



## A Guide to the Kofu Ebisu-ko Festival and *Mikoshi* Etiquette

The Kofu Ebisu-ko Festival is a signature autumn event in Kofu that honors Ebisu, the deity of business prosperity and wealth. Every year in mid-November, the city comes alive with the powerful shouts of participants as *mikoshi* (portable shrines) are paraded from the Kofu Station area through the central shopping districts. The dynamic movements and voices of the bearers are impressive to watch, but actually joining in to carry a *mikoshi* provides an unforgettable rush of excitement and energy.

To help first-time participants enjoy the experience safely, we spoke with Mr. Kenji Saegusa, chairman of the Okabe Mikoshi-kai 'Tengu-mutsumi' Association who has been a central figure in promoting Yamanashi's *mikoshi* culture for many years.

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## **What is the appeal of the Kofu Ebisu-ko Festival and *mikoshi*?**

**—What exactly is a *mikoshi*?**

**Chairman Saegusa:** To put it simply, a *mikoshi* is a vehicle for a deity. It is shaped like a shrine building; it is believed that the deity rides it to travel around the region, absorbing disasters and misfortunes to protect the community. At festivals, a major highlight is everyone chanting together to carry the *mikoshi*. It is truly the main event of the festival.

**—What is the Kofu Ebisu-ko Festival?**

**Chairman Saegusa:** Ebisu-ko is a festival enshrining Ebisu, the god of business prosperity, characterized by a high level of participation from merchants. At the festival, two shrines—one where Ebisu resides and another enshrining a crystal—are carried by about 30 to 50 people each. Kofu's Ebisu-ko Festival is known as one of the latest *mikoshi* events held in the year in Japan. Because of this, members of *mikoshi* associations from outside the prefecture gather in Kofu for their "final carry of the year." Participants come from many regions, including Tokyo, Kanagawa, Gunma, Saitama, Shizuoka, Nagano, and Kyoto... truly a vast number of areas.

**Interviewer:** With people gathering from all across the country, the atmosphere on the day must be incredibly vibrant!.



Chairman Saegusa kindly showing us the association's *mikoshi*.

—What does Kofu Ebisu-ko Festival mean to you, Chairman Saegusa?

**Chairman Saegusa:** When we were children, it felt like the whole city of Kofu was in festival mode. Sales were being held everywhere, and so many people gathered that you'd think every single resident of Yamanashi Prefecture was there. Stalls lined the streets all the way from Kofu Station, creating a bustling atmosphere. It was a festival that overflowed with energy, drawing visitors from all over the country. More than 25 years have passed since I first started carrying the *mikoshi* at Ebisu-ko festival, and now I have come to cooperate in the management of the *mikoshi* itself.

**Interviewer:** It is inspiring to see how various *mikoshi* associations like yours serve as the backbone of Yamanashi's traditional culture.

**Can a Beginner Carry One? *Mikoshi* Etiquette and Mindset**

**Where does one start?**

— If someone thinks, "I want to try carrying one," what should they get started?

**Chairman Saegusa:** If you want to carry a *mikoshi*, try contacting and consulting with

the neighborhood association (*Chokai*) or the *mikoshi* group (*Mikoshi-kai*) involved. If you don't know the contact information, checking their social media or local neighborhood bulletin boards may reveal recruitment notices before the festival. However, contacting them out of the blue without any prior acquaintance might make the other party feel hesitant. It becomes easier to participate if you build a relationship beforehand—for example, by greeting people regularly, or by having a shopkeeper you visit often remember your face and introduce you. Also, for preparation purposes, these groups usually want to know the number of participants early. Please consult as early as possible—at the latest, one month before the festival.

— **Once someone is set to carry the *mikoshi*, what should they know first?**

**Chairman Saegusa:** The fundamental rule is to follow the instructions of the neighborhood association or *mikoshi* group hosting the event. When carrying the *mikoshi*, beginners are placed under the direction of experienced members, so you should not try to force your way into other positions.

