

Tanabata in Noshiro: “Lantern Castles in the Sky”

The Noshiro Tanabata Festival features hand-painted, vividly colored “lantern castle” floats that weigh approximately 25 metric tons and rise more than 24 meters into the sky—the tallest of their kind. The festival is called Tenkū no Fuyajō, and its official English name is “Lantern Castles in the Sky,” though a more precise translation might be “sky castles that never sleep.” Certainly, the lanterns’ brilliant glow banishes the night in Noshiro.

Distinctive floats in the shape of Nagoya Castle first appeared in Noshiro’s Tanabata celebrations around two centuries ago during the latter Edo period (1603–1867). In more recent times, the height of the floats was restricted to around 8 meters because of overhead powerlines. Once the cables were buried underground, a 17.6-meter float called *Karoku* appeared in 2013. It was modeled after an original Nagoya Castle float pictured in a photograph from the Meiji era (1868–1912). In 2014, the 24.1-meter *Chikasue* float made its debut, named for Chikasue Andō (1539–1587), the one-time lord of nearby Hiyama Castle. Each lantern float is topped with magnificent *shachi* (mythical creatures with the head of a tiger and the body of a carp) and painted a dazzling array of colors.

The Tanabata festival originated in China and centers on the tale of two deities who are allowed to meet only once a year, on the seventh night of the seventh month.

“Tanabata” means “evening of the seventh,” and while most areas in Japan now hold their celebrations on July 7, the festival in Noshiro is still held in early August, in line with the traditional lunar calendar.

The festival takes place on August 3 and 4, with around 700 participants in the main parade: musicians, dancers, and people pulling the floats. The festival is free, but chairs can be rented along the procession route.