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Candlelight brings added dimension to the Yokote Kamakura Igloo Festival.

# Sake and Snow: An Igloo Festival in Japan

Story and photography by Abigail King

**K**amakura. It's one of those words I'd never heard until I went to Yokote in northern Japan.

Snow was falling as I arrived in Yokote, a city 260 miles from Tokyo. It fell softly at first, like a scene from a storybook, before whipping itself into airborne swirls. Among the bright white and inky darkness, I watched the city throw itself into its *kamakura matsuri*—a two-day festival studded with snowflakes, sake and, most of all, igloos.

Winters are often harsh in this part of Japan, but this one had dented the record books. Nearly two meters of snow had stacked up, and banks of gray, stale snow still loomed high over traffic lights and signposts. Every sidewalk and weighed-down public space served as a reminder of the frosty hardship Yokote had endured.

What locals didn't know, of course, nor did I, was that in a few weeks' time a devastating earthquake would strike a few miles east of Sendai, the region's capital. The earthquake would cause a tsunami that would go on to claim the lives of more than 15,000 people and bring Japan

into the world's headlines for devastating reasons.

Yokote, as it turned out, would be spared from direct damage. Yet the lives of the people who live here would clearly never be the same. Of course, neither I nor the children who dipped ladles into hot cauldrons of sweet rice drinks could predict this as the snow fell that night.

I spotted my first full-size igloo, or *kamakura*, beside a bus stop and was

anxious to step inside. Shioji, my interpreter and friend, pulled me away and hauled me onto a minibus. In a voice fresh from a 1950s suspense movie, she assured me that the best was yet to come.

The bus climbed slowly yet steadily through the night. We passed a field of kennel-sized igloos built beside the local high school before lumbering over a frosted river. From the window, the landscape blurred, almost lost in an impression of forked-tongue tree branches and the condensation of my breath on the glass.

Eventually, we reached the castle. As a Brit, I'm used to castles made from earthy stone with jaw-tooth turrets, but this one had smooth white walls, and its curved slate roof reached into the sky like an oversized wedding cake.

As Shioji and I walked along the path, our shadows were long and wild in the *kamakura* candlelight.

Just before the castle, we reached a full-size igloo, domed and grand with a welcoming amber light.

I ducked my head and went in.

Three pairs of eyes greeted me.

The girls, ages 12 and 13, wore



The scent of cooking rice cakes floats through the frosty air at the festival.





A warm glow from altar candles invites visitors into an igloo.

scarlet winter coats and scarves. Their hands toasted rice cakes over a stove made of snow, and curls of calligraphy paper rested on an altar behind them.

They giggled, handed me a rice cake and started chatting.

Like all good traditions, the kamakura matsuuri's origins remain shrouded in mystery. For more than 400 years, the children of Yokote have offered hot rice drinks to strangers (with shots of sake for the most deserving adults) as a way of pleading with the gods to bring them an early spring. Or water. Or scaring the birds away from the crops. Or, they giggled a little more, something like that.

After a while, they wanted their photo taken with me. Tourists aren't rare in this part of Japan, but a blonde visitor in a ski jacket stands out. The girls formed Vs with their fingers and beamed a row of lovely smiles.

It was hard not to get swept along with the general goodwill there that night. In another kamakura, I found the lads about town, aged 16 or so. They handed me a cup of amazake, the local, warm, rice drink, and wondered when they'd get the chance to taste sake.

Across from the rows of traditional, domed kamakura, some enterprising souls had draped blue lights in the shape of a heart, on an igloo, and carved a large, snow likeness of Donald Duck, which presided over a wall of upside down kamakura.

Huddling around a stove to keep warm, I met the architects of the wintry extravaganza: the igloo builders themselves. Builders, farmers and lawyers for the rest of the year, they turn out each February to shovel and pack snow.

