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Onbashira-sai festival: The log surfers of Lake Suwa

We travel to Lake Suwa in Nagano Prefecture to take a look at the massively popular festival that only takes place every six years

By [Hiroko Yoda \(./. /. /hiroko-yoda-935872\)](#) 5 May, 2010



The Onbashira-sai in Nagano Prefecture attracts a huge crowd.

There's a famous saying in Japanese that goes, "If you want to see people, go to the Onbashira festival." This festival, only held once every six years, sees a dangerous crush of human beings congregating in Nagano Prefecture's Lake Suwa area. It is one of the most iconic festivals in Japan, widely broadcast both domestically and abroad. This April, more than half a million people gathered to watch the first half of the festival -- the largest recorded attendance in the history of Nagano prefecture.

What is the festival about? The area's shrines have a unique architectural quirk: They are always surrounded by four wooden posts. The posts come in all heights and sizes, but they are almost always there. In fact, some 3,000 are reputed to stand throughout the region. They are called onbashira ("honored poles"), and by local custom, they must be replaced every six years -- in the Chinese zodiac's Year of the Tiger and the Year of the Monkey.

The most elaborate of these replacement rituals is a grand, two-part festival called Onbashira-sai, which is held at the ancient Suwa Taisha Shrine. During the festival, participants fell massive fir trees, and then young men ride them downhill in a test of faith and bravery.

A festival of two halves

Held without fail for more than a millennium -- 1,200 years is the official count -- the Onbashira festival is carried out in two segments, the first called the Yamadashi and the last, the Satobiki.

Yamadashi, in April, literally means "coming out from the mountains." After a Shinto purification ceremony, 16 massive and carefully selected fir trees are felled by hand with special axes and saws. Then select groups of local men haul the logs off the mountain, again by hand, to the four shrines of Suwa Taisha. The most dramatic moments, called Ki-otoshi ("tree-drops"), occur on slopes too steep to carry the logs. Instead the men clamber atop and ride them downhill like massive toboggans. The sight of these massive, multi-ton timbers plunging down steep hillsides and into rivers is almost as breathtaking to watch as it must be to participate. Many times riders are seriously injured and sometimes even killed in the process.

[Olympics \(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1998_Winter_Olympics\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1998_Winter_Olympics) .

Within Suwa Taisha are believed to dwell gods of wind, water, hunting and agriculture, and war - a masculine sort of place if ever there was one. Being held so infrequently for one of Japan's largest festivals, Onbashira-sai is definitely worth a trip. But be aware: You won't be alone. It may not be on the level of riding a massive log down a sheer slope, but surviving the crush of humanity in the viewing areas is certainly a test of endurance!

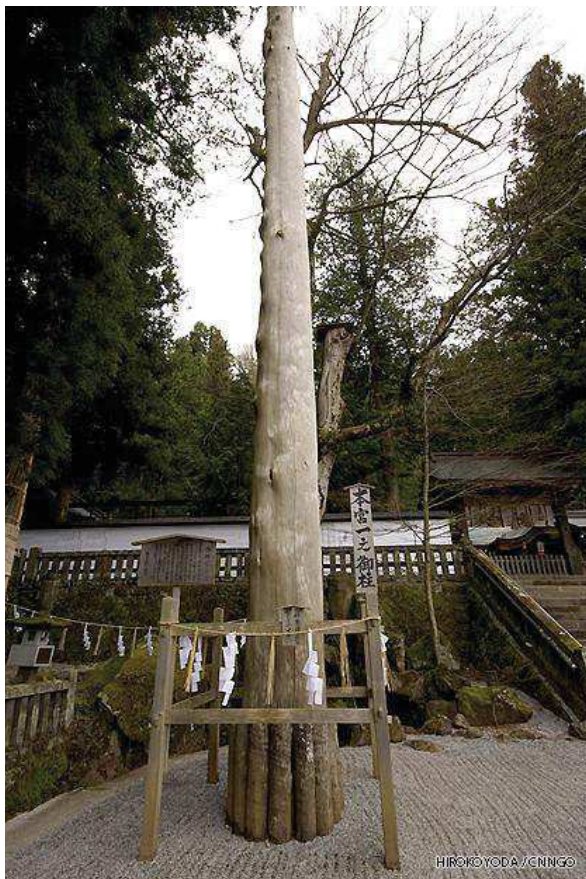
This year's Satobiki will be held at Hon-Miya and Mae-Miya on May 2, 3, and 4, and at Haru-Miya and Aki-Miya on May 8, 9, and 10.



Participants astride a huge log slide down a hill during the Onbashira Festival on April 9, 2010.



Parishioners of the Suwa Grand shrine cheer as the log hurtles down the slope.



The old Ichi-no-onbashira ("First pole") at Suwa Taisha's Hon-Miya, ready to be replaced.



Construction equipment is used to remove the old poles in preparation for the festivities.



A gaping crater awaits the placement of a new timber.



The giant ropes used to pull the onbashira from the hillsides sits coiled and ready for action.



The Kiyari-uta, or "work cry," helps time the participants' efforts as they haul the timbers during the festival.





The altar at Haru-miya, deep inside Suwa Taisha, is 230 years old.



This sacred braided straw rope on display at Suwa Taisha's Aki-miya weighs a ton -- literally. getting there

Lake Suwa is roughly two and a half hours from Tokyo. To see the shrines, take the Super Azusa express train from Shinjuku Station to Chino or Shimo-Suwa stations.



Hiroko Yoda runs [AltJapan Co., Ltd.](http://www.altjapan.com/), a Tokyo-based entertainment localization and translation company. She is the author of many books [about Japan](http://www.amazon.com/Hiroko-Yoda/e/B001JOSL5C/ref=ntt_dp_epwbk_1), including "[Yokai Attack!](http://www.amazon.com/Yokai-Attack-Japanese-Monster-Survival/dp/480531219X/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1326696684&sr=8-2)" [The Japanese Monster Survival Guide](http://www.amazon.com/Ninja-Attack-Assassins-Samurai-Outlaws/dp/477003119X/ref=sr_1_2?s=gateway&ie=UTF8&qid=1285289318&sr=8-2), "[Ninja Attack!](http://www.amazon.com/Ninja-Attack-Assassins-Samurai-Outlaws/dp/477003119X/ref=sr_1_2?s=gateway&ie=UTF8&qid=1285289318&sr=8-2)" [True Tales of Assassins, Samurai, and Outlaws](http://www.amazon.com/Yurei-Attack-Japanese-Ghost-Attack/dp/477003119X/ref=sr_1_2?s=gateway&ie=UTF8&qid=1285289318&sr=8-2)," and "[Yurei Attack!](http://www.amazon.com/Yurei-Attack-Japanese-Ghost-Attack/dp/477003119X/ref=sr_1_2?s=gateway&ie=UTF8&qid=1285289318&sr=8-2)" [The Japanese Ghost](http://www.amazon.com/Yurei-Attack-Japanese-Ghost-Attack/dp/477003119X/ref=sr_1_2?s=gateway&ie=UTF8&qid=1285289318&sr=8-2)