

How to Spend the New Year Holidays

Here we introduce how the Japanese spend the New Year holidays.

December 31 is called *Omisoka*, and the night of the 31st is sometimes called *Joya*. From this, temple bells that are struck on the night of the 31st throughout Japan are called *Joya no kane* (Joya bells). According to Buddhist philosophy, human beings have 108 earthly desires. It is said that the temple bells came to be struck 108 times to rid people of these desires.

On New Year's Eve, the Japanese have the custom of eating *toshikoshi soba* (literally, "year-crossing noodles"). There are various views on how the tradition came about, but generally, eating the long, thin noodles is said to extend one's good fortune and life.

By the way, there is something that must be done before the temple bells are struck and toshikoshi noodles are eaten. That is, *ohsoji*, or major house-cleaning. To welcome the god of the New Year, even places that are not frequently cleaned during regular cleaning routines, such as bedrooms and workplaces, are thoroughly cleaned.

Most Japanese people spend a relaxing New Year's Day with family and relatives. At such moments, the game of *karuta* is commonly played with the whole family. The game is simple. One person reads out a *yomifuda*, or reading card, and the others compete to grab the corresponding *torifuda*, or playing card. In the end, the player who has the largest number of torifuda wins.

There are karuta of various themes, but the classic *Iroha-karuta* is most well-known. On the reading cards are proverbs beginning with each of the 47 characters of the traditional iroha alphabet, which correspond to the 50 sounds of the modern Japanese alphabet. The playing cards show a picture related to a proverb written on the reading cards and the first character of the proverb in large font. By playing the karuta many times, even small children begin to memorize the characters of the Japanese alphabet and proverbs. You, too, can learn Japanese by playing karuta. You could make your own karuta, or look for one at a bookstore or general store.

年末年始の過ごし方

今回は日本の年末年始の過ごし方をご紹介します。

12月31日は「大晦日」と呼ばれ、この日の夜のことを「除夜」ともいい、各地のお寺で「除夜の鐘」が撞かれます。仏教の思想では、人間には108つの煩惱があるとされ、それをはらうために108回鐘を鳴らすようになったといわれています。

大晦日には「年越し蕎麦」を食べる習慣もあります。諸説ありますが、細く長い蕎麦を食べて運や寿命を延ばすという意味だそうです。

ところで、除夜の鐘や年越し蕎麦の前にやっておかなければいけないのが「大掃除」。新年の神様を迎えるため、自分の部屋や職場を徹底的に、普段はやらないような箇所も掃除します。

正月は、日本人の多くが家族や親戚とゆっくり過ごします。そこで家族らと一緒に楽しむ遊びの1つに「かるた」があります。遊び方は簡単で、1人が読み札を読んで、他の人がそれに対応した取り札を取る速さを競い、最終的に取得した枚数で勝敗を決めるというものです。

かるたの題材には色々ありますが「いろはかるた」が古典的で有名です。読み札には、現代の「あいうえお」五十音に当たる「いろは47文字」に対応したことわざが書かれ、取り札には読み札のことわざに関連した絵と、ことわざの最初の文字が大きく書かれています。かるたでは小さな子どもでも、何度も遊ぶうちに文字やことわざが覚えられます。皆さんもかるたで遊びながら日本語を学んでみてはいかがでしょうか。自分たちでかるたを作ったり、書店等に行ってかるたを探してみるのもいいでしょう。