

A Historical Walk Around Kyoto



Photo by Ryotaro Nakajima

Mountain Bonfires

A lot of Japanese people take summer holidays at the same time around August 13–16. Every year during this period, transportation in Japan is often packed because many people travel or go back to their hometowns using these holidays.

There is a reason why many Japanese people receive such holidays around the same time. Japan has a custom that we welcome the souls of our ancestors on August 13 to stay with our family. On August 16, the final day, the souls of the ancestors return to the land of the dead. This period is called “Bon.” Various Bon events are held, such as Bon dances in many places around Japan.

In Kyoto, Mountain Bonfires (*Gozan no Okuribi*) take place on August 16 as a traditional event. We show the souls of our ancestors the way back by making large bonfires on five mountains like hills.

A lot of tourists and local people are able to enjoy views of all the bonfires from the top of high buildings such as restaurants, hotels, supermarkets and apartments.

Various Bonfires on Mountains Surrounding Kyoto City

The Bonfire event is held at night in order to guide the souls of the ancestors who return to the land of the dead, starting from 8:00 p.m. There are now six bonfires (i.e., five kinds of bonfires) to be lit. Four of them represent kanji characters; 大 (*dai*), 大, 妙 (*myo*), and 法 (*hou*). The other two bonfires show the shapes of a boat and a shrine gate. The bonfires are lit one by one from the east to the west.

The Origin of Bonfires

There were originally four more bonfires having different shapes for this event before the Meiji Restoration in 1868. This event was temporarily suspended in the 19th century, and four of them do not exist now. There are several legends about the origin and the reason why these characters were chosen. In this event, it is said that the 大 indicates not only large but also a human form for ancestors. The 妙 and 法 indicate Buddhist scriptures. It is said that this 大 climbs an east mountain, reads scriptures, takes a boat, and sees another 大 reflected in the water. Then, it passes through the shrine gate to return to the land of the dead. This story is one of legends. Perhaps, these characters are closely connected with our traditional custom affected by Buddhism and Shintoism.

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