5:30 - 10 p.m. (last admission at 9:30 p.m.)
GPS COORDINATES: N 26.407128, E 127.719856
ADMISSION: 1,800 yen for adults; 700 yen for high school and middle school students; 600 yen for elementary school students; free admission for younger children.



WEBSITE



Photo courtesy of Southeast Botanical Gardens

Okinawa Nangoku Illumination

Tounan Shokubutsu Rakuen, or Southeast Botanical Gardens, is home to 1,300 different plants. People go there to see unique plants such as baobab trees, dragon's blood trees, and Alexandra palms. However, when winter rolls around, shining lights add more reasons to visit the place.

Until May 25, Okinawa Nangoku Illumination will add special splendor and colors to the garden's lush green. Four million light bulbs modeled after lotus, waterfall, hibiscus, Emerald creeper and more will create fantastical scenes. Ranked second in the International Illumination Award (for the illumination event category dedicated to storytelling), this garden's illuminations are now a winter highlight widely acknowledged in the country.

Nangoku Illumination at Southeast Botanical Garden

DATE: Through May 24
TIME: 5 - 10 p.m. (Last admission at 9:30 p.m.)
GPS COORDINATES: N 26.375447, E 127.806597

ADMISSION: 2,500 yen for adults (15 and older); 900 yen for ages 4-14; free admission for 3 years old and below.

*Dec.20 - Jan.4, Jan.10 - 12, the above fees will be 2,850 yen (15 and above) and 1,200 (ages 4 and 14) yen respectively.



WEBSITE



Photo courtesy of Kanucha Resort

Star Dust Fantasia at Kanucha Resort

This resort hotel near Camp Schwab hosts a large-scale illumination event every year. Its pool and beach will be a stage for various illuminations including "STELLA PARK AVENU", a chapel with illuminations in many colors and "Garden Pool Square" where an illumination in the shape of a large tree stands.

Star Dust Fantasia at Kanucha Resort

DATE: Until Feb. 14
TIME: 6 - 11 p.m. (Subject to change, admission between 5:30 - 9 p.m.)
GPS COORDINATES: N 26.548740, E 128.076245
ADMISSION TICKETS REQUIRED: 3,000 yen per vehicle; Tickets can be purchased through the hotel's website. Only credit card payment is accepted. On Dec. 31, the tickets will be priced at 3,500 yen for hotel guests, 5,000 yen for visitors from outside.



HOTEL'S
WEBSITE



Photo courtesy of Christmas Fantasy Planning Committee

Christmas Fantasy Illuminations at Okinawa Zoo & Museum

From mid-December through the end of the year, the Okinawa Zoo & Museum gives off exceptional radiance with 1.4 million bulbs. Not only that, the zoo also becomes a stage for many festivities to pump up the excitement. With "Super Aurora Attraction" a laser light and firework show as a main feature, illuminations of various themes will be displayed to include "Heart Land (heart-shaped illuminations)", "Niagara (waterfall-simulating illumination)."

Santa Claus is also coming to join the crowd, and there will even be a snowfall for a "White Christmas" in Okinawa. Not only that, zombies and dinosaurs are expected to bring some chill to the warm winter on the sub-tropical island.

Illuminations

at Okinawa Zoo & Museum near Kadena Air Base

DATE: Dec. 20 - 31
TIME: 1 - 9:30 p.m. (Last admission at 9 p.m. On Dec. 31, the hours will be 4 p.m. - 1 a.m. with the last admission at 12 a.m.)
GPS COORDINATES: N 26.327100, E 127.804266
ADMISSION (WALK-UP): 2,800 yen (approx. \$18.3, high schoolers and above, 3,500 yen on Dec. 31); free admission for 15 years and below.



