The Dancing Fools

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Recently, I was looking for an adventure. Fortunately, I was reminded of Awa Odori, the largest dance festival in Japan. Conveniently, Imabari is a mere three-hour drive from this amazing event.

Awa Odori, which is a dance festival leading up to the start of Obon, takes place in Tokushima, Tokushima. The actual meaning of the name Awa Odori is simple: Awa was the former name of Tokushima, and Odori means dance.

According to the Tokushima prefectural website, the exact origins of the festival are not known, but there are several theories. However, I have a personal favorite.

The story says that Hachisuka Iemasa wanted to celebrate the completion of Tokushima Castle. He was feeling quite generous, and provided sake to everyone in the town. Well, as often happens with a free all you can drink, everyone in the town became very drunk. They began to enthusiastically dance through the streets of the town. Thus, Awa Odori was born.

My own Awa Odori experience began with a four-person road trip. After three hours of music and conversation on the highway, we arrived in Tokushima. I was impressed.

From the highway, you cross a bridge over an impressive river and approach a forest of towering buildings. As we drove toward the station, signs of the coming festivities began to appear along the streets. Festive red and yellow lanterns lined narrow roads, and stadium seating appeared occasionally, marking a particularly active area.

After parking, we let the lanterns guide us to our first performance. The performers were dancing on a stage set up outside of a shopping center, on an elevated walkway. The official festival would not start until 18:00, but the pre-festivities were well under way. Traditional instruments guided dancers young and old across a stage. To my delight, at the end of the first performance, they invited the audience to dance across the stage. Indeed, part of what makes Awa Odori so magical is the inclusive spirit of the festival. Everyone who can stand, from young children to the elderly, foreigners and Japanese, are invited to join in the dancing.

Next we moved onto exploring the many colorful food stalls that lined the river and streets. There were many delicious options, such as cucumbers, yakisoba, karaage, a great assortment of beers, and every kind of shaved ice. We indulged in delicious festival food and were even treated to shaved ice by a kind elderly man.

Suddenly, before I knew it, the streets came alive with dancing. Women in yukata and high swooping hats, ubiquitous to Awa Odori, danced enthusiastically. I found myself amazed that they could dance with such energy while balancing on their geta. Men with lanterns prowled around, some wearing fools masks. Children danced in disorderly rows, too young to really understand the dance, but old enough to show that Awa Odori does not discriminate against anyone with the will to dance.

Every group that performed was accompanied by their own band of musicians. Each band had something like a flute and drums. Though the general sound of the festivities melded into a recognizable rhythm, an individual group always had their own unique spin on the performance. It was incredible to see the same dance and hear the same song done a hundred different ways, never failing to capture my attention and grow my enthusiasm.

After quite some time, in what was my most memorable moment of the night, the watching crowds were invited to dance down the streets with the performers. That moment really brought to life the motto of Awa Odori, which I saw translated into English as "The dancing fools, the watching fools, fools just the same, so you might as well dance!" When my group reached the end of the street and the dancers began to disperse, we found ourselves at the base of a mountain with a colorful ropeway leading to the top. After riding to the top of the mountain, we discovered that the festivities were much more expansive than we could have guessed. It seemed that every street was alive with dancing and the music could still clearly be heard even from the top of the mountain.

Awa Odori did not disappoint, and was truly one of the most amazing festivals I have ever seen. I hope that everyone who can takes the opportunity to attend Awa Odori and dance. If we are fools just the same, then indeed, you might as well dance.