



What's Up Aichi



— Timely Tourist Information On Aichi Prefecture And The Surrounding Central Japan Region —

Racy March Festivals in Aichi's Countryside

Ah, small town parades. In America these most wholesome of community events evoke nostalgia for a bygone era. Gather the kids and head down to Main Street to wave hello to the mayor, sway to the tunes of a marching band and scramble for candy thrown from the float of the town beauty queen.



The fertility symbol is carried through Komaki

In Aichi prefecture's small towns, too, parades are central to two March festivals. There are some slight differences, however. The streets are narrower, the music a little more somber, there are no Shriners on undersized motorcycles. Oh, and one more thing: those colorful floats are replaced with enormous renderings of human reproductive organs. The blush-inducing fertility festivals have roots going back over two thousand years, and they are sure to make you reconsider your notions of Japanese modesty.

At the **Tagata Shrine Fertility Festival** in Komaki (March 15), a Shinto priest leads five women who carry offerings to the female god of fertility. Holding all-too-detailed carvings of oversized phalli, the women walk the short distance from shrine to shrine surrounded by townspeople and visitors with hopes of a bountiful harvest and prosperous year in their hearts. The star of the show, an enormous male member carved especially for the festival from a local cypress tree, soon makes its way from Kumano Shrine on the shoulders of the town's 42-year-old men (the age is considered unlucky for unrelated reasons).

While the festival is generally light-hearted

and the *sake* flows generously into the cups of pilgrims from far and wide, a serious aura also pervades, revealing the venerated place that the ceremony holds in the local lore. Don't be surprised to come across the local clergy blessing the offering with the utmost gravitas.

Take the Meijo subway line from downtown Nagoya to Heian Dori station, where you'll transfer to the Kamiida subway line for just one stop to Kamiida station. Make a quick transfer to the Meitetsu Komaki line for the 15-minute trip to Tagatajinja-mae station.

Every yin must have its yang, and female festival lovers needn't feel shafted. On the Sunday before the better known Tagata Shrine Fertility Festival, the people of nearby Inuyama City celebrate the **Oagata Shrine Fertility Festival** and pay tribute to the female fertility god in their own way.

You are much less likely to see television news cameras or fellow foreigners at this festival, and its homage to the deity is comparatively understated. Aside from the lewd lollipops and the uncannily shaped sacred stone to which the faithful come to pray for safe childbirth, a happy marriage, or protection from disaster, you have to look a little harder for subtle tributes to the female representation of the fertility god as the procession makes its way through the one-and-a-half kilometer path to the Hime-no-Miya shrine. But if we told you where to look, that would spoil the fun, wouldn't it? See for yourself on March 9.



A more subtle celebration at the Oagata festival

The Oagata Shrine Fertility Festival takes place near Gakuden station, just one stop beyond Tagatajinja-mae station on the Meitetsu Komaki line.

Swordsmithing and Cutlery Tradition of Seki City

Whether you are a weapon enthusiast or just an insomniac who has developed an appreciation for quality Japanese knives through late night infomercials, Seki City, in Aichi's neighboring prefecture of Gifu, is a fascinating place to sharpen your knowledge of Japan's blademaking tradition. On the first Sundays of March and April, visitors to the city, which is located about an hour from Nagoya, get a rare chance to see a master swordsmith at work in a town that has long been celebrated for the craft.



Seki's swordsmiths carry on their age-old trade

Seki's sword making history goes back 700 years to the Kamakura era, when the country's top swordsmiths fled the turmoil of war-torn cities. Attracted to the area's outstanding soil, abundant charcoal and clear water, the swordsmiths chose to settle in Seki, thus beginning a tradition that has lasted to this day.

At the **Seki Swordsmith Museum** (Seki kaji densho kan), a master swordsmith kneels attentively over a glowing blade, directing his apprentices' efforts to hammer out impurities and fold the malleable metal into a sharp and durable sword. Red hot sparks fly precariously close to the undaunted craftsmen as they shape the sword's graceful curve, all the while communicating in a succinct patois as old as their trade itself. At the end of the process, which can take many months, the elegant weapon, one of only a handful that the facility fashions every year, is a flawless, potentially deadly piece of art.

After the half-hour demonstrations (beginning at 10:00, 1:30 and 2:30), take some time to explore Seki's other cutlery culture. With the end of the hostilities in the Warring States era and the consequent drop in demand for swords, the city shifted its focus to making blades for more utilitarian purposes such as farming and cooking. Capitalizing on their thorough understanding of blades, Seki's craftsmen were able to apply their mastery even as modern technology began to play an increasingly important role in the trade. Today, Seki is one of the world's premier centers for cutlery, and a number of sites in the city celebrate this tradition.

