

# Hanami



For the Japanese the most important question of spring is: "When can I see the first cherry blossoms?" There is no other event that excites all Japanese more than sakura, cherry blossom, which mostly begins around 20 March. Even TV channels and radio stations broadcast this important event at prime time.

This euphoria is not astonishing as the cherry blossom has been admired for more than 1,000 years. The first sakura celebration was supposedly held by Emperor Saga in 812. According to the traditional Japanese idea there is a blossom fairy for each and every cherry blossom. These fairies are very much revered. The cherry blossom is one of the most important symbols of Japanese culture and stands for tenderness and purity, but also for beauty and the transitoriness of life.

It was life's transitoriness that made the ancient samurai choose a grave under cherry trees. And the kamikaze pilots of the Second World War liked to decorate themselves with cherry blossoms before setting off for their last flight. When the magnificent spectacle of nature takes place, a white and pale pink sea of blossom spreads through the whole country from the subtropical South of Japan to the comparatively cold North. Each day the splendour of blossoms stretches out approximately 25 kilometres further to the North. During that time millions of Japanese listen anxiously to the weather report, as heavy rainfalls or a storm would put an abrupt end to the cherry blossom.

Even the administrative bodies are officially occupied with cherry blossom and show an appearance of frenzied activity. Absolute hosts of biologists and gardeners watch, measure and weigh the buds of the 80 official standard trees spread out all over the country.

The result of this check is displayed on notice boards in public parks, for example "sambuzaki" when a bud is 30% open or "mankei" when the bud is completely open. When that day has come, a run on the greens takes place. Everyone wants to be part of the spectacle and the time of blossom is short. Furthermore, it can be over all of a sudden due to bad weather.

Those people who want to see the flowerage in the parks of Tokyo must sometimes make an effort. Due to the crowds it is not easy to see the trees. In Tokyo's Ueno Park alone up to 1.5 million people gather for hanami at one "cherry blossom weekend" to celebrate the biggest party in honour of cherry blossom having a picnic and a lot of sake until late at night. Statistics answer the question why such a crowd rushes to the parks. In Tokyo there are about 140,000 cherry trees. Consequently 86 people must share one cherry tree. It is comforting that there are approximately 4,000 cherry blossoms per capita, as every tree has about 350,000 blossoms adding up to a total of 49 billion.

Cherry blossom is particularly impressive in Kyoto, the ancient imperial city with its famous gardens and parks. The ultimate highlight for cherry blossom fans is the pale pink sea of blossom around the Kiyomizu Temple that is illuminated at night in a festive way. And there is probably only one place on earth where one can take a more beautiful picture: the sea of blossom at the bottom of Volcano Fuji is known as the best motif.

The real cherry tree fans even follow the blossom. Those people who can afford it travel all through Japan in order to sit under a different blooming tree each day. Japanese insurance companies even insure travel businesses against losses occurring if the cherry trees blossom too early or if they are destroyed by extreme weather.

# SEIKO