WEBSITE

* Advance tickets are available at MCCA Tours+ and KADENA ITT. They are priced at 2,500 yen for high schoolers and above (3,000 yen for Dec. 31)

Illuminations at shopping malls

Mihama American Village Illumination

Until Feb. 15; 5 p.m. - 12 a.m.; Mihama American village near Camp Foster and Kadena Air Base; free admission. This annual illumination returns to the popular shopping area. Buildings, palm trees, banisters, and more will don colorful illuminations.

WINTER ELEGANCE at Ashibinaa

Until Feb.15; 5 - 8:30 p.m.; Okinawa Outlet Mall Ashibinaa (N 26.159139, E 127.657608) near Naha Airport; free admission. This popular outlet shopping mall's illumination event marks its 21st anniversary this year. Queen's Gimlet tower, a hexagonal pyramid and a plaza nearby will be lit in silver. Plus, once every 30 minutes between 5 and 8 p.m., snow made from bubbles will fall to bring white Christmas to the southern island.

Beachside Illumination at Iias Okinawa

Until Feb. 15; Iias Okinawa Toyosaki (N 26.157377, E 127.650212) near Naha Airport; free admission. "Beach Side", a terrace on the second floor of this large shopping mall will be decorated with many lights including those in the shape of a crescent moon.

New Year's Ceremony

Jan. 1 (Thu) to 3 (Sat), 2026

Start the New Year with elegance at Shurijo Castle Park! Experience a special reenactment of the Ryukyu Kingdom's New Year court ceremony, Chōhai Okishiki, and step into a world filled with regal tradition, beauty, and cultural pride.

Imperial Court Music Performance (Uzagaku)




Date & Time
Jan. 1 (Thu) - 2 (Fri) / Each day
① 8:30 ② 9:30 ③ 10:30
25 min per session

Place
Keizu-za
Yōmotsu-za halls

Appearance of the King and Queen

The King and Queen will appear from Hōshinmon Gate. Costume explanations and a photo point are set up for visitors to take pictures.



Date & Time
Jan. 3 (Sat)
① 10:00 ② 11:00 ③ 12:00
10 min per session

Place
Hōshinmon Gate

Chōhai Okishiki

The King and Queen, accompanied by court officials, will perform part of the traditional New Year ceremony Chōhai Okishiki in Shicha-nu-Una (the Lower Garden). Witness the elegance and solemn atmosphere of Ryukyu royal culture up close.



Date & Time
Jan. 1 (Thu) - 2 (Fri) / Each day
① 10:00 ② 11:00 ③ 12:00
15 min per session

Place
Hōshinmon Gate and Shicha-nu-Una Garden



Shurijo Castle Park

<https://oki-park.jp.e.ms.hp.transer.com/shurijo/>



2026 JAN. 1 Thu.

2026 Jan. 3 Sat.

Comic Con Okinawa to return Dec. 14

BY SHOJI KUDAKA,
STRIPES OKINAWA

Get your best cosplay gear ready and make plans to check out this year's comic con at Camp Foster on Dec. 14. MCCC's Comic Con Okinawa returns to Foster's Fieldhouse, Community Center and Ocean Breeze Club, bringing many fun-packed programs and meet-and-greets for manga and anime fans of all ages.

This year's guests will include actress Elise Baughman, known for voicing Goku's granddaughter Pan for the Dragon Ball series, comic book inker Jeremy Clark, who worked on big titles such as Batman and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and Aly Martinez, a.k.a. "TTREK-KIE," a pop culture content creator.

Admission on Dec. 14 is free, but on Dec. 13 there will be an exclusive Gold Pass Exclusive event which will require you to purchase a ticket. The ticketed event from 1-5 p.m. includes a dinner buffet, early admission to the Dec. 14 comic con, express entry to autograph sessions and more.

There will be many programs

Comic Con Okinawa

DATE: Dec. 14 (Sun.)
TIME: 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.
LOCATION: Camp Foster Fieldhouse, Community Center

Gold Pass Exclusive

DATE: Dec. 13 (Sat.)
TIME: 1-5 p.m.
LOCATION: Ocean Breeze
TICKETS COST: \$33 for adults (ages 13 and above), \$17.50 for children (ages between 5 and 12). Sales end Dec. 7.



