

Japan Seasonal Series

August Obon

The Japan Society (2020)

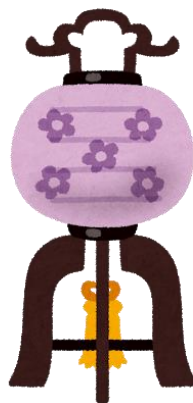
Every summer in mid-August, Japanese people celebrate one of their most important annual festivals called Obon. This Buddhist celebration is based on the belief that at this time of year, the spirits of ancestors return to their family home. Japanese people typically take time off work and return to their hometowns to see relatives, making Obon a very busy time to travel.

Celebrations

There are regional differences in the start date of the festival (most celebrations take place in August) and some variations in customs for the celebrations, but traditionally everyone will clean their homes and family graves in preparation for Obon. It is also common to prepare offerings, such as fruit, to be placed on the household shrine or displayed on shelves set up especially for the festival.

On the first day of Obon, the spirits are said to return and it is customary to light small “welcome fires” called mukaebi and chochin paper lanterns to guide them home. This is usually followed on the second day by a dance called Bon Odori which may be performed in parks, temples, shrines or outdoor festivals.

Today, many Japanese people still celebrate Obon by attending summer festivals, where they might wear summer kimono called yukata, eat street food, and watch large firework displays.



End of the Festival

On the final day of Obon, the spirits leave again and people may light fires, known as okuri-bi, to send them off. Kyoto is particularly famous for having five large bonfires as okuri-bi, each in the shape of a different Japanese character.

Some regions mark the end of Obon with lantern ceremonies called Toro Nagashi in which paper lanterns are lit with candles and placed with others to float on a river. Just as the chochin lanterns are symbolically used to guide the spirits on their way to visit, these lanterns guide the spirits away again.