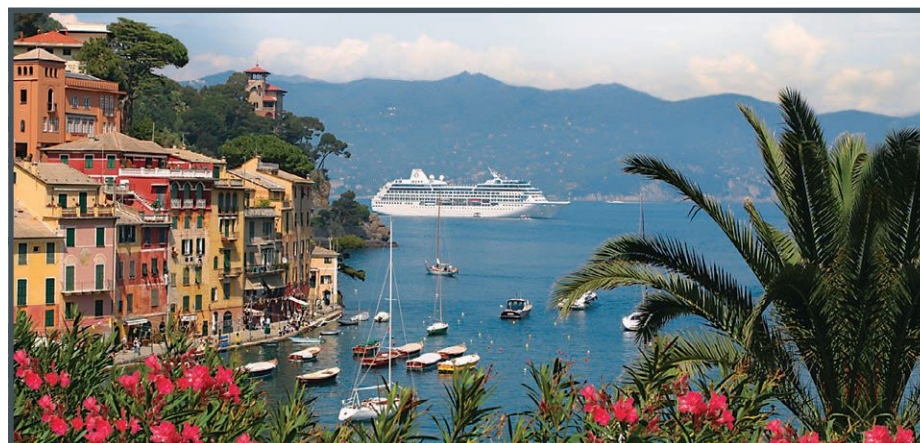
How did they make sure the igloos didn't fall down, I wanted to know. How did they carve such precision into the altars, and how did they man-

age to make Donald Duck's beak stay so sharp?

They refused to answer. Snow thumpers, as they call themselves, keep their trade secrets, well, secret.

The sweet scent of charring rice enveloped us and after enough amazake I no longer felt the cold. I watched

*continued on page 31*



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Tuesday, February 28th

2:00pm - 3:00pm or 6:00pm - 7:00pm

**Location:**

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**Guest Speaker:**

Charles Sauter, CIMA®

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## GREAT ESCAPE continued



Girls, ages 12 and 13, flash smiles and Vs to the photographer.

families pass by and found it hard to believe that by the next day, this snow-globe world would disappear. The snow thumpers stand on duty, ready to demolish the igloos as soon as the crowds disperse.

Melting kamakura and dissolving giant snow ducks pose a risk to the community, and that's something that Yokote will not tolerate.

Still, there's always next year, when the kamakura will return. And after more than 400 years of sake and snow, even an earthquake and tsunami won't be able to stop them.

**DL**

*Abigail King is a freelance writer and photographer living in Great Britain. Comments for publication should be addressed to letters@desertleaf.com.*

## DAY TRIPPING continued

"It's windier and colder up there," says one of the men, pointing to the looming craggy rocks.

Stuffing my hands in my pockets, I plod on, glad I'd packed gloves in my fanny pack. Ice covers the trail at Bel-lows Spring (3.8 miles from the trail-head). Water gurgles from a pipe into a small cement basin, and the overflow has frozen solid. I carefully pick my way across.

The next 0.7 mile is heart-pounding switchbacks. Up, up and up, I climb, finally reaching Baldy Saddle (4.5 miles from the trailhead).

It's flat and grassy with several Ponderosa pines and Douglas fir and a good place to rest before the final push. I tug on my gloves, and at the T-junction head right along the 0.9 mile Mt. Wrightson Trail.

It's easygoing at first, a nice break from the earlier steep grade, but soon enough I pass through the last tall pines, and the switchbacks start again. The trail hugs boulders and curls past scrappy, shoulder-high oaks. Pea-size hail pummels me as I round a bend. I push on, finally reaching the top of the wind-swept peak.

Sitting huddled on the foundation of the old fire lookout, I marvel at the 360-degree view: Mt. Hopkins' observatories, Baboquivari Peak, Mt. Lemmon, Mt. Graham, the Huachucas and Mexico's Sierra San Antonio. Prying open an ammo container, I sign my name in the log book. One last view and I head back down. At a fast clip with breaks,

the round trip took me five hours and 45 minutes.

### Finding Your Way

From Tucson, take I-19 south. Turn east at Continental Road (Exit 63). Follow signs to Madera Canyon picnic area (12.5 miles). There is a \$5 day-use fee.

**DL**

*Lisa K. Harris is a freelance writer and environmental consultant with huge wanderlust. Comments for publication should be addressed to letters@desertleaf.com.*

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