— **What are the precautions while carrying?**

**Chairman Saegusa:** If everyone carries it in their own way, it could lead to accidents. Carrying a *mikoshi* is a team effort, so a sense of solidarity with your peers is very important.

#### **4 Things to Keep in Mind When Carrying a *Mikoshi***

1. Press the carrying pole firmly against your shoulder.
2. Carrying with a slightly forward-leaning posture lightens the burden on the collarbone.
3. Have the awareness to support firmly with your legs and hips, rather than relying only on shoulder or arm strength (it is good to slightly lift your heels).
4. The most important thing is to withdraw without pushing yourself if you get tired.



Chairman Saegusa demonstrating how to carry the *mikoshi*.

**Chairman Saegusa:** Once the carrying pole is on your shoulder, move your body up and down in sync with the vertical motion of the *mikoshi*. If you don't keep your shoulder firmly pressed against the pole, it will repeatedly strike your shoulder and become very painful. The *mikoshi* is heavy, but if you keep the pole snug against your shoulder and carry it in rhythm with everyone else, it won't hurt, and you'll stop feeling the weight entirely. And most importantly, don't overdo it. If you feel tired or find it difficult, don't endure it in silence; you can step out by signaling to the people in front of or behind you, saying 'Deru-yo' (I'm heading out).

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**There is no 'right way' to chant—just join with your voice and you're part of the group**

— **Can people enjoy it even if they don't speak the language?**

**Chairman Saegusa:** In the beginning, there might be moments where first-timers or foreign participants find it hard to join in or aren't sure what to do. However, even without the language, if you communicate through gestures or body language, people will understand your desire to join the *mikoshi*. Those around the *mikoshi* will likely

help you out, saying things like "Get in here, join in here!" ('koko ni haire, koko he haire'). I want people to have the courage to take on the challenge. Also, shouting the chants while carrying creates a sense of unity, allowing you to enjoy yourself even if the language doesn't translate. It feels great to let out a loud shout.

**Interviewer:** So it's a sense of unity born from connecting through spirit rather than words.

— Are the chants strictly decided?

**Chairman Saegusa:** Chants vary by region, such as "Wasshoi," "Soiya," "Seiya," or "Oisa." However, when you're actually carrying it, voices tend to come out naturally, and I think that's perfectly fine. It's okay as long as you match your voice to those around you; doing it "roughly by feel" is no problem at all (unless there are specific special rules). Shouting gets everyone excited, and having a chant makes it easier to get into the rhythm and stay in sync with those around you.

**Interviewer:** It seems the beauty of the *mikoshi* is that by raising your voice, you can naturally become part of the "circle."



## Etiquette for both Carriers and Spectators

— Are there any parts of the *mikoshi* that should not be touched?

**Chairman Saegusa:** In Kofu's Ebisu-ko Festival, there are two types of *mikoshi*: one where Ebisu resides and another that houses a crystal. It is actually okay to touch the divine body of Ebisu or the crystal in the crystal *mikoshi*. It is said to bring divine favor. However, it is forbidden to touch the *mikoshi* decorations or the "ofuda" (amulets) where the deity's soul has been transferred.

In other festivals, for example when handling a "Miya-mikoshi" (shrine-owned *mikoshi*), there are rules like never opening the doors of the inner shrine. Since rules differ depending on the festival or region, I recommend checking with the *mikoshi* association or the festival organizers if you are unsure.



Kofu Ebisu-ko Festival's colorful Crystal *Mikoshi*.



Touching the central crystal is OK.

Touching the surrounding *mikoshi* decorations or amulets is strictly prohibited.



Touching the divine body of Ebisu is also OK.



However, touching the amulets is prohibited.

