

Elegant Boat Ritual Featuring Traditional Music Performed on the Sea

A ritual that replicates the graceful boating traditions of ancient nobility takes place at Itsukushima Shrine in Hatsukaichi City, Hiroshima Prefecture. (Text: TANAKA Nozomi)



Photo: SHINTANI Koichi

A scene from the Kangensai Festival: a gorgeously decorated *goza-bune* (center) sails through the Seto Inland Sea accompanied by three smaller boats.

Itsukushima Shrine, registered as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site in 1996, is located on the island of Itsukushima in Hatsukaichi City, Hiroshima Prefecture. The island, floating in Hiroshima Bay in the western part of the Seto Inland Sea, is more popularly known as ‘Miyajima,’ literally ‘shrine island.’

In the lush green forests of Itsukushima, which extend to the coastline, historical wooden structures lining toward the sea create an impressive landscape. The most splendid ritual at Itsukushima Shrine is the *Kangensai*. In the 10th to 11th centuries, in the capital at the time, Kyoto, nobles would float boats on ponds

and rivers, playing musical instruments in a leisure activity known as *kangen*¹. This occurred more than 800 years ago. Taira no Kiyomori², who oversaw the construction of Itsukushima Shrine, began conducting the *Kangensai* ritual to please the gods, adapting this pastime. The event is held annually on the 17th day of the sixth month according to Japan’s old luni-solar calendar, which in 2024 falls on July 22. It takes place from evening until late at night, illuminated by moonlight, where boats glide back and forth on the sea while musicians play *kangen* music. It is a sight of great elegance and beauty, reminiscent of ancient imperial court rituals being recreated.



Photo: SHINTANI Koichi

Passing under the grand torii gate, the *goza-bune* makes its return.



Photo: SHINTANI Koichi

The *goza-bune* arrives at the narrow space (*masugata*) surrounded by corridors of Itsukushima Shrine and rotates three times.



Photo: PKYA

Japanese lanterns, or *Chochin*, prepared to welcome the boats at Nagahama Shrine

We spoke with SUZUKI Naotomo from the Miyajima Tourist Association about the Kangensai Festival. “During the Kangensai Festival, a portable shrine (*mikoshi*) said to carry the gods of Itsukushima is placed on a ceremonial boat called a *goza-bune*, which is towed by three smaller boats. Onboard are musicians playing traditional *kangen* music while circling Itsukushima Shrine and its surrounding auxiliary shrines³,” explains SUZUKI.

“Departing from Itsukushima Shrine in the evening, the *goza-bune* boat with three smaller boats visit several auxiliary shrines, including Nagahama Shrine, before returning. At around 11pm, they pass through the O-torii, a grand torii gate standing approximately 160 meters offshore from the shrine’s main hall. The highlight of the festival is when each boat circles three times when arriving and departing from the shrine. The most impressive scene occurs during the final return to Itsukushima Shrine, where the ceremonial boat circles closely along the corridor of the shrine’s hall in the narrow *masugata*⁴, accompanied by *kangen* music. This powerful spectacle reaches its climax with hand clapping and cheers from visitors. After completing this ritual, the gods return to the main hall, concluding the festival.”

The Kangensai Festival attracts around 10,000 visitors annually, including tourists to Itsukushima. Many

visitors come from overseas as well.

“At Nagahama Shrine, where the ceremonial boat circles, there are events such as welcoming the boats with Japanese lanterns called *Chochin*⁵ and opportunities for reserved boat rides alongside the ceremonial one. These activities offer participants a more immersive experience of the festival,” explains SUZUKI, while sharing ways to enjoy the event.


This grand and elegant summer ritual unfolding on the Seto Inland Sea until late at night is truly a spectacle. For those who have the opportunity, it is well worth experiencing it firsthand. 



Photo: SHINTANI Koichi

The O-torii gate, repaired in 2022, stands in the sea at a height of 16.6 meters.

1. *Kangen* is a style of *Gagaku* music, a traditional form of Japanese court music that includes purely instrumental ensemble performances known as *kangen*. *Gagaku* has been passed down since ancient times, incorporating Japan’s own songs such as *kagura-uta*, and blending elements of ancient music and dance from various Asian mainland countries from around the 5th century, influenced by the introduction of Buddhist culture from China and the Korean Peninsula. Traditional instruments used include the *sho*, *hichiriki*, flutes, and other wind instruments, the *koto*, *biwa* and other string instruments, as well as the *kakko* and *taiko* drums, among others.
2. Born in 1118 and died in 1181, this military commander established a warrior government at the end of the 12th century. He was the first samurai to be appointed as the Grand Minister of State, the head of Dajokan, the Grand Council of State, equivalent to today’s Cabinet.
3. Shrines within a shrine complex, associated with the main shrine, dedicated to gods closely connected with the enshrined deity.
4. A square area surrounded by the corridors of the shrine. In 2024, due to repairs on the corridors, scaffolding has been set up, and the boats will circle in a different location.
5. A lighting fixture that uses thin bamboo or wooden frames covered with paper, with candles placed inside for illumination.