

# Drive-in theaters making a comeback amid pandemic

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Drive-in theaters are witnessing a resurgence after cinemas were shuttered because of the new coronavirus pandemic.

Outdoor film screening events were held in Yamanashi Prefecture in April and Miyazaki Prefecture and Hokkaido in May, among other places.

Just like in old movies, patrons park in an outdoor lot facing a large screen and tune into a broadcast of the movie's audio with their car radios to enjoy a show.

Do It Theater, based in Tokyo's Meguro Ward, plans to host a drive-in cinema event as early as June at a parking lot of the Oiso Long Beach resort in Kanagawa Prefecture, which used to have a permanent drive-in theater, as a way to offer people a way to release health crisis-related tension.

"While there is less real-life entertainment content available, the audience can enjoy an out-of-the-ordinary cinematic experience while they observe social distancing," said Daichi Ito, who heads Do It Theater.

The operator plans to seek advice from medical professionals and decide the best time for the screening.

It started a crowdfunding campaign for the project and will donate a portion of the profits from ticket sales to art house cinemas, the World Health Organization and others.

Drive-in theaters, which until now had mostly become a nostalgic relic, took root in the United States after World War II, thanks to rising car ownership and the country's car culture.

Drive-ins became popular in Japan in the 1990s, but the fad eventually subsided, owing to the spread of multiplexes and other factors.

Now, just like a classic movie remake, that style of theater is attracting audiences anew in the United States, South Korea and elsewhere in this era of social distancing.

But even though watching movies from inside a vehicle keeps audience members apart, it has still been a challenge for organizers to implement infection control and other health measures.

A volunteer group organizing drive-in cinema events since last year in Kawagoe, Saitama Prefecture, said the number of attendees for a screening event held in March increased by more than three-fold from a similar event held in December

But it is still grappling with ways to reduce the risk of infection arising from shared cars, crowded restrooms and people traveling between cities.

Members of Sapporo-based Outdoor Theater Japan plan to host drive-in cinema events in Hokkaido and elsewhere in June.

They are considering ways to reduce human contact as much as possible by introducing an online ticket sales system and a drive-through service for food.

“We want to help restaurant operators hurt by the crisis by asking them to join,” said project manager Tsubasa Yokota.