

# escape

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## Takamatsu: Udon the key to castle town’s heart

Come for the gardens, stay for the noodles in Kagawa’s capital city

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Takamatsu has gained recognition in the last half-century for its specialty Sanuki udon and the incredible gardens of Ritsurin Koen. In the process, the city has quietly become the go-to destination for travelers starting their exploration of the island of Shikoku. As the closest port to Honshu, the castle town flourished under the daimyo of the Edo Period (1603-1868), and has a long history of maritime trading. Today, the town is a city, and is the business capital of Shikoku and the heart of Kagawa Prefecture, with plenty to offer any traveler who steps onto its streets.

Whether it's by direct bus from Takamatsu Airport or a short train journey from the center, the first stop on anyone's list is usually Ritsurin Gardens. Famed for borrowed scenery of forest-cloaked mountains and calm boat rides across shimmering lakes, the gardens are known as a place of carefully constructed serenity.

Construction began under feudal Lord Ikomi Takatoshi in 1625 and continued for more than 100 years under the watchful eyes of successive family members until the gardens were completed in 1745. Ritsurin remained a private retreat for the Matsudaira family for more than a century, but was designated a prefectural park in 1875 following the Meiji Restoration.

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Split into two halves, the north garden is Western in style and the south is Japanese, with six ponds and 13 mounds creating a world in miniature. The concept of "borrowed scenery" is common in Japanese gardens — where designers use the surrounding landscapes as a backdrop for smaller scenes — but here that art is perfected. The soft curves of Mount Shiun form a backdrop for the gardens and, rather than marking borders with fences and walls, the edges of Ritsurin merge seamlessly with their natural counterparts, allowing the eye to wander across the landscapes as one.

The gardens are impossible to explore in a hurry: Small hills and viewpoints stop you in your tracks and paths tempt you into hidden pockets of beauty. Following the south garden route you can admire traditional *wasen* boats as they glide across the main pond and even ride in one yourself. Friendly guides offer explanations of the garden's construction and notable features as you relax and enjoy the views once reserved for feudal lords. Within the gardens is the Kikugetsutei teahouse, perched on the water's edge and positioned perfectly for autumnal moon viewing. For a few hundred yen, you can relax on tatami with traditional matcha and delicate *wagashi* sweets, looking out across Nanko pond as boats pass by.

Although its name translates to "Chestnut Grove," Ritsurin is famed for its collection of pine trees, with more than 1,000 carefully pruned trees lining the garden's paths. With curved branches and imposing silhouettes, they resemble bonsai trees and lend a magical yet haunted feel to the gardens. One of the most impressive is the Neagari Goyomatsu pine, which was gifted to the Takamatsu domain in 1835 as a bonsai by the 11th Tokugawa shogunate. However, it now stands tall, looming over the Kikugetsutei teahouse with fantastically twisted branches that provide shade from the summer sun.

Like Japan itself, seasonal changes transform huge areas of the gardens, filling ponds with floating water lilies, arches with hanging wisteria and whole swaths of hillside



Below: Still standing, Tsukimiyagura the surviving remains of Takamatsu Castle. Below right: Local Sanuki udon served with a side of tempura vegetables at Shinpei Udon.



Top: Ride a wasen boat across Ritsurin Garden's Nanko Pond. Bottom row: The borrowed scenery of Mount Shiun blends seamlessly with the pine-fringed ponds of Ritsurin Garden.

with autumn leaves. The gardens are home to a gift shop and the Sanuki Fold Craft Museum, displaying a variety of Kagawa lacquer ware, dolls and local *rihei-yaki* ceramics. Kagawa was the first place in Japan to successfully cultivate olives, and the garden shop is a great place to pick up a bottle to take home.

After you've wandered through each and every corner of the garden, you'll no doubt have worked up an appetite and there's only one dish to try in Kagawa — Sanuki udon. Known as the "udon prefecture," Kagawa is home to more than 700 udon shops and is the largest udon producing prefecture in Japan.

