

Fireworks during the Muroan Port Festival with a large cruise ship docked at Muroan Port

FEATURES



Photo: Muroan Tourist Association

Grand Summer Festival in a Northern Port Town

Muroan City, situated in the southwestern part of Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island, hosts a major summer event known as the Muroan Port Festival. This vibrant celebration takes place over three days at the end of July every year.

(Text: TANAKA Nozomi)



Photo: Muroan Tourist Association

A scene from Muroan Nerikomi, where participants carry mikoshi portable shrines as they parade



Photo: Muroran Tourist Association

A group performs an eye-catching drum dance

Muroran City, along with its ironworks and steelworks, represents one of the cities in Hokkaido that has developed as a center of heavy industry. Muroran Port, opened in 1872, has long been renowned as a natural harbor. It continues to serve as a critical part of the international maritime cargo transportation network, designated as an ‘international hub port¹,’ playing a crucial role in logistics. We spoke with SATO Mizuki, in charge of tourism public relations at the Muroran City Office, regarding the 78th Muroran Port Festival to be held in 2024 around Irierinkai Park facing Muroran Port.

“The first festival dates back to 1947. To lift the spirits of the port town, which had been low following the end of the war in 1945, the citizens organized a week-long series of diverse events, including a marathon, a costume parade, and a sailors’ baseball tournament. After various twists and turns and the dedicated efforts of the community, the festival evolved into its current form as the Muroran Port Festival,” says SATO. “The festival kicks off with a grand fireworks display, featuring around 2,200 fireworks launched over Muroran Port. Other highlights include the Muroran Nerikomi, where illuminated *mikoshi* (portable shrines²) parade through the main streets, and a dance parade by local citizens. Traditionally held over a three-day weekend at the end of July, last year’s event (2023) attracted over 100,000 visitors.”

The main venues for the festival are Irierinkai Park, located along Muroran Port, and the adjacent plaza. This area also serves as the viewing spot for the first day’s fireworks display. The plaza comes alive with

food stalls and a stage featuring dance and music performances. Depending on the year, visitors can enjoy the festivities while admiring the large cruise ships docked at Muroran Port, immersing themselves in the vibrant atmosphere of the harbor.

In addition, the citizen dances, which involve active participation from the residents, feature around 600 local residents dancing to the tunes of ‘Muroran Bayashi’ and ‘Hokkai Bon Uta.’ This parade showcases a large group dance through the shopping streets. The festival finale, ‘Yosakoi Soran in Muroran,’ features around 15 groups from within and outside the city performing their unique group dances. This event takes place on the port stage, bringing the festival to a close.

“Each team dances to their own unique arrangements of the Soran Bushi³, a traditional folk song of Hokkaido. The dancers, wearing colorful costumes and holding *naruko*⁴ clappers, perform in perfect harmony. The large flags and drums used to enhance the performances are must-sees. The festival reaches its climax with a grand group dance featuring all the participants, which is both spectacular and impressive,” says SATO, describing the highlights of the festival. **7**



Photo: Muroran Tourist Association

A drum performance showcased against the backdrop of a large cruise ship

1. Ports are classified based on their overall capabilities and intended uses in relation to national economic activities. Muroran Port is particularly significant in terms of trade and is categorized as an ‘international hub port’ that has a major impact on the nation’s economic activities.
2. A *mikoshi* is a portable shrine modeled after a Shinto shrine for the gods to ride in. It is carried and paraded through the streets during festivals. The carriers shout chants and shake the *mikoshi* as they move.
3. A traditional folk song of Hokkaido, originally a work song sung by fishermen at herring fishing grounds.
4. A percussion instrument consisting of a wooden clapper attached to a handle, which is shaken to produce sound.