

# A Personal Guide To Japanese Castles. 1st edition

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## **A Personal Guide To Japanese Castles By Christopher Glen**

This book is dedicated to my parents, Daniel and June Glen. They helped shape me into who I am. It is also dedicated to the good citizens of Kumamoto, who are recovering from the recent earthquake.

Foreword: Castles can be found throughout the length of Japan. From Akita in the north, Tokyo in the east, Nagoya in the centre, Matsuyama – in Shikoku (found in the “inland sea”), and Kumamoto in Kyushu to the south. Each has its own story. The primary components of Japanese castle are stone foundations, and wooden structures. The period in which they built was typically 1467 to 1603, during the “Warring States”, or *Sengoku Jidai* period. During the Edo period that followed, up until the Meiji Restoration of 1868 (more on that later) many underwent reconstruction several times due to war, or damage from natural disasters. The Japanese didn’t incorporate cannon into their armies until late in the “Warring States” period, and firearms were not used during the peaceful two centuries of the Tokugawa Shogunate. The only notable case where cannon were used was against Osaka castle in 1614-15. For that reason Japanese castles usually fell to starvation, or an undermining of the defences rather than cannon fire. At the onset of the Meiji period many were pulled down, due to the eagerness of the new government to erase remaining traces of the old Tokugawa-regime. Others were damaged by bombing in World War 2, due to having military targets in close proximity. Many are now museum-converted reconstructions. Some are ruins, with just the wall remaining. A select, prized few however, are originals. Largely untouched, and much as they originally were. One might ask why I haven’t mentioned any castles in Hokkaido. For the simple reason Hokkaido wasn’t incorporated into Japan until the Meiji period. Until that time the Aboriginal inhabitants of the island, the Ainu people, had been left to their own devices. Being of a peaceful nature, they did not conceive of the idea of needing castles. I would be lying if I said I’ve been to every single castle in Japan – but I have been to many of them. So let us step back in time, and begin a journey. To a time when samurai reigned supreme.

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**(1) Aoba Castle. Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture.** It seems fitting I start this book in the northern part of Honshu. I've only been to this castle once, back in 2006. Today all that remains of the castle is some of its walls, and reconstructed outer buildings. It was originally the headquarters of the Date clan throughout the Edo period. The most famous protagonist of the Date clan (pronounced Da-te) was Masamune Date, a warrior famous for having only one eye. He was highly skilled in war, and personally equipped every soldier in his army with bulletproof armour, being keenly aware of the entry of firearms onto the battlefield (via Portuguese missionaries, from 1543 onwards). (Visited in October 2006). Some people say that if Masamune had been born earlier, he would have been Shogun instead of Ieyasu Tokugawa (Tokugawa Ieyasu to the Japanese). Masamune was certainly interested in expanding trade and Japan's international connections – unfortunately at a time when the new Tokugawa government was turning against the idea. Who knows how history may have turned out if Japan hadn't isolated itself for 214 years, starting in 1639. Aoba castle was only ever intended to be used symbolically for administrative purposes. The castle and the gate nearby were destroyed by American firebombing in 1945. What survived was razed by US occupation authorities after the war. In 2003 it received national recognition as an historical monument. There is no entry charge.

**(2) Kofu Castle. Kofu, Yamanashi Prefecture.** Next, we move to Kofu in Yamanashi prefecture. Easily accessible in a couple of hours by train from Tokyo. (Visited in 2006 and 2010) The warlord whose very presence in the city is still felt to this day – Shingen Takeda – never used a castle while he lived. He famously depended on his army to be his moat and wall. After he died however, control of his clan fell into the hands of his less capable son, Katsuyori. The strength of the Takeda clan was its crack cavalry. However at the Battle of Nagashino in 1575, Katsuyori was defeated by a combined Oda-Tokugawa army, using platoon arquebus fire (the first ever recorded in history) and a well selected defensive position. He and the rest of his clan went down for good several years later. As a result, what Shingen never contemplated came to pass in 1583. A castle was built in Kofu. As was fashionable in the Meiji period however, most of the original building were destroyed in 1877. From 1904 onwards, the area surrounding the castle came to be known as Maizuru park. In 2004 one of the towers known as "Inari Yagura" was rebuilt to resemble the 1664 original as closely as possible. There is no entry charge. Mt Fuji can be seen from the castle on clear days.

**(3) Matsumoto Castle. Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture.** Matsumoto is a sleepy town, located in Nagano prefecture, which received a lot of publicity due to the 1998 Winter Olympics. Some of the locals speak a little English for that reason. It's easily accessible by bullet train from Tokyo, and happens to be home to one of the best original castles in Japan. By that I mean largely unscathed, left in the condition it originally was. "Matsumoto" is not the original name of this castle. Once upon a time it was called Fukashi Castle. Unusually for a Japanese castle, it was built on flatland, thereby placing it in the *Hirashiro* category. "Hira" meaning flat, and "shiro" meaning castle. The first castle here was built in 1504, more as a fort. In 1550 it came under the control of Shingen, and later the Tokugawa clan when the Takeda were vanquished. The castle used to be larger back in its heyday, the Edo period. When the Tokugawa Shogunate was established in 1603, the castle's name switched from Fukashi to Matsumoto. This was due to the newly established "Matsumoto Domain", making the lords of Matsumoto owners of the castle. In 1872 the castle was slated for destruction like so many others in the early Meiji period. A influential Matsumoto figure named Ryozo Ichikawa, and local residents, started a campaign to save the main keep. Their wish was granted. In the end the outer defences were destroyed, but the moat (seen in the 1st picture) was left intact as well as the picturesque red-wooden bridge connecting the castle. The Meiji government made a very wise choice. Entry to the castle costs 610 yen. (Yours truly, on my first visit. January 2008). With my older sister Melanie and her husband Adrian, on my second visit.

February 2015. Beautiful white swans glide through the moat. Taiko drummers. They are to be found at a few castles now, and provide an extra drawcard for tourists. These are known as "tsutsuji", and are intended to evenly distribute the heavy snowfall common in winter in this area.

At many castles in Japan you will have to remove your shoes at the entrance, and carry them with you in a plastic bag. Matsumoto Castle is no exception, and it's mainly to protect the wooden flooring inside. You will have to climb up many ladder-stairs like this one, particularly at "original castles". Not for the weak-kneed!

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A journey from Sendai to Kagoshima: 17 castles and the stories behind them.

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