Festivals in Tokyo

1. Hanami

Hanami, literally “flower watching,” is not a specific festival in any given place. Rather, it is a cultural event that takes place all across Japan and ranges from March until May. Hanami centers around the blooming of the Sakura, or cherry blossom. Because different parts of Japan have different climates, that period of bloom varies. In Tokyo, the prime Hanami time is usually in late March.

For Hanami, all you need is a group of friends, a picnic lunch from the local conbini, and a tarp. Ueno park in east Tokyo and Yoyogi park in west Tokyo are the biggest parks in the city, but around Hanami time it can still be difficult to find some spare grass. Sophia University has a nice hill overlooking the school, and it is not uncommon to see students lining the path during Hanami season.

Because the blossoming period is so short (1-2 weeks at full bloom) and it can be unpredictable from year to year, planning a vacation to Japan specifically to see Sakura is difficult. Study abroad allows you the unique opportunity to actually be in Japan long enough where you will be sure to enjoy Hanami no matter when it happens on your given year.

2. Grand Sumo Tournament

There are Sumo tournaments at various times throughout the year, but the one in May falls during the spring semester. The tournament runs almost every day of May, but I recommend going near the end of the month to see the more exciting final matches. The stadium is at Ryogoku Station in east Tokyo.

You probably won’t be able to buy tickets ahead of time since it is usually sold out. However, if you get there early in the morning (5-6am), you can stand in line for cheap tickets on hold. These tickets are for seats at the very top and back of the stadium, but the stadium is smaller than most American sports and you still have a good view. Also, most people won’t arrive until later in the day for the final matches, so you can go sit in other vacant seats. There is no one to check your tickets for the rows, so I was able to get a front row seat right next to the
Sumo ring. During one match, a wrestler was thrown off the ring and I had to scramble back to keep from being hit!

3. Sanja Matsuri Festival at Asakusa

This festival falls on the third Friday, Saturday, and Sunday in May. You’ll need to head to Asakusa Station in east Tokyo, and be prepared for crowds. It will be difficult to get through the packed streets, as collections of people will be carrying around portable shrines in a long parade.

Not only will you get a chance to see the excitement, but there will be plenty of interesting food vendors so you can grab a great lunch while walking around!
4. Tanabata

Tanabata, or the Star Festival, is on July 7th every year. Like Hanami, Tanabata is more of a nationwide cultural event than a specific festival. On this day, you’ll see special trees set up in classrooms, shopping malls, and anywhere else people are likely to gather. Your task is to write a wish down on a sheet of paper and tie it to the one of the tree branches.

Depending on where you are, your town may have its own festivities for the day, so be sure to check ahead of time.