

## Japan's Spectacular Hikone Castle

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Any traveler to Japan wishing to combine spectacular scenery with one of the nation's most beautiful castles must visit Hikone Castle (Hikone-jo) in Shiga Prefecture, only an hour by train from Kyoto Station. Towering over the town of Hikone near the shores of Lake Biwa, Japan's largest lake, the Castle provides spectacular views of the blue waters of Biwa-ko with its backdrop of rugged mountains. The castle is surrounded by over a thousand cherry trees which were in full bloom when I visited the town in early April 2006. A sudden cold wave had brought some snow earlier that morning, really enhancing the natural beauty of the site.

Japan has many incredible castles. A visitor to Tokyo must absolutely walk through the imperial palace grounds near Tokyo Station to admire the views of the moats and complex that once housed the Tokugawa Shoguns and is now home to the Emperor. The grand castles in Nagoya, Osaka and Hiroshima were totally destroyed during the Pacific War and have been replaced by ferro-concrete replicas which look wonderful from a distance, but with their modern conveniences such as elevators hardly convey a sense of authenticity. The most beautiful of Japan's castles left in its natural state is, of course, Himeji-jo, but Hikone-jo with its incredible natural surroundings and original interior is also a gem.

Hikone-jo was the home of the powerful Ii family throughout the Tokugawa period (1600-1867). Because of his strong performance on behalf of the Tokugawa side at the climactic battle of Sekigahara in 1600, Ii Naomasa was awarded Sawayama castle and surrounding lands. Due to its inconvenient location and poor condition, he soon started planning for a new castle on a new location that would become Hikone Castle. Unfortunately, Naomasa died soon after and the castle was actually begun under his son Naotsugu. It took 20 years and was completed under Naotsugu's brother Naotaka who had become lord of the castle in 1615.

Hikone Castle is one of only a dozen castles in Japan remaining intact. Almost all of its kind were destroyed, and the few remaining greatly altered through later modifications. The mastery of the woodwork is astounding and the beauty of contrasting white plaster with wood and stone is exceptional. Hikone castle is a lasting symbol of functional feudalism and military might. The fact that the castle is not on most tourists' itineraries means that one rarely has to fight crowds even during the busiest holiday seasons.

Most of the castle's inner moats, walls, guard houses and gates also remain in excellent condition, giving visitors a good impression of a relatively complete feudal castle. Hikone Castle's three storied castle tower was uniquely constructed, using various architecture styles. This is one reason why Hikone Castle has been designated a national treasure, the highest designation for cultural properties, held by only three other Japanese castles, at Himeiji, Matsumoto and Inuyama.

Despite the castle's small size, any visitor desiring to visit the castle tower must be in excellent physical shape. The first sets of stairways up are quite harmless, but then one must clamber up three sets of long and very steep ladders to get to the top, but the trip is very worthwhile because of the wonderful views of the town below and of the lake and mountains surrounding it.

Next door one finds the equally beautiful Genkyu-en, one of the largest and most spectacular gardens in Japan. I have been there during every season of the year, but the best time to visit is in the fall when all the Japanese maples are turning. The garden boasts a large lake with a beautiful tea house that sits on one side. One can enjoy a traditional cup of Japanese tea which was especially warming on that cold April morning walking through the snow. Near the garden are the restored homes of samurai and other notables of the Tokugawa period.

Those truly addicted to Japanese history should also make a brief stop at the Hikone Castle Museum. The museum is an exact copy of the official quarter of the Castle where the governor (daimyo) of the region lived and administered his people. There is a restored Noh stage, tea house and the living quarters of the Ii family. One can also find a vast array of Tokugawa era armory.

Hikone-jo is one of my favorite spots in Japan and I never fail to take my students and guests who want to experience Japanese history at its best.