

Japan: Seasonal Series

January New Year Celebrations

The most important festival in Japan is New Year. Japanese people enjoy a three-day holiday from New Year's Day to 3 January. People spend a lot of time preparing for New Year. It is a time to make a new start, so it is important that everything is just right. In the past, the New Year holiday was a time for thanking the gods who oversee the harvests and for welcoming spirits of ancestors, who protect the family. At the end of December, Japanese people traditionally clean the house from top to bottom so that no dirt is carried into the New Year. Special decorations are put up for good luck.

Decorations

Rice cake ornament (*kagami-mochi*) かがみもち



Traditionally, kagami-mochi are edible decorations, however these days many people use ornamental versions that can be reused. They are usually made from two round rice cakes stacked on top of one another. The bottom cake is the larger of the two and a small orange is usually placed on top. The whole decoration is set on a stand called a sampo and is seen as an offering to the New Year Gods. It is displayed from New Year until 11 January, when it will be taken down and eaten. With more formal decorations, other good luck symbols such as kelp, dried persimmon and lobster are used to decorate the kagami-mochi.

Pine Decoration (*kado-matsu*) 門松

Perhaps the most symbolic of the New Year decorations, kado-matsu are usually set up on either or both sides of the front entrance of a house. They are generally comprised of pine boughs, 3 bamboo stalks and plum tree sprigs. The three bamboo poles are all a slightly



different size and are cut diagonally. The pine and plum tree sprigs are set in the centre and the base of the decoration is tied together with straw ropes.

The decorations are left outside the home in an attempt to welcome long life, good fortune and prosperity into the household. Pine trees are traditionally associated with longevity, because they tend to grow tall and strong and live a long time. Bamboo is thought of as a symbol of prosperity and flexibility with strength, and plum trees, the first to flower in spring, are often linked to good fortune and strength through adversity.

Events

First Sunrise (*hatsu-hinode*) 初日の出



Sunrise on 1 January is seen as an important part of New Year celebrations in Japan. Many people will gather in places known for their glorious sunrises and pray for good health for the year ahead. Mount Fuji is perhaps the most famous spot to view the rising sun and people will set up their cameras hours in advance to try and capture the moment. Mount Fuji is also associated with New Year as it is said that if you have a dream on 2 January in which Mount Fuji features, then you will have a very lucky, prosperous and happy year ahead of you.

First Shrine Visit (*hatsu-mōde*) 初もうで

As most Japanese people are Buddhist or Shinto, many people visit a temple or a shrine at New Year. This is called *hatsumōde* as it is the first visit of the year. It is important to remember here that, though many New Year customs have religious roots,

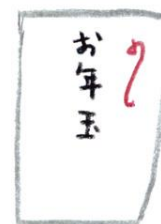


for many people it is more from tradition than deeply held religious conviction. It is probably not unlike the people who only go to church at Christmas, or who enjoy carols but don't have a strong belief.

Customs

New Year Money (*otoshidama*) お年玉

Children receive gifts of money from family and friends on 1 January. The gift is presented in specially designed envelopes. The design may include traditional images, such as the horoscope animal which will represent the forthcoming year, or it may simply be a popular cartoon character. Children wait with eager anticipation to see how much money they will receive!



New Year Cards (*nengajō*) 年賀状



In the same way that many people who celebrate Christmas send greeting cards, Japanese people send New Year cards. These are postcards which usually have the animal of the Chinese zodiac representing that particular year.

Daruma dolls だるま

The red daruma doll is one way Japanese people make a wish. They are popular at New Year- a bit like making a New Year's resolution. A new daruma has no eyes and people paint in the first eye when they begin a project. They believe it will help them to succeed. The daruma with one eye reminds them to work hard and, if they are successful, they fill in the second eye.



New Year Food (*osechi ryōri*) おせち料理



Osechi ryori is colourful food presented in boxes like an obento. Each food has a special meaning. Traditionally, it was prepared in advance of New Year's Day so that on 1 January, Japanese families could take a complete rest from cooking. The food is often eaten with a hot soup (*ozoni*) which contains a sticky rice cake (*mochi*).

Traditional Games

Again, it's important to remember that lots of children will spend the holiday in front of their computers! These games are more frequently played at school or kindergarten.

Japanese badminton (hanetsuki) はねつき



Hanetsuki is a type of badminton. It is played with two wooden paddles (hagoita) and a shuttlecock (hane). The paddles are usually ornately decorated (often with famous kabuki actors) and the feathers of the shuttlecock are also usually brightly coloured. This game is traditionally associated with New Year and is generally thought to be a game for girls to play. However, in recent years it has declined in popularity and the hagoita and hane are often now just used for decorative purposes.

'Fuku-warai' game 福笑い



Like 'pin the tail on the donkey' players are blindfolded, then try to put the eyes, nose, mouth and eyebrows on an outline of a face. The face used is also known as fuku. The character for 'good fortune' is also said fuku, and the face is smiling, so it is a New Year's good luck game. Children enjoy seeing the strange-looking faces they make.

100 Poets Card Game (Hyakunin isshu) 百人一首

This is a bit like a game of 'pairs', using ancient Japanese poems. There are 200 cards. The picture cards have the whole poem; the ones with writing on just have the end of the poem. All the endings are laid out on the floor and someone turns up each picture card in turn and reads it. All the players rush to find the ending on the matching card.

