

Himeji Castle — a national and World Heritage treasure

Himeji Castle was one of Japan's first two World Heritage sites, inscribed together with Horyuji Temple in 1993. Japanese castles are on most visitors' itineraries, and Himeji Castle, called Himeji-jo in Japanese, is often listed as the 'must-see' castle. Located in its namesake city, it is considered the finest surviving example of early 17th-century Japanese castle architecture. In fact, the UNESCO listing describes Himeji Castle as a "masterpiece of construction in wood" combining "its effective functional role with great aesthetic appeal, both in the use of white-painted plaster and in the subtlety of the relationships between the building masses and the multiple roof layers."

It would be hard not to be impressed as you approach the structure. Walking from the train station towards the castle, you can see how it dominates the skyline even today.

A hilltop castle, it can still be seen from most parts of the city. The castle has another name—*Shirasagi-jo* or White Heron

The defensive nature of its design is clear as you, the visitor, contemplate the enormous moats, wind your way through the multiple gates and are dwarfed by the impressive and steep stone walls. Himeji-jo was never the site of a major battle. Some buildings were taken down or added over the years, but the castle complex is considered to have great integrity as an example of an early Edo Period (1603-1867) castle. Himeji-jo became obsolete with the fall of the shogun and the rise of the new national government (the Meiji Restoration in 1868).

The importance of Himeji-jo was recognised early on and steps were taken to protect it.



Castle, and perched on high, this rather poetic name seems fitting.

However, the beauty of the structure should not distract from the purpose of Himeji Castle. It was a way to maintain power and order. Built in a strategically important location in the central part of the Harima Plain—in fact there was a castle on the site since the early 1300s—the current Himeji Castle was started in 1601 and served as the centre of a feudal domain for almost three centuries.



Today it is one of 12 original castles throughout Japan. Himeji Castle is certainly in a league of its own, but all these castles exude their own charm, such as the much smaller Matsue Castle on the cover. Himeji Castle can be easily reached from Osaka or Kyoto as a day trip by train, and having completed a major restoration in 2015, it is looking its best!

www.himejicastle.jp/en/

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Japanese castles—a living history

Knowing you are seeing an original castle does make for a special experience, but the very fact that a community made the effort to reconstruct a destroyed castle signals its importance as a landmark and source of historical pride. Moreover, some are rebuilt using data and methods faithful to the original and this can lead to truly magnificent results.

First completed in 1615, the **Hommaru Palace at Nagoya Castle** (left) was destroyed in 1945. Considered a masterpiece of the Edo Period, the palace and the castle's keeps were the first castle structures to be designated by Japan as a national treasure in 1930. Fortunately plans and early photos existed, and in 2018, the Hommaru Palace was authentically restored. The city now plans to rebuild the castle's tower keeps in wood.

www.nagoyajo.city.nagoya.jp/en/