**—Are there any specific rules we should be aware of?**

**Chairman Saegusa:** As I mentioned earlier, you must not touch the decorations or amulets, nor should you open the doors of the *mikoshi*. Since the *mikoshi* is considered a vehicle for a deity, handling it roughly is strictly prohibited. When carrying it, be careful not to shake it excessively or handle it carelessly.

Also, excessive drinking is a no-no. While alcohol is often a part of festivals, carrying a *mikoshi* requires significant physical strength; participating while drunk and exhausted is dangerous.

**—Are there any rules for people viewing the parade?**

**Chairman Saegusa:** Please do not get too close to a *mikoshi* while it is being carried. If you approach carelessly to take photos, there is a risk of getting caught in the carriers' movements, which can lead to unexpected injury. Also, please refrain from moving in front of the *mikoshi*, as it hinders its progress.

Because the *mikoshi* is considered a vehicle for a deity, at some festivals it is said to be "disrespectful to look down on the *mikoshi* from a higher place." However, when I see elderly people who cannot usually visit a shrine pressing their hands together in prayer

while seeing off the *mikoshi* from the second floor of their homes, I feel it is very heartfelt. I believe that as long as you have a spirit of respect, it shouldn't be a problem.

## Festivals that Unite People and Cultures

— What changes have you seen in recent years?

**Chairman Saegusa:** Recently, the number of young carriers—including foreigners, women, and children—has been increasing. I hope that by having children participate with interest, traditions like festivals and the *mikoshi* will be passed down to the next generation, further energizing the entire community.



Foreign residents happily carrying Ebisu's *mikoshi*.

— How do you view the role that the festival plays?

**Chairman Saegusa:** I see it as a place where friends can reunite after a year apart, and I hope it becomes a venue where both Japanese and foreign residents can communicate and enjoy themselves together. It's natural for people to stick together with those from their own country—Vietnamese people with other Vietnamese, or Brazilians with other Brazilians. I think Japanese people do the same when they go abroad. However, in a place where such a variety of people gather, it should be possible to naturally interact

with people from other countries.



Kofu Ebisu-ko Festival: Where People Gather Across Generations and Backgrounds.

— **Finally, a word for those participating for the first time?**

**Chairman Saegusa:** I want people to feel free to participate more casually. Kofu Ebisu-ko is a festival that welcomes a diverse range of people, including those from outside the prefecture and from overseas, making it very easy to join. Furthermore, my hope is that this will lead to more opportunities for people to participate not just in Kofu Ebisu-ko Festival, but also in the local festivals where they live. By participating in various festivals, you can experience Japanese culture firsthand and enjoy it with everyone. People often have an image of *mikoshi* carriers as "tough" or "scary," but they are all actually very friendly and fun-loving people. Please feel free to reach out and talk to us.



The association's lanterns displayed at Chairman Saegusa's home. Each local *mikoshi* association plays a vital role in preserving the festival traditions within their community.

**Interviewer:** I truly felt today how festivals serve as a vital space that connects people to one another and to our culture. I hope that the Kofu Ebisu-ko Festival and other local festivals will continue to grow as inclusive events where everyone can enjoy cultural exchange while respecting traditions and etiquette. Thank you very much for sharing your valuable insights with us today

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#### Summary Notes for First-time Participants:

1. Basically follow the organizer's instructions: If there is anything you don't understand, feel free to ask.
2. Do not overexert yourself: If you feel tired or find it painful, withdraw without pushing yourself.
3. Chanting is OK as long as you match those around you: Raising your voice makes it easier to stay in rhythm and creates a sense of unity.
4. Handle the *mikoshi* with care: Do not touch prohibited areas and never handle it roughly.
5. Maintain distance when spectating: Keep your distance even when taking

photos, and be careful not to obstruct the movements of the carriers.

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**See our 2025 report: The Energy of Kofu Ebisu-ko Festival's *Mikoshi* Festivities!"**

Why not take that first step and become part of the *mikoshi* tradition? Let's all share the magic of the festival together!