

# TOKYO TALES

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trees are organised by companies, families and friends. Well-known parks and gardens become incredibly crowded with people who sit under the blooming trees and drink beer and sake. Soft tartan rugs are not for the Japanese; they use crunchy blue tarpaulins and shoes are removed and lined up neatly on the grass before kneeling in the Japanese fashion for the picnic. This is the only time that alcohol is allowed to be drunk in public, and on the whole, the Japanese are 'happy' drunks. Towards the end of the official Hanami day in my local park there was no rowdiness, no vomiting and no aggression, just joyful singing and laughing, couples waltzing gently under the trees and teenage boys practising their skipping! And for many people, it's a chance to gather a whole new set of sakura

## Cherry Blossom Time

Of all the many festivals here in Japan, *hanami* is probably the best loved and is certainly the most beautiful. *Hanami* is the name given to cherry-blossom viewing parties which take place during a brief period in March or April.

Cherry blossom or *sakura* is part of the nation's identity and is revered for its beautiful appearance, yet short-lived nature. This gives rise to all kinds of lyrical explanations. The most common description is that the *sakura*'s splendour and briefness of life is a poignant reminder to us that life is short, yet incredibly beautiful, and should not be wasted.

The date of *hanami* is never regular as so many things influence this particular time, most notably the weather and geography. In the south, on the subtropical islands of Okinawa, cherry blossoms can open as early as January, while on the northernmost island of Hokkaido, they don't bloom until as late as May. In Tokyo the season usually occurs around the end of March or the beginning of April.

*Hanami* is anticipated with great seriousness. Each year, the Meteorological Agency and the media carefully follow the 'cherry blossom front', as it moves north through the country and give forecasts of the progress of the cherry-blossom schedule. Last year, the meteorological office was forced to make a public apology when a computer error wrongly predicted an early start to the season. Naturally, not every cherry tree flowers at the same time, so there are special "benchmark" trees which are checked each day and used to define the start of *hanami*. A formal announcement is made by an official cherry blossom inspector when five or six blossoms are observed on these particular trees. The surprisingly bureaucratic attitude to this festival is that the date is an important money-maker for tour companies as many people use this period for holidays.

Other reasons for *hanami* being such an eagerly awaited event are because it marks the advent of spring, the start of the school year and, for many, it marks the start of a lifetime of work after university finishes. And it's a good excuse for a party. Picnics under the flowering

photographs. The range of cameras on show is as spectacular as the flowers, anything from mobile phone cameras to top of the range large format cameras are brought into play. I even saw someone with an antique camera which drew as much admiration as the flowers. Orderly queues form by trees with a particularly spectacular show of blooms so that everyone gets the chance to take the perfect photo.

During this brief week or two everything possible is taken outside, from nursery school classes, English language classes to friends just catching up with each other. Prime locations are claimed very early in the morning by pinning the groundsheet down and placing your name on it. Nobody would remove this, it just wouldn't be considered. In most cases for company parties, the claimant will be a new employee and he will just sit there all day long in his suit until the rest of the party arrive, often in the evening. It's quite a good way of getting a day off work!

The tradition of *hanami* is centuries old and was originally used to dictate when the rice-planting season should start. Cherry trees, like many other aspects of nature, are also said to be the homes of gods, known as *kami*, which is where the sake offerings originate, although nowadays the sake is partaken by the people rather than used to feed the tree god.

