



MELINDA MURPHY enjoys a different kind of travel experience on a spring visit to the Japanese Alps.

Four centuries. That's what I kept thinking. People had re-enacted this same scene every April for more than 400 years; and now it was my turn to witness what is often billed as one of Japan's three most beautiful festivals, the Takayama Sakura Festival (aka the Sanno Festival).

Hundreds – maybe thousands – had crushed into Takayama's small square, patiently waiting for the show to begin. It was an unusually cold and rainy spring, so the cherry blossoms hadn't even appeared yet, but it didn't matter: we all knew we were there to celebrate the approaching warm weather. I was just happy it wasn't raining – if it rains on the day of the festival, the whole thing is called off!

Most of the visitors were Japanese, but there were a few westerners like me and my family who had made the

pilgrimage to see what all the fuss was about. Three of the ancient, elaborately decorated floats (*yatai*) overwhelmed the small square, each with a puppet (*karakuri ningyo*) mounted high in front. Finally, the marionettes performed, one by one, animated by hundreds of wires operated by men hidden inside, no easy task from what I understood; if you looked closely, you could see a puppeteer on the platform dressed in all black. The show? Truth? It was actually a bit boring. One puppet at a time, pontificating in a language I didn't understand, wasn't too enthralling. However, each puppet did transform into something else right in front of our eyes, culminating with the last one becoming a dragon. I imagine 400 years ago those transformations must have seemed like pure magic.

Little did I know the real magic would happen that night. First, though, each of the dozen floats was paraded through town, following a portable shrine (*mikoshi*) that houses a Shinto deity (*kami*). The two-storey golden structures ride on decrepit wooden wheels and are pulled by a large team of men, ranging from young to very old, tugging massive ropes. I asked around, but nobody's English was good enough to

explain how the teams were chosen. I'm guessing it's a lot like the crews who work the Mardi Gras floats in New Orleans, as it seemed to be a huge honour to be a part of the parade. We followed the floats around, trying – and mostly failing – to get a glimpse of each of them through the crowds.

Takayama is in Gifu Prefecture, in the foothills of the Japanese Alps, and it's a sprawling city with a population of around 100,000. People like me don't come to see the modern parts. Nope. We wanted to check out the beautifully preserved Old Town, dating back to the Edo Period (1600-1868). So, after the parade was finished and before the evening festivities started, we explored the quaint streets, which felt like they must have when the festival first began all those centuries ago.

Each building was frozen in time, with its own unique flavour. Unlike in most tourist areas, the shops here offered a wide variety of items, including many goodies I hadn't seen before, such as giant vats of miso paste and *ichii itoobori* (yew wood) carvings. Everywhere we looked, there were *sarubobo* dolls – red, faceless human-shaped amulets associated





with Takayama, said to bring good luck. There were real works of art and, yes, a few souvenirs, too. We browsed the shops on all of the streets, which even my children enjoyed (probably because there were lots of yummy treats to eat along the way).

We each bought a few trinkets, my favourite a robe for my husband with Japanese writing on it. The shopkeeper said the words came from an ancient Japanese poem (though perhaps it just says “gullible tourist”!). I like it because every morning when I see him in it, I’m reminded of our wonderful day in Takayama.

Hidden among the surprisingly uncrowded shops were warehouses garaging the stunning floats. So, we would shop a little, check out a float with its team standing guard, nibble something delicious and buy something else. And, repeat.

As darkness began to fall, onlookers began to line the main street. The cement curb was a bit cold, so we found some cardboard and plopped down on it for front-row seats. The same dozen floats we’d only glimpsed of during the day now went by slowly, aglow with Japanese lanterns, each very different and more beautiful than the one before. I now understood why this is known as one of the three most beautiful festivals in Japan. In between the floats,



bands played and small children in traditional costume danced and sang. Thousands of cameras clicked madly. People handed out free sake in wooden box cups. All the floats stopped for a while and it turned into a giant street party, illuminated by the gorgeous *yatai*.

Around the corner from where the parade ended, there was a big carnival, too, with games I didn’t know (and food I wasn’t sure I wanted to know). My kids loved the dipped bananas and we got some sort of fried balls. The street was one of the most crowded places I’d ever been and our kids were tired so we only dipped our toe into the offerings, but even that was an experience.

Want to go, but don’t want to wait until April? No worries: a similar event, the Hachiman Festival, is held in autumn (9 and 10 October), with the same kind of schedule and activities, but it takes place on the other end of town and has a dozen different floats. You can also ski near Takayama, so if your itinerary doesn’t line up with the festivals, at least try to get there for the snow (and the shopping!). The town is well worth the visit. Even without the beautiful floats, Takayama will leave a mark on your heart.

Fact File

- Takayama is about 4.5 hours from Tokyo, with a stop in Nagoya. The ride is quite beautiful, with the train twisting its way through the foothills of the Japanese Alps, chasing a river along the way.
- The festival is very popular; we’d waited too late to book a *ryokan*, ending up at the fabulous, modern Hotel Associa Takayama Resort. Because of the public baths, this hotel was my kids’ favourite in Japan, and they insisted on trying each of the several pools, both indoor and outdoor.
- If you get tired of Takayama, take a short bus ride to the Hida Folk Village to check out what life was like many years ago. It’s a recreation village with more than 30 buildings, many with thatched roofs. Kids can try their hand at some crafts. *el*