

# The amateur collector's guide to Kokugikan souvenirs

by Chris Gould

In Japan, wherever you go, whatever you do, the souvenir salesmen are ready and waiting, tempting your overwhelmed eyes with every colour, texture, shape and size imaginable. Sumo is no exception. Whereas the marketing of the actual event can be called heavily into question, the marketing ideas that spawn sumo souvenirs are highly impressive, and have produced some memorable products.

As you step off the train at Ryogoku station on a matchday, you will most likely be confronted with a series of tables at the west exit, where ageing sellers display a variety of bath towels, sumo fans, cups and confectionery. If you have Japanese friends, these are the souvenirs to buy them, for even people who don't like sumo have a fond regard for the artwork and crazy titles of items.

The most convenient souvenir is surely the wrestler key-ring, or "key-holder" as known to the Japanese. Tiny plastic models of the yokozuna and ozeki, dressed in fighting garb with cute caricatured faces, are available for around 500 yen at first-floor vending booths in the Kokugikan. A few years ago, the Asashoryu "key-holder" bore a fantastic cheeky likeness to the man himself. Kisenosato and Kotoshogiku key-holders may prove particularly popular this time round.

Available for about the same price is a sumo hologram cup. The holograms usually consist of two wrestlers doing a tachi-ai or Takamisakari doing his crazy Robocop dance before a salt-throw. A host of other cups are also available, with the porcelain variants carrying brightly coloured paintings of leading wrestlers

perhaps the most impressive. Several souvenirs are available in food form, with the Kokugikan taking particular advantage of the Japanese love of confectionery. Sumo doleyaki, sweet bread with anko paste are rather delicious, as is the Sweets Oyakata Cheesecake, available for around 1200 yen. Sweets Oyakata was actually a former yokozuna named Onokuni, who hit a peak weight of 210 kilograms and earned the nickname of "Giant Panda." He obviously tried a lot of sweets in his time, and it is a little sad that his performances as yokozuna were so unimpressive that he has now gained fame as a confectionery chef.

Perhaps the ultimate food souvenir, though, is a wrestler bento box, available for 1050 yen. These ingenious marketing ploys enable fans to sample the bento (lunchbox) foods that individual wrestlers have selected as their favourites. Kotooshu's bento is heavy on pork, for example, while Takamisakari's includes a mini squid.

Photocopies of wrestler hand-prints, or tegata, are also available for 400 yen. However, the brush strokes used to write the names can be nigh-incomprehensible to even the fairly-trained eye (even some junior wrestlers, who actually went to sumo school to study this sort of thing, couldn't read Kaio's name!) so it is best to double-check that you have the right one before buying!

Bath towels are much more popular presents in Japan than they are in the west, and can even be given as greeting presents to new neighbours when moving house! Little surprise, then, that there are several bath towel

varieties available in the Kokugikan, for around 1500 yen, featuring either mini pictures of every senior wrestler, or large pictures of the yokozuna or ozeki. The artwork, as ever, is fantastic.

It is also possible, near the shomen entrance, to peruse the artwork of Daimon Kinoshita, one of Japan's precious few ukiyo-e artists still living. Kinoshita has produced hoards of sumo memorabilia, and his most convenient souvenir would appear to be the wrestler postcards, with sumo greats such as Takanohana and Chiyonofuji depicted in Edo-era woodblock style. These postcards are also among the cheapest souvenirs available.

Keep an eye out in the shops and hotels around the Kokugikan too – this is a sumo neighbourhood and local businesses thus make every attempt possible to cash in on souvenirs. And for the true souvenir buffs, perhaps a walk down Kokugikan street and a left turn at the t-junction might prove especially rewarding. About 400 metres down the main Keiyo Doro avenue lies the Takahashi sumo souvenir shop, where not only sumo cuddly toys and Daimon Kinoshita's artwork stand out, but even many souvenirs unavailable in the Kokugikan glisten and gleam. Floor cushions, sumo sandals, referee's clothes and fans, wooden banzuke frames, and even the wrestlers' pungent bintzuke oil used for straightening the hair are freely available.

So open your eyes to the mementoes, and claim something easy to ensure that either you never forget your big day out, or your friends never forget what you bought them.