

The Four Seasons and the Seasonal Calendar of the Japanese Ryokan

Stretching lengthwise from north to south, with numerous hilly areas and mountain ranges, Japan has four distinct seasons due to the wide regional differences in climate, and is also influenced by the seasonal monsoon winds occurring between the Asiatic Continent and the Pacific Ocean. In the spring, the entire country becomes brightly colored with cherry blossoms (*sakura*), which start to flower in Okinawa and the wave of blossom travels northward. Once the rainy season (known as *tsuyu*) is over and summer sets in, the whole of Japan, with the exception of Hokkaido, enters a season of high temperature and high humidity, and you will be able to hear cicadas singing almost everywhere. In the fall, the landscapes become dyed in autumnal tints of gold and crimson beginning in the mountains, and the people busily harvest rice and other crops in the rural districts. In the winter, cold seasonal winds blow in from the Continent, bringing heavy snowfall to a large area facing the Japan Sea stretching from Hokkaido to the Hokuiku District, with some of the heaviest snowfalls in the world.

Spring, summer, autumn, winter - the Japanese have always looked upon these seasonal transitions with special emotions. These include a sense of awe toward the mighty power of Mother Nature, and are also associated with the concept of reincarnation as the cycle of rebirth, which in turn relates to our concept of life and death. Life newly born in spring, thrives in summer, bears fruit in autumn, and withers away in winter toward death. But once spring arrives again, new life is born and the cycle turns once again. The Japanese people have long sought the meaning of human life and death in the rhythms of nature.

Many times in the past, Japan has been hit by natural catastrophes including earthquakes, typhoons, heavy snowfall, floods, and starvation. And it was widely believed that such phenomena were caused by the anger of the deities of nature, which explains our awe of nature. With such underlying thoughts, the Japanese receive the blessings of each season with gratitude, and have adopted lifestyles suited to each season, thereby fostering values and an aesthetic appreciation of the four seasons. Furthermore, we have honored the bond between man and nature, and between one person and another, and it is considered a virtue to treat other people first before thinking of oneself. This spirit inherent

to the Japanese has been passed down over the generations, and it can still be found in a more limited form in *Sadō* (art of ceremonial tea), *Kadō* (art of flower arrangement), *haiku* poems, *Kabuki* (traditional drama performed by male actors), *Sumō* wrestling, *Shinto* rituals (called *Shinji*), and traditional events.

As mentioned earlier, Japanese architecture, Japanese gardens and Japanese cuisine are indeed fruits borne by the spiritual culture unique to Japan, evolving and developing on the fundamental concept of the four seasons as perceived by the Japanese people. The Japanese ryokan is a lodging house peculiar to Japan integrating all such fruits, and is a treasure-house of diverse traditions reflecting Japanese culture.

The Japanese ryokan also has four distinct seasons. This does not merely refer to the changes in the landscapes. For instance, in *Shōgatsu** (the New Year), special decorations are set up such as *matsu-kazari* (New Year's pine decoration) and *shime-nawa* (a sacred twisted straw rope of Shintoism), with *Osechi** *ryōri* served, and people enjoying *mochi-tsuki* (pounding rice into cake). At *Setsubun**, *mame-maki* (throwing beans for driving away the devil) is carried out in a ritual to pray for good health and protection from disasters and calamities. In the guestrooms, *kake-jiku* (hanging scrolls) and flowers are replaced to suit each season of the year. Iris leaves are floated in the bathtubs on *Sekku**, and *yuzu* (Japanese citron) are floated in the bath at winter solstice, to pray for the healthy growth of children and good health during the cold months respectively. At *Tanabata**, bamboo branches are set up for tying *tanzaku* (long, narrow strips of colored paper) with one's wishes written on, and at the time of *Chūshū** *no Meigetsu* (full moon in mid-autumn), *tsukimi-dango* dumplings are served for viewing the full moon. Events associated with these traditional ceremonies are carried out nationwide in most ryokan based on the customs of each locality. Of course, various means are used to convey the seasons throughout the ryokan as well as in the food served, allowing the guests to fully admire the beauty of the four seasons together with *kachō-fūgetsu* (flowers and birds, wind and the moon). Moreover, each ryokan has its own practices and customs, such as offering pleasant surprises that will be remembered by the guests, with the *Okami* paying courtesy calls on the guests and serving house sake and

meals in their rooms, or offering souvenirs.

Furthermore, in all districts and local regions of the country, there are numerous traditional festivals and celebratory events which are still carried out today in each season, and annual events attracting large numbers of tourists are much talked about. Ryokans contributing to the promotion and revitalization of their local areas have close ties with local society, and often play leading or supporting roles in organizing festivals, so if you happen to be staying at a ryokan on the day of a festival, you will doubtless have an exciting and memorable experience. The majority of festivals originated in the people offering prayers or gratitude to the deities for an abundant harvest of crops including rice and farm products as well as large catches of fish, and they are worth watching for they include strange festivals as well as very large festivals. The summer fireworks displays with a strong local flavor organized for the people in the cool of the evening, the cherry-blossom viewing (*hanami*) in the spring, and excursions for viewing the gold and crimson leaves (*momiji-gari*) in late autumn - all serve to further enhance the four seasons of Japan.

Some ryokans stage marriage ceremonies, and if you are lucky enough to chance upon a wedding, you might be able to catch a glimpse of the traditional Japanese-style matrimonial ceremony conducted faithfully in accordance with ancient customs.

- *Shōgatsu* : New Year - January, also known as *Mutsuki* (meaning 'month of harmonious relations'). Today, January 1st to 7th is called *Matsu-no-uchi* when New Year is celebrated.
- *Osechi* : special dishes served in the New Year or *Sekku* (the five annual festivals of Japan)
- *Setsubun* : the day preceding the *risshun* (the first day of spring), *rikka* (the first day of summer), *risshō* (the first day of autumn), *ritō* (the first day of winter), and the *Setsubun* cited above refers to the day before *risshun*.
- *Sekku* : the *Sekku* here refers to the *Tango no Sekku* (Boys' Festival) on May 5th.
- *Tanabata* : the Star Festival held on July 7th.
- *Chūshū* : around mid-September every year, corresponding to August 15th according to the lunar calendar.



花火は夏の風物詩
A fireworks display is symbolic of summer.



夏と秋は恒例の祭りで賑わう
Lively annual festivals in summer and autumn.



冬、雪化粧した老舗旅館
An old-established ryokan covered in snow in winter.