

The Shingu Fire Festival (Otou Matsuri) – by Wayne Nash

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Every year, February 6th, about 2000+ men and boys climb the steep stone steps up to the Kamikura Shrine to participate in the 'Shingu Otou Matsuri' or 'Shingu Fire Festival' that has a tradition of over 2600 years and is one of the most sacred festivals in the region holding deep meaning for the local residents.

Originally, only locals participated in this festival and it few people in other parts of Japan or the outside world knew about it. However, times have changed and recently there have been many people coming from all parts of Japan, including people from other countries.

Being able to participate in this event is a wonderful experience and we should be grateful to the local people for allow anyone to participate. Of course, with every privilege there comes responsibility, and both Japanese and non-Japanese guests share an equal responsibility to better understand the nature and deeper meaning of the festival in order to participate in a way that reflects that deeper meaning.

In recent years the locals have been commenting that the manners and behavior of some Japanese and non-Japanese guests have been a bit out of sync with the spirit of the festival. Some people drink a little too much, get involved in fights, and generally behave in a belligerent manner. Most of the men and boys participating do not drink or act inappropriately. However, it only takes a few people to ruin the atmosphere and experience for the many.

Therefore, I have decided to put together a list of important points to help you understand more about the Fire Festival, cultivate the proper attitude, and learn how to conduct yourself should you choose to participate.

1. Understand that this is an ancient sacred ceremonial festival and not 'party time' or a 'fight fest'. Traditionally, 'naboriko', the festival participants would engage in 'Misogi', a purification rite, normally done at Ohama beach. If you would like to join in let the person know who invited you or contact the Shingu City Office for information.
2. Alcohol is also prohibited before, after and during the festival. Although you will see some people who do not appear to understand this, I suggest you make an effort to not get caught up in this 'party' atmosphere and try to add to the calmness of the festival by gravitating towards groups of men and boys that are keeping to the nature of the festival.
3. Traditionally, only white food and drink should be consumed on the day of the festival. Normally, if you are participating with a Japanese group this will be provided for you. Some groups may encourage you to drink alcohol even though it is prohibited. The Japanese tend to allow each group to police themselves on this matter and some do not do such a great job of it. I suggest you decline and set an example for others.
4. Catch the true spirit of the festival and endeavour to focus on the center of your being and keep your mind concentrating on the principles of balance, clarity, calmness, equanimity, courage, hope, and a vision of your future and role in this life and world. Try to recall what your life

purpose is and why you are here in this moment. Even if you don't believe in things invisible to the eye, try to muster whatever degree of quietude and peace in your mind with the determination to have a profound and moving experience.

5. As you enter 'the other world', the inner precincts of the Kamikura Shrine, imagine yourself as going back into the womb to experience existence before you were born. In fact, the mountain you are ascending, Gongen Yama, is considered a female entity. This is one of the reasons women do not participate as this a kind of Yin and Yang unification experience, or a returning to the 'mother'. Women do participate in the festival but in the nature of supporting the men before during and after the festival.
6. In order to keep safe and avoid accidents when the shrine gate is thrown open I suggest you go up the mountain at about 6:30pm and move to the back of the holding area. If there are any scuffles or fighting it will happen near the shrine gate. Stay away from this area and enjoy a more peaceful experience at the back. This is especially important if you are bringing young children with you.
7. Understand that you are engaging in this festival completely under your own free will and the festival organizers carry no responsibility for your injuries or accidents.
8. One of the phrases you will hear chanted as you do 'sanshamairi' (visiting and praying at 3 sacred shrines in Shingu) is 'Tanomude, Tanomude'. This is essentially confirming that everyone will do their best to keep each other safe and return home without injury. So, please do your best to support others as they will support you to finish the festival without injury or incident.
9. Once the gate is thrown open the very excited young men near the gate will race down the mountain to the lower gate. In your case, if you are near the rear you will be able to calmly walk down to the bottom without incident. Please stay clear of the 'Big Torch' while descending down to the lower gate or 'Torii'.
10. Imagine yourself coming down the mountain as if you were being reborn from 'the other world' into 'this mundane world' spiritually refreshed and ready to meet the new year and all its challenges and opportunities.
11. Consider observing the Shugendo ceremonies on the day following the festival. This occurs in the morning in front of lower gate. Contact the Shingu City Hall for more information.
12. Most of all, enjoy yourself and experience the powerful energy of Kumano while participating in this sacred festival.

Also, in 2011 I put together four videos that may give you a virtual experience of participating in the Otou Matsuri from start to finish.

Part One: <http://kumanoworld.tv/?p=356>

Part Two: <http://kumanoworld.tv/?p=367>

Part Three: <http://kumanoworld.tv/?p=372>

Part Four: <http://kumanoworld.tv/?p=411>

If you would like to read an article I wrote about my experience in the Fire Festival go to:

<http://kumanoworld.tv/?p=273>