FOR MORE INFO,
CHECK OUT



for gamers as well, including pro-gamer exhibitions, eSports program gaming, Pokémon Trading Card matches and free play stations.

Don't forget to join art and cosplay contests. Registration for these competitions on Eventbrite will close Nov. 25.

This event is a cosplayer-favorite so don't miss all the fun at Camp Foster!

kudaka.shoji@stripes.com

Photos courtesy of MCCC Okinawa



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Stripes Sports Trivia

Don't let the nickname confuse you, "Charlie Hustle" was no Charlie or Charles. Who was the player known for his relentless hustle?

Answer
Pete Rose

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DID YOU KNOW?

To give their children an edge over the competition, many parents in Japan send their children to "juku," or cram schools. The schools have been around for decades. There are more than 50,000 juku in Japan today and about 50-70 percent of students who plan to take entrance exams use them.

Kanji of the week

冬
Fuyu (winter)

Language Lesson

When?

Itsu?

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Crossword

by Margie E. Burke

ACROSS

1 Rumble, as hair
5 del Sol
10 Orch. section
14 "___ Dinka Doo"
15 Bread spreads
16 Opera feature
17 Working hard
18 Saving gas, say
20 Shortcut
22 Bobby of tennis fame
23 "The Zoo Story" playwright
24 Took to jail
26 Like draft beer
29 Renders invalid
33 Taunts on the field
36 Meetup, slangily
37 Sculler's need
38 Gibraltar and Magellan
40 Nonpro sports gp.
41 It ebbs and flows
43 Denier's words
45 Trap
47 "Peer Gynt" composer
48 Street reps
50 Indian flatbreads
53 Social no-no
56 "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoonist
59 "It's news to me"
61 Bones, in anatomy
62 Golfer's cry
63 Water and elec.
64 Fortune teller
65 Heads-up abbrs.
66 "One of ___ days...."
67 Latin "to be"

DOWN

1 Sporty Mazda
2 No further than
3 Wave-riding platforms
4 Shiny fabrics
5 Cola starter
6 One of five Norwegian kings
7 More parched
8 Highest rated
9 Japanese volcano
10 Steinbeck's birthplace
11 H.S. math
12 Smoke or napkin follower
13 Yields to gravity
19 Copier insert: Abbr.
21 Rogen and others
25 Trojan War figure
27 Clothing
28 Gave up, reluctantly
30 Quells, as rioters
31 Son of Isaac
32 "On the Verge" actress Elisabeth
33 Shopper's bag
34 Parade spoiler
35 ___ Cruces, N.M.
39 "Goosebumps" writer
42 Makes a cryptogram
44 Fragrant bloomer
46 Elvis' middle name, originally
49 Sink of "Stranger Things"
51 Plastic surgery targets
52 Catch
53 Minor quarrel
54 Call to a mate
55 Italian seaport
57 Business card nos.
58 Shock, in a way
60 Ump's call

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Answers to Previous Crossword:

M	A	M	A	C	U	R	T	O	N	C	E
I	C	O	N	S	A	F	A	R	V	E	R
L	A	N	G	E	R	O	S	E	W	A	T
L	I	K	E	N	E	D	H	E	A	R	T
L	I	L	I	A	N	S	I	L	K	S	
I	N	D	E	L	I	B	L	E	T	E	E
L	O	O	S	E	S	A	S	S	E	S	S
L	A	W	H	E	S	S	E	O	V	A	
S	A	N	D	B	A	N	K	T	H	E	M
S	A	O	F	A	S	T	E	N	E	R	S
A	S	T	I	R	E	N	T	E	R	S	
D	A	R	L	E	N	E	R	E	D	U	C
A	V	O	I	D	A	B	L	E	E	R	O
P	O	K	E	G	L	E	E	R	E	N	E
T	R	E	S	S	E	E	P	D	E	N	Y

SUDOKU

Difficulty: Easy

4					5	1		
				9		5	4	
	3							6
	7							
9				7	2	3		
				3		4	1	
1								
3	4			6				
2		9	1	4		8	7	

HOW TO SOLVE:
Each row must contain the numbers 1 to 9; each column must contain the numbers 1 to 9; and each set of 3 by 3 boxes must contain the numbers 1 to 9.

