
History of the Sapporo Summer Festival

The Sapporo Summer Festival is a month-long celebration throughout Sapporo from mid-July to mid-August. The spirit of charity has been an important part of the festival from the start. Each year, millions of yen are donated to welfare organizations dedicated to causes such as child welfare and helping those with disabilities.

The festival began in 1954 as a collection of 22 events that included the Tanabata star festival, fireworks, a children's sumo tournament, a boat festival, *bon odori* dancing, and a firefly hunt. These activities took place all over town and at the Toyohira River.

In 1957, Odori Park became the main venue of the festival, and the beer garden held there is now the centerpiece of the current festival. The history of beer in Sapporo goes back to 1876, and the city has breweries run by two of Japan's biggest beer companies, as well as the only beer museum in the country.

In 1972, Sapporo established a sister-city relationship with Munich, Germany—another beer capital, which brought an international flavor to the festival. Sapporo German Village offers German brews and all kinds of German pub food in the spirit of Oktoberfest. Beers from other countries are served up in World Beer Square. Meanwhile, each of the four major domestic brewers has a block in Odori Park where they serve beer and foods that pair well with it.

Another facet of the summer festival that occurs in Odori Park is the Hokkai Bon Odori held in mid-August. In the evenings, dancers circle the specially built tower in 2-chome, near the Sapporo TV Tower.

The Susukino Festival, held during the first weekend of August, is another important component. Susukino is adjacent to the south end of Odori Park, and the main events there are parades and dance performances.



Sapporo Odori Beer Garden

The mainstay of the Sapporo Summer Festival is the beer garden in Odori Park that runs from mid-July to mid-August. The beer garden is divided into six sections throughout the park, from 5-chome to 8-chome, and at 10-chome and 11-chome. There are 13,000 seats available in total, making it the biggest beer garden in the country. An important feature of the festival is support for charity, and a portion of the proceeds from the beer garden goes to charitable organizations.

The four biggest breweries in Japan are Sapporo, Asahi, Kirin, and Suntory. Their beer gardens occupy the center of Odori Park, in the blocks between 5-chome and 8-chome. The four brewers offer limited-edition beers that can only be sampled at the festival. Further down the avenue at 10-chome is World Beer Square, followed by Sapporo German Village at 11-chome. Microbrew craft beers are also on offer. Beers can be ordered in tasting sets as well as large sizes like three-liter tower pitchers.

Foods that pair well with beer are readily available, including pizza, sausages, pretzels, and beef hors d'oeuvres. A Hokkaido specialty is *jingisukan*, barbecued lamb or mutton with plenty of vegetables. The name of the dish—a Japanese rendition of “Genghis Khan”—is supposedly derived from the pan it is cooked in, which is thought to resemble the helmet of a Mongolian soldier. Food and drinks can be ordered directly at each stall, or by using tickets purchased at the ticket counter or from the specialized ticket staff.

There are several seating options to choose from in the various blocks: non-reserved seats at tables, either open to the sky or covered; spaces at standing bars; and reserved seating. Seating in some areas fills up quickly, however, reservations for hospitality seating for out-of-town visitors may be arranged through hotel concierge services.



Hokkai Bon Odori

One of the final events at the Sapporo Summer Festival is the Hokkai Bon Odori at Odori Park in mid-August. This is the season of Obon, the traditional festival that welcomes the spirits of the dead back to this world for a brief reunion with loved ones.

Bon odori is a type of dancing held during Obon, and it is thought that the spirits of the dead dance along with the living. Anyone can join the dance circle. Many of the steps and gestures are simple and are repeated many times, so it is possible to catch on quickly.

Dancing begins each evening at 6 p.m. with easy dances that kids will enjoy, and children receive a small gift for joining the dance. There is a special “kids only” lottery each day, and winners get to beat the big taiko drum on top of the tower. Lottery entries are accepted right up until the performance starts.

Jim Beam Summer Festival

On the first two days of the festival, Jim Beam highballs, music, dance, and festival food are on offer. In a departure from the traditional *bon odori* music, a DJ selects songs from a variety of genres, such as popular songs, Western music, and folk songs.

Costume Contest

A costume contest is held during the evening of the last day of the festival at 3-chome in Odori Park. The costumed dancers often join the *bon odori* later, after a parade. Contest entry applications can be downloaded and submitted by email, fax, or postal mail from the beginning of July.



Susukino Festival

The Susukino Festival is held during the evenings for three days over the first weekend in August. Food stalls line the streets, which are closed to vehicles during this time. The main events include a number of parades and dance performances, with a lively procession of portable shrines (*mikoshi*) from throughout the area on the last day.

The festival begins with the reverberations of taiko drums, as teams from all over Hokkaido band together in a combined performance. The drums herald the start of the Oiran Procession, featuring women dressed as high-class courtesans (*oiran*) of the Edo period (1603–1867) in elaborate and colorful period costumes.

On the second day, a series of dance performances by both local and international teams moves down the street. This is the day of the *yosakoi* dance competition featuring large teams of extravagantly costumed performers. *Yosakoi* originated in the 1950s as a modern form of the traditional *awa odori* dance from Tokushima Prefecture and has energetic, choreographed moves.

Also on the second day is the newest addition to the festival, the Samba Carnival Parade. Dancers costumed in the spirit of Brazil's Carnival perform along the avenue in Susukino and then onstage at the nearby Odori Beer Garden. In 2019, the first year of this parade, 13 teams comprised of 635 people participated.

On the third and final day, hundreds of people carry *mikoshi* through Sapporo and gather at the entrance to Susukino. As many as 1,000 people are needed to carry the seven *mikoshi*. The largest, which weighs 1.5 tons, requires 100 people to carry it at a time. In the throng of people surrounding the *mikoshi* and moving along with it are people ready to step in as replacements for the first carriers. People come from all over Hokkaido to participate.



