

## Japanese customs

This page introduces you to some Japanese social customs which may be helpful while you adapt yourself to Japanese way of life.

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## Seasonal greetings



In Japan there are customs called mid-year gift (*Ochu-gen*) and year-end gift (*Oseibo*). We send *Oseibo* at the end of the year to show appreciation to bosses, clients, match-makers, old teachers, relatives and others who deserve consideration.

You are supposed to send *Ochu-gen* from early July to around the time of 15th and *Oseibo* from early December to around 20th. In general the prices of gifts range from 3000 yen to 5000 yen depending on how much favor you feel you owe to the person. However, you do not have to be concerned about prices because the most important thing is to convey your appreciation.

There are a variety of gifts, including detergent, seasonings, beer certificates, seaweeds, and luxury fresh food delivered directly from the locality. A number of department stores compete with one another in developing their own unique merchandise. When you receive *Ochu-gen* or *Oseibo*, you send a thank-you note in three days in the form of a post card or a letter to show your appreciation for the gift, for instance, by saying, "we very much enjoyed the food."

## Courtesy when you move to a new neighborhood



In Japan when you move to a new community, you visit your neighbors with small gifts. This introduces you and reassures the long time residents who might be worried about the kind of person you are. In the past, people would give a present of Japanese buckwheat noodles called "*Hikkoshi Soba*", but now more and more people give things like soap or towels. Although the younger generation tends to ignore this customs, older people still follow it, thinking this is important part of courtesy.

Before moving into a large apartment block, you visit the people who will be living next to you on the same floor and also the apartments above and below to apologize for any noise you might make while moving in. It is also customary to greet your neighbors when you run into them in the hallway, in the elevator, and other communal areas.

These customs might seem troublesome to some people but they would be much appreciated by your new neighbors.

## End of the Year Events



In Japan, December is considered to be the busiest month of year as a series of events such as Christmas, *Bonenkai* (end-of-year party), *Osoji* (general house-cleaning), and preparation for the New Year take place. This page introduces you to the end of year events in Japan.

### <Christmas>

As you know, Christmas is a Christian celebration. However, it became one of the biggest year-end events in Buddhist Japan after the World War II, and it was developed into a non-religious Japanese style Christmas. The Japanese enjoy exchanging presents and eat Christmas cakes. Going to the church on the eve is not very popular in Japan. Instead, Christmas party is held on the eve with friends instead with family, and chicken is eaten as a Christmas feast instead turkey. Thus it became more like Japanese style Christmas.

### <Bonenkai>

Though it is the busiest month of year, December is also the time for the Japanese to enjoy *Bonenkai*. *Bonenkai* literally means a party for forgetting the year. Usually sections of companies, social groups and close friends have own *Bonenkai*. Many restaurants and Izakayas (Japanese style pub) are full in December because of this event.

### <Osoji>

Among a great many annual events, *Osoji* (general house-cleaning) is one of the most essential preparations for *Oshogatsu* or the New Year. In addition to the usual cleaning, the

cleaning of window screens, kitchen fan and room lamps, those of which are rarely done by daily cleaning, are done. *Osoji* is not merely a thorough cleaning, but it originally has a religious significance of purification. *Osoji* must traditionally be done by all family members, though nowadays female members of a house are tend to be in charge of it.

#### <Preparation for the New Year>

One of the most essential preparations for *Oshogatsu* (the New Year) is cooking *Osechi Ryori* (new year plates). *Osechi* is eaten during the first three days of *Oshogatsu*. It must be cooked ahead of time, so that the mother can share in the joys of *Oshogatsu* without spending all her time in the kitchen. *Osechi* is neatly packed in a *Jubako*, a 4-5 tiered lunch box, and each food has meaning which make a Japanese New Year merry. Some of the meanings are as follows;

Bamboo Shoot: bamboo shoot with a lot of joint stands for constancy

White Radish (*Daikon*): it symbolizes a long life

*Datemaki*: Rolled omelet means progress of learning

*Kuromame*: Black sweetened soybeans mean hard working

*Kazunoko*: Herring roe means to be blessed with children

Another important preparation for *Oshogatsu* is the New Year decorations such as *Kadomatsu* (pipe-tree branches) put up at the gates, *Shimenawa* (a sacred straw festoon) hunged above the front door, and *Kagamimochi* (round mirror-shaped rice cakes) offered in the alcove of the main room or on *Kamidana* (the household altar). Those decorations must be completed by December 30 as one-day decoration is believed to be unlucky.