Answer to Previous Sudoku:

3	8	5	4	9	7	1	6	2
9	2	6	3	8	1	4	5	7
1	4	7	5	2	6	3	9	8
6	1	3	7	4	5	2	8	9
7	9	4	2	6	8	5	1	3
8	5	2	9	1	3	7	4	6
5	7	1	8	3	9	6	2	4
4	6	9	1	7	2	8	3	5
2	3	8	6	5	4	9	7	1

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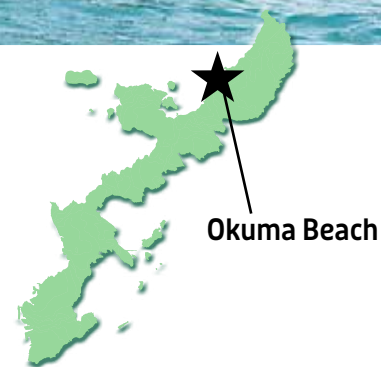


Team A (Top Gun)—made up of older, more experienced players—was represented by (top row, left to right): Harry Register (15), Teddy Roen (15), Ben Roesn (17), Brett Burbach (15), and Wyatt James (15). Team B (Rocky)—featuring newer and younger players—was represented by (bottom row, left to right): Ava Law (13), Londyn Jones (13), Nico Gibson (15), David Hallock (13), and Harvey Fabian (12).

Members of Blue Reef Okinawa Junior Lifeguards compete in All-Japan Water Rock Rugby Tournament on Nov.1-3. Photos courtesy of Blue Reef Okinawa



Military kids make splash at water rock rugby tourney



BY BLUE REEF OKINAWA

In a tough competition of grit and endurance, 10 military kids hit the water for an annual water rock rugby tournament in Okinawa.

The 24th Annual All-Japan Water Rock Rugby Tournament was held at the Okuma Beach Resort Nov.1 through Nov. 3.

The athletes are members of the Blue Reef Okinawa's Junior Lifeguard Program and put their water skills to the test at the tournament.

Water Rock Rugby, developed by Hawaiian Lifeguards, is a unique sport designed to build real-world rescue skills. Played at depths of 9–12 feet, it combines teamwork,

endurance, and strength. Players wear only swimwear and goggles—no fins—and must dive to retrieve a 70-pound rock from the ocean floor, racing it to the goal while avoiding tackles from opponents who can hold their breath long enough to chase them down.

This year, the members competing were split into two groups, Team A with older, more experienced players and Team B with newer, younger players.

This year marked the program's best performance yet, with Team A placing 4th in the Men's Champions League and Team B taking 4th in the Women's/Junior Division.

Nico Gibson earned the Best New Player award, standing out among new athletes

More information



@blureefokinawa

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Most Improved, tying for 4th in overall scoring with four hard-fought goals.

At the helm was Coach Jason MacDonald, who also leads the Junior Lifeguard Program each Saturday and also manages the Ocean Safety Program for the MCIPAC Installation Safety Office during the week.

For the Blue Reef Junior Lifeguards, this year's success sets the bar even higher. With stronger skills, deeper breath holds, and growing confidence underwater, both teams are already looking ahead to next season.

Blue Reef Okinawa offers programs for children ages seven and up. The programs help kids develop ocean awareness and confidence in the water through swim, surf, snorkel, paddle and fishing.



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