A **monument to Motoshige**, serves as a tribute not only to the founder of Seki's swordsmithing tradition, but also to the "1000 swordsmiths" that put the town on the map. At the **Knife Museum**, 1500 rare blades from around the world shimmer in a cozy log cabin. If you're interested in taking home a one of Seki's fine blades, stop by the **Gifu Prefecture Cutlery Hall**, where you can choose from among 2000 cooking knives, razors and scissors.



Courtesy of Nosyudo, Inc (和濃州堂)

Shining examples of Seki's proud tradition

Seki City is best reached from Nagoya station by taking the JR Takayama line to Mino Ota station and transferring to the Nagarakawa line to Seki City Hall station (Seki shiyakusho mae).

The Comforts of Centrair

With the resumption of United Airlines' daily direct flights from San Francisco last month and the continuing success of the Northwest Airlines route from Detroit, more and more Americans are making Nagoya's Chubu International Airport, or Centrair, their convenient gateway to Japan. While some travelers try to spend as little time in airports as possible, Centrair offers a number of amenities for those who like to stretch out a little before their flight, do some last minute shopping, or grab a pre-flight meal so as not to be subjected to

that notorious airline food.

For travelers whose sightseeing itineraries were so busy that they didn't get chance to sample the local specialties, Centrair is the perfect place to get a taste of all of Aichi's famed treats before taking off.



Centrair's Renga Dori shopping arcade

Grab a take-out set of five (\$6.30) or 10 (\$12.50) *tenmusu* shrimp rice balls at **Senju** and after getting your fill spread the love to the flight attendants in exchange for a tall stack of pillows. Or fill up on the country's best deep-fried pork loin at **Tonkatsu Wako** to ensure a full belly for the homeward journey. If you've managed to slither out of trying the most exotic of the region's specialties, **Unasho** is your last chance to get an all-eel set meal.

You can also stock up on in-flight snacks before you go. A bag of *wasabi* shrimp chips (*ebi senbei*) from **Ebi Senbei no Sato** beats airline peanuts any day and has the added bonus of keeping nosy seatmates from striking up unwanted conversation lest they get a whiff of that horseradishy breath. The *senbei* are an excellent edible gift, and ¥840 (\$8) is an outrageously good price for five bags of any flavor. *Uiro* (sweet bean cakes) from **Toraya Uiro** are the perfect decadent dessert for friends back home if you can resist them that long.

Last-minute souvenir shoppers will be rewarded for their procrastination at Centrair's retail shops. If you didn't get a chance to visit Aichi's great pottery towns, stop by **Tokoname Kobo Toshio** for a one-of-a-kind ceramic pot. Use it to serve tea while you reminisce with friends about your memorable journey. **Wa No Ma** has all kinds of unique modern and traditional Japanese gifts. And just in case you didn't get enough of the ubiquitous feline during your trip, the **Hello Kitty Store** has all the versions of her and her Sanrio friends that you could possibly stuff into a suitcase.

Whether you're the type who can't sleep a wink on a flight or one of those people who falls asleep at takeoff not to wake again

until landing, Centrair has the perfect option for you. For the sleep deprived, the newly renovated **Centrair Hotel** has great rates on shared rooms. For as little as \$75 per person in a three-person room, assure yourself of a good night's sleep and avoid the pre-flight scramble by spending your last evening at the hotel, which is located only steps from the departure lobby. If your efforts to make the most of your last night in Nagoya left you a bit disheveled, scrub up in **Fu no Yu**, the recently refurbished in-airport public bath. Nothing loosens up your muscles and prepares you for an in-flight snooze like a hot soak and a soothing view of departing planes.



A calming view from Fu no Yu's communal bath

For more on the unique comforts awaiting you at Japan's newest and most convenient international airport, visit the Centrair website: <http://www.centrair.jp/en/>.

Tokugawa Doll Festival Treasures

Travelers to Nagoya in March will no doubt notice that they are surrounded by colorful round-faced dolls on display for the annual Doll Festival. Nagoya's Tokugawa Art Museum celebrates the festival with **Hina Matsuri: Daimyo Doll Festival** through April 26. The exhibit features dolls and their accoutrements that were owned by the Tokugawa Owari clan, descendants of the founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate. Doll lovers and history buffs will enjoy the chance to get a look into the day-to-day lives of the daughters of feudal rulers.

For more information visit the museum's website: <http://www.tokugawa-art-museum.jp/english/index.html>

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