

Square Dancing in Japan by Anne Christie and Betz Ratch



Yes, square dancing in Japan is alive and vibrant with over 500 clubs. Square dancing was introduced in Nagasaki, Japan in 1946 by Winfield Niblo, who was working as an education officer for the American occupation forces. It was received enthusiastically and has been growing ever since, aided by the early endorsement of Japan's royal family.

Betz Ratch and Anne Christie, of the Williams Lake Whirlaways club, travelled to Japan in early July to attend a square dance jamboree and visit with Betz's Japanese friends. We were met at the Narita airport by Betz's friend Kazuto who took us to the Shimura Square Dance Party on

the western outskirts of Tokyo the next day. It was in a beautiful big hall with around 300 dancers, and was very hot and humid. They had portable fans stationed around the hall, and we learned to use our paddle fans constantly. The dancers were skilled, energetic and graceful, and were all dressed in colorful traditional western square dance outfits. The Shimura Square Dance Club was very hospitable and helpful. The square dance calls were in English but the callers were all Japanese and some were much easier to understand than others. After the dance we had a fun evening at an Izakaya (Japanese pub-style eatery) where we sat on the floor on tatami mats and sampled many new foods including lotus root and skate fin. The beer was good! Kam-pai!

We spent another day in Tokyo touring Senso-ji temple complex, cruising on the Sumida River and watching an incredible lightening and rain storm in Ueno Park. Then we travelled to Nakano (north of Nagano) and stayed with Kazuto and family. His house has been the ancestral family home for 160 years and is a traditional style with a thick thatched roof. They took us to see the snow monkeys cavorting in hot springs, and to Matsumoto Castle.

We attended the 35th Nagano Apple Squares Shiga Summer Jamboree, in the Shiga Highlands north of Nagano, where several events were held during the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics. The area consists of 21 linked ski areas and we drove to the top of the mountain to see the beautiful views and the wild orange daylilies. Betz enjoyed visiting with Nagano Apple Square members who she had met on previous visits. This was Anne's first visit to Japan and because she has only been dancing for one year, it was difficult at first but everyone was very helpful and accommodating. We loved seeing all the colorful and creative dance outfits, and admired the graceful round dancers. **Jerry Story**, from Iowa, and **Mac O'Jima**, from Sendai Japan, and the other guest callers created a lively and fun jamboree, and we really enjoyed ourselves. As the only other English speakers, we ate all our meals with Jerry Story and were interested to learn more about his travels as a caller to Taiwan, England, Canada and Germany, as well as three trips to Japan this year.

A favourite highlight was our participation in the ceremonial lighting of the campfire followed by singing, folk dancing, square dancing, fireworks and sparklers. It was truly magical! The rest of the evening was also great fun with lively parties and great cheer.

The remainder of our holiday was in Kyoto to see the Gion Matsuri festival and parade, and tour the many historic temples, shrines and beautiful gardens. We spent one day in Nara and really admired the giant Buddha.

Square dancing was definitely a good way to have fun, meet lots of people and learn some Japanese. We found the Japanese to be extremely gracious and hospitable and they were constantly taking our picture, giving us gifts and buying our meals. They also stopped to help if we looked lost, which was a good thing because we did take the wrong train on our fourth day, and travelled an hour in the wrong direction!

