

November

■ Christmas in Japan

Spending Christmas in Japan will be a wholly different experience. You do not have to be religious to celebrate this event here.

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■ Bell Toll on New Year's Eve

In Japanese, it is called *joya no kane*. Many temples toll the bells 108 times on New Year's Eve, in order to illuminate 108 worldly desires.

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■ Worldly Desires

It is believed that there are 108 things in the world that make human beings suffer or confused.

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■ Machida Tourist Gallery

It is the visitor center of Machida in the Poppo Building near the Machida Station. English service is available when an English-speaking staff member is available.

Winter Illuminations in Machida City Light up your Heart.

Machida has many romantic spots with Christmas lights. Even if you are not planning to go on a date, you can still hang out with the people you love!



(Above: Christmas illumination in the plaza of Poppo Machida until December 25.)

If you are living in Japan, away from your home country, you might miss how you spend time during the winter season. Christmas and New Year's Day are coming up very soon! There could be a big get-together with your family, friends, or you could spend time with your partner. Also, you might wonder whether the customs are the same here in Japan.

There is Christmas here in Japan. Most Japanese people, however, are Non-Christian, which means that Christmas here is much smaller in scale, compared to the celebrations held in other cultures. You might wonder about the reasons why Japanese people welcomed Christmas in first place, considering the fact the majority of Japanese people are not Christian.

Japanese people must have adopted certain foreign events when they seemed to be fun; Christmas and Tanabata (the idea related to Chinese myths) are great examples. At the same time, where adaptation takes place, there must be special arrangements made to make the adaptation fit in the society. Therefore, Christmas here may appear different from what you already know from other cultures.

First, couples in Japan find it more important to make the 24th, or Christmas Eve more special. This is the time many people consider as a day to spend with your love. So on the 25th, some might feel as if Christmas is already over.

Second, the Christmas meals Japanese people enjoy can be very unique. You might eat *sushi*, fried chicken, salad, or pizza for dinner, then a piece of cake as dessert. You might have wine, champagne, or *sake* (Japanese rice wine) as well.

Third, Christmas does not necessarily constitute a religious day in Japan. It is more like an excuse to have nice food and an awesome party so that you may receive presents. Even if someone's household chooses Buddhism as their religion, they might have a Christmas party. Christmas is a good excuse for us to have a get-together. When in Rome, why don't you enjoy a happy winter event in Japan?

Machida city has several famous spots for Christmas illuminations: The Terminal Plaza's pink illumination, Tamagawa Gakuen's huge Christmas tree, Grand Berry Mall's thoroughfare of bright decorations and more. The illumination map is available at the Machida Tourism Gallery, the city's official tourism information center in the Poppo Machida building.

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FREE Paper

Listening to Endless Bell Toll on New Year's Eve

Counting the bell toll 108 times on New Year's Eve will surely be a unique experience.

How do you usually spend your new year's eve? In Japan, a stereotypical New Year's Eve and Day flows like this; 1. Eat *toshikoshi* soba noodles and watch TV until midnight, 2. Experience the moment it becomes a new year while hearing the bell toll from a temple nearby, and; 3. Go to a nearby shrine to pray, in order to have a good new year.

According to ancient belief, you are not supposed to sleep on New Year's Eve. The reason for this is because you should be awake to welcome a *toshigami*, or a year god that is believed to bring prosperity for the new year. People used to say that if you sleep through New Year's Eve, you'd get wrinkles and gray hair.

To Japanese people, listening to the bell toll is the moment of feeling the surge of a new year. The time when they toll the bell differs from one temple to another, but the standard number for the toll is 108 times. In the simplest theory, the number, 108 is believed to be the amount of worldly desires. In Buddhism terms, worldly desires are what make people suffer or confused, such as physical and psychological desires, anger, obsession and more (To explain all the worldly desires, it will not fit on a page!). In short, the bell toll event exists in hopes that people will have much more happiness in the New Year.



(Above, top) *Jūshoku*, or the head priest of the Buddhist temple, *Kegon-in*, toll the bell beautifully.

(Above, bottom) People lining up to toll the bell. To make a beautiful sound of the bell requires years of practice.

At some temples, you are allowed to toll the bell yourself by waiting in line. For example, *Jōunji* near Machida station offers such an event. The gate opens at 11 o'clock at night on New Year's Eve, and they start giving out tickets at that time. The bell toll begins at 11:45 and goes on until about 1am on New Year's Day. They also offer *amazake* (sweet rice sake) and fruit.

There are temples that provide similar services; For example, *Tōunji* in Naruse, *Enjōji* in Tsuruma, *Nozuta Yakushidō* in Nozuta, and many more. Tolling a bell in Machida may become a meaningful memory for you.

(Left) *Nozuta Yakushidō* in April. It is located right next to the famous *Yakushi-ike* Park, one of the best tourist spots in Machida City. Temples show whole different atmospheres, according to seasons and events, and it is very interesting to compare differences among them.



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