

EXPERIENCE KESEN



Find your romantic adventure

We are grateful for all of the support and encouragement we have received from all over the world in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami.

We continue to move forward in our reconstruction from the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, but in order to truly rebuild, it is important to learn about the local history and culture, and then pass that on to the future. That's why we have compiled this brochure series showcasing the Kesen region of Iwate Prefecture as a historical and cultural tourist destination. Enjoy our third volume about folk performing arts in the Kesen region.

The Folk Performing Arts of Kesen

Folk performing arts are dances, parades, and other performances where the craft has been handed down from generation to generation. These arts are closely tied with the lives of normal people, so they are a separate class of performance from those of professional actors.

Iwate Prefecture is home to many of these traditional arts, and many people consider Iwate to have the richest variety in the entire nation. The Kesen region is known for its traditions of "Shishi-odori" and "Kenbai" dances.

There are many varieties of Shishi-odori, as "Shishi" can refer to deer, boars, or serows. It can also refer to a mythical lion figure, called a Karajishi, which is seen in the Gongen or Tora-mai dances.

Kenbai ("Kenbea" in the local dialect) usually means "swords dance" in Japanese, but in Kesen it refers to a "henbai." Henbai is a ritual of stepping on the ground in a certain pattern in order to ward off evil spirits. Have you ever seen a sumo wrestler stomp the ground before a match? Or how about a person clacking two sticks together before getting in position? This is purportedly a legacy of the henbai ritual.



Fury of the Shoulders Dance

Itayo Kataikari Kenbai

Ofunato City

In 1751, the Inagozawa clan of Ikawa-cho (present day Ofunato) made use of their fortune to invite Buddhist artisans to make carvings, altars, and a large Buddhist temple.

As the clan had many underlings working for them at this time, they needed a way to encourage harmony. They borrowed techniques of the historic Nenbutsu Kenbai dance from their ancestors of Esashi (southern inland of Iwate) and had their workers make masks and costumes.

These kenbai performers do not wear armor. Over a long-sleeved dark blue shirt dyed with bold patterns, they wear a sleeveless cover with rounded shoulders trimmed with red piping. This is why they call it "Kata-Ikari," which can be loosely translated as "fury of the shoulders."

Procession of the Feudal Lord in Shimozai

Shimozai Daimyo Gyoretsu

Sumita Town

In 1868, a man named Sasaki traveled to Murone Shrine in Ichinoseki (southern inland of Iwate) where he learned their procession ritual, or “gyoretsu.” He returned to his home in the Setamai area of current-day Sumita Town and taught the townspeople, which they say was the start of the Shimozai Daimyo Gyoretsu. (Shimozai is a village within Setamai)

In the past, the Kesen river area saw a terrible outbreak of dysentery, but the people of Shimozai were miraculously spared. Some say this was because of their prayers at the village shrine to ward off the sickness spirits.

As a sign of gratitude to the gods, the people of Shimozai perform the Gyoretsu at the Amaterasu Mioya Shrine Festival, a festival held every three years in the beginning of May. The custom now is that Gyoretsu starts off a parade of Shinto altars to pray for peace and well-being.



Nesaki's Tiger Dance on a Ladder

Nesaki Hashigo Tora-mai

Rikuzentakata City

A dancer performs a Tora-mai 20 meters in the air, on a ladder standing at 50 degrees. This acrobatic stunt can be quite thrilling to festival-goers, but its origins lie in ancient times.

The legend says that a god was traveling with a group of people through a valley but were blocked by a mythical Karajishi lion. A man named Saibo lured the lion to the top of a cliff, and the group was able to make it safely to Izumo (a sacred land in southern Japan). This Tora-mai is said to recreate that event.

The dance is performed once every 4 years at an October festival led by Kakuju Shrine and Kurosaki Shrine.



Deer dance of Nagahama

Nagahama Shishi-odori

Ofunato City

Shishi-odori is performed throughout southern Iwate and northern Miyagi Prefecture, which used to be part of the Date domain in the feudal era. There are three styles: Gyosan-ryu, Kanatsu-ryu, and Kasuga-ryu, with Gyosan-ryu being the most common, even in Kesen. The Nagahama Shishi-odori originally crossed over from Maikawa Village (present-day Ichinoseki City), through Sumita to Ofunato.

Nagahama Shishi-odori was mainly practiced by the Shida clan who arrived 200 years ago. There are 8 performers, with the lead called a “Nakadachi.” The Shida clan has continued to act as a base for the Shishi-odori, and the Nakadachi has traditionally been played by a Shida.



Fighting Star Festival

Kenka Tanabata

Rikuzentakata City

Every year on August 7, the Imaizumi area of Rikuzentakata City comes to life with the beat of huge taiko drums. People have come to see decorated floats crash together for the Kenka Tanabata Festival.

Kenka Tanabata's origins lie long ago, with some recording its history from around 1624-1644. When Kongoji Temple moved to the Imaizumi area, there was a mass Buddhist ritual held between the Imaizumi and Takata area to feed hungry ghosts. In order boost morale, people of Imaizumi started beating their drums like they were going to war. The theory is that those same drum beats are what are played in the Tanabata festival.

Three of the four floats were washed away by the 2011 tsunami, but thanks to aid sent by the rest of the nation, they have been able to continue the festival every year. Tanabata itself is held throughout the country, but this sort of "Fighting" festival may be the only one of its kind in all of Japan!



KESEN LOCAL CUISINE

HOTAWAKA GOZEN – Scallops and Wakame Seaweed



Rikuzentakata City now has a new dish to attract tourists to the area!

It's a grill and shabu-shabu set for scallops and seaweed (JPN: Hotate to Wakame no Aburi Shabushabu Gozen). For short, they just call it Hotawaka Gozen.

This meal is a real treat, as it uses 3 of Rikuzentakata's famous marine products: scallops, wakame seaweed, and Takata-no-yume rice. It comes with raw scallops for sashimi, grilled scallops, fried scallops, wakame shabu-shabu (where you swish the seaweed in boiling broth before eating), wakame-topped rice, scallop soup, Japanese pickles, and a wakame dessert.

This Hotawaka Gozen set is served at 4 restaurants in the city: Rikumaru, Capital Hotel 1000, Hotel Sanyo, and Café Food Bar Waiwai.

☆☆☆ Further Information ☆☆☆

(Information is in Japanese)

- "Folk Performing Arts of Ofunato City, Iwate Prefecture," by the Executive Committee for Revitalizing Ofunato's Folk Performing Arts
- "Designated Cultural Heritage of Rikuzentakata City," by the Rikuzentakata City Board of Education
- "Walking through the historical sites around Ofunato City," by Kenji Hirayama

Note from the editor

Allow me to express my gratitude to those who helped with the reporting of this issue. Thank you very much. We will continue to work toward sharing tourism information in other languages.