Sanuki udon is the local specialty and, alongside Mizusawa udon from Gunma Prefecture and Inaniwa udon from Akita Prefecture, it is one of Japan's top three udon noodles. Characterized by their chewy and firm texture, the noodles are made from a specific kind of wheat that was originally grown in the prefecture, but is now mostly imported from Australia. Due to the udon's popularity, you won't have any problem finding a restaurant to try the noodles in, but some restau-

rants are worth a little extra effort.

Traditionally, Sanuki udon are served fast, fresh and with minimal fuss, often in self-service restaurants. The process of lining up, ordering and selecting toppings is definitely speedy, but sometimes it's nice to savor the moment and enjoy your food.

One of the best spots for this is Shinpei Udon in the Kawaramachi area, which can be found at the end of the city's shopping arcade. Easily reached from the gardens using the pleasingly retro trains of the Kotoden Kotohira Line, this local favorite is full-service, always busy and pays tremendous attention to detail. There's both tatami seating and communal counters, and staff speak English, Chinese and Japanese.

Whether you order the summer special of Hikikake udon, or the warming Shippoku udon in winter, you won't be disappointed. One of the simplest dishes, however, is Kamaage udon: a portion of noodles served in their cooking water in a *rotenburo*-like wooden bowl. With a side-serving of a strong dipping sauce, you can focus on the texture and subtle flavors of the udon: simple and

delicious. It's pretty easy to see why Japan is so in love with Sanuki udon, and the locals are proud of their specialty. One regional dish, Kamatama udon, is so popular that the local Takamatsu soccer team, Kamatamare Sanuki, named themselves after it. The dish is made with beaten eggs and a soy or fish broth.

As you head back toward the city center and Takamatsu Station, there's one final spot worth visiting before continuing your journey in Shikoku. Looking out across the Seto Inland Sea, Takamatsu Castle was once one of the three great water castles of Japan. Although little remains of the original structure, it is a site worth exploring and has both unusual moats and well-tended gardens. The Western-style, three-story castle was first built by Chikamasa Ikoma in 1590 and took two years to complete. Just over half a century later it became the residence of the Matsudaira clan, who were relatives of the ruling Tokugawa shogun, and remained under their control until the end of the Edo Period. Although the castle was damaged by bombs during World War II and later demolished, there are two surviving turrets and the

traditional entrance bridge remains.

Crossing into the castle grounds, you'll be greeted by a seawater moat and the sight of wasen boats that can be hired for short rides. The boats pass by the roof-covered Sayabashi bridge that connects the *honmaru* (core of the castle) to the *ninomaru* (outer castle). One of the two surviving turrets, Tsukimiyagura, has been carefully maintained and is an impressive feature. Designed for moon viewing, it was used to look out across the sea for advancing boats and to announce the daimyo's return from his travels. Takamatsu Castle is slated for reconstruction and in 2013, its foundations were restored after years of work, but no further progress has been made since. The gardens are still popular however, with more than 90 cherry trees in the Sakuranobaba area of the castle becoming a busy hanami spot in spring.

However, it is the dry stone garden that is the castle's real attraction. With its aged pine trees and winding paths, it feels a world away from the bare castle walls. Called Nai-enoniwa, the garden was built in 1917 along with the Hiunkaku — a reconstruction of the original daimyo's home that is now used for banquets and flower-arranging classes. With stepping stones and bridges crossing ever-empty streams, the sketch-like perfection of the space remains untouched by the movement of water. A sense of serenity and calm envelops the garden, removing you from the busy roads of the city and rewarding explorations into the quieter corners of the castle.

**Getting there:** Takamatsu is served by Takamatsu Airport, which has direct flights to Tokyo. The city is also connected by rapid train to Okayama City, which is on the JR Tokaido/Sanyo Shinkansen Line. Night buses run from Tokyo to Takamatsu and take approximately 10 hours one way.