#### <Omisoka>

*Omisoka* is the last day of the year, which is December 31st. Preparations for the New Year are to be made by *Omisoka*. Typically, the Japanese spend *Omisoka* night eating mandarin oranges in *Kotatsu* (a table with a heater and a coverlet) and watching *NHK Kohaku Utagassen* (the annual singing contest on New Year's Eve). Also, there are two more important events that should not be forgotten, which are listening to *Joya-no-Kane* and eating *Toshikoshi Soba*. On New Years' Eve, temples ring *Joya-no-Kane*, or the watch-night bell, 108 times, wishing to relieve the human sufferings caused by men's earthly desires, which amount, according to Buddhist belief, to 108. *Toshikoshi Soba* is the soba noodle eaten on the New Year's Eve. As noodles being long, we eat the noodles wishing our long lives.



The Coming-of-Age (*Seijin-shiki*) ceremony is an important event in Japan. The ceremony is held to welcome young people who get voting rights and are admitted into the society as full grownups. Historically, Coming-of-Age Day was celebrated on Jan. 15, inviting those who became 20 years old to the official Coming-of-Age ceremony at municipal halls. In 2000, the date was changed to the second Monday of January.

Every year there are many reports on bad manners among participants who don't listen to speeches by hosts of the ceremony, make noises and don't behave themselves. Eventually some are even ordered to leave the site. Many adults are lamented and think such invitees are not entitled to be treated as grownups. Several municipal bodies decided to cancel the ceremony this year. It is very regrettable as there are a lot of young people who are looking forward to attending the ceremony.

The Coming-of-Age ceremony is enjoyable as you can see many young girls in traditional Japanese *kimono*. In Japan, there is a custom that single girls wear *kimono* with long sleeves, while married women wear *kimono* with short sleeves. *Kimono* is very expensive and parents who have daughters save money to buy *kimono*. But *kimono* is a very tight garment, so many young girls who have accustomed to wearing casual clothes like jeans don't wear it often. They put on *kimono* only on limited occasions like wedding ceremony, formal party, etc. Therefore more and more people use rental *kimono* on Coming-of-Age ceremony.

## Events in the Spring



### ***Hina-Matsuri* (Girls' Festival)**

March 3rd is *Hina-Matsuri*. It is the girls' day. In Japan we set up traditional dolls. The girls invite guests and drink sweet mild rice wine and eat diamond-shaped rice cakes. The doll-stand is built in five or seven stairs. A set of dolls usually consists of the Emperor and Empress and their courtiers.

### ***Ohanami***

The Japanese love cherry blossoms very much. Every spring, many people enjoy the beauty of the cherry blossoms in full bloom while eating, drinking and singing under the cherry trees. In some places, there are nighttime lighting of the cherry trees only during this period.

### ***Kodomo-no-Hi* (Boys' Festival)**

May 5th is a national holiday called Children's Day. Strictly speaking, it's a festival for little boys. They display traditional warrior dolls, helmet, swords in the house. People put up carp-

shaped streamers attached to a tall bamboo pole outdoors. They eat '*Chimaki*', which is a kind of rice cakes wrapped in bamboo leaves.

## Bon Odori



It is getting hotter day by day and people plan how to spend the summer vacation. For business people, the *Bon* period (Aug.13 - Aug.16) is convenient to spend long holiday because during the period most companies are closed.

The *Bon* period is originated from the Buddhism ritual when people wish their ancestors soul may rest in peace. Therefore many people return to the hometown during this and visit their ancestors' graveyard. There are many community where people gather at night and enjoy the Japanese *Bon* dance and walk around various stalls of goldfish scooping, cotton candy, toys and so on wearing the *Yukata* (casual Japanese *kimono*) and *Geta* (wooden clogs).

If you find a notice of the *Bon* dance nearby, why don't you join it and see how people enjoy the summer vacation.

## Moonlight Party



In Japan, people celebrate the night of a full moon in mid-September.

The function of "Jyugoya" (The night of a full moon) originated from China.

In Heian Period, it was introduced to Japan. People composed poem and played the ceremonial Court music (Gagaku) in the moon viewing feast of court.

In Edo period, the function of "Jyugoya" became more popular. People made offering dumpling (Tsukimidango), green soybeans, taro, persimmon and Japanese pampas grass, etc. to the moon.

In present time, "Jyugoya" is called 'Chushu no Meigetsu' (the harvest moon) or 'Imo Meigetsu' (the taro moon). People offer and eat taro and dumpling on the Jyugoya night.

## National Holidays in Autumn



### ***Respect-for-the-Aged Day***

This is the day when people express respect and wish for longevity of the senior people.

Children may offer a heartfelt service such as massage to the grandparents, and their parents may give some gifts and offer a feast.

On this day, each municipal government organizes various events to entertain senior citizens.

### ***Autumunal Equinox Day***

On this day, the length of daytime and nighttime becomes equal.

Customarily people visit their ancestor's graveyard and wish them to rest in peace.

People eat Ohagi (glutinous rice ball covered by sweet bean paste), which was once a delicacy as sugar was expensive in those days. Nowadays people eat it as a snack not only on this day.