

## Saidaiji Eyo Matsuri

### A.k.a. "The Naked Man Festival"

Twenty years ago, National Geographic Magazine carried a black-and-white photograph of an unusual lunar New-Year festival in Japan. In the picture, dozens of almost naked men can be seen clinging to the inside walls and rafters of a pitch dark temple, while a handful of others leap into a swirling pit of human bodies below. The photograph was of Okayama's own Saidaiji Eyo Matsuri at the Saidaiji Kannon-in Temple, and this year marks the festival's 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Every winter on the third Saturday of February, more than 9000 participants brave one of the coldest nights of the year in nothing but a loincloth and a pair of socks as part of what can be a very dangerous festival. Indeed, people have died while taking part in the Saidaiji Eyo.

The climax of the festival is a fight for two sacred sticks (called a *shingi*) which are dropped into the main temple hall at the stroke of midnight.\* Jostling for position gets serious more than an hour beforehand and there is a total blackout when the sticks are dropped.

A cash reward is given to anyone lucky enough to get a *shingi* out of the temple and safely return it to the Saidaiji Chamber of Commerce, but there are also numerous fake *shingi* decoys in the fray as well. Sometimes a lucky individual will come away with a *shingi*

but most people form teams, some spending months rehearsing maneuvers to wrest the sticks away from opponents.

The whole event, including the preparatory running around the temple grounds and "cleansing" in almost frozen pools of water is essentially a test of manhood. Local ladies and their fathers are even rumored to refuse marriage suitors who are "not man enough" to participate.

#### Schedule of Events for Feb 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009\*

Junior divisions for young boys	18:00
Taiko performance	20:30 & 22:00
Fireworks display	21:00
Dropping of the sacred <i>Shingi</i>	24:00



Fighting is not supposed to continue once out of the main hall and climbing up the temple walls has long been banned, but the pushing and shoving at ground level is still intense, prompting organizers to advise that anybody who falls to the floor should protect themselves by turning face-down and trying to crawl out. They also ask that

participants make room for the rescue workers who have to barge through the crowd to get to anyone needing attention. Organizers will this year be asking participants to hide a nametag, complete with medical information, within the folds of their loincloth in case of emergency.

Tens of thousands of people will witness the festivities, some choosing to pay ¥500 for standing-only access, others ¥1000 or ¥5000 for seating, but anyone can join the festivities for free, provided they are a physically fit, sober male without tattoos. (People with tattoos will be refused entry even if the tattoo is covered. No upper body clothing, jewelry or headwear is permitted

and there are strict rules about footwear and loincloths. Correct outfits can be purchased and fitted in the changing tents on site.)

For more information (in Japanese) phone 086-944-5000.

Okayama AJET will operate a bus tour from JR Okayama Station, costing ¥3000 for spectators (incl. grandstand ticket) and ¥2000 (plus clothing) for participants. Make your reservation as soon as possible by contacting nakedman2009@gmail.com



Last year's festival, courtesy Saidaiji Chamber of Commerce. The National Geographic Magazine photograph can be seen at <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/flashback/0009>

\* From next year (2010) the Shingi will be dropped two hours earlier in an effort to reduce the effects of fatigue and alcohol.