

In a King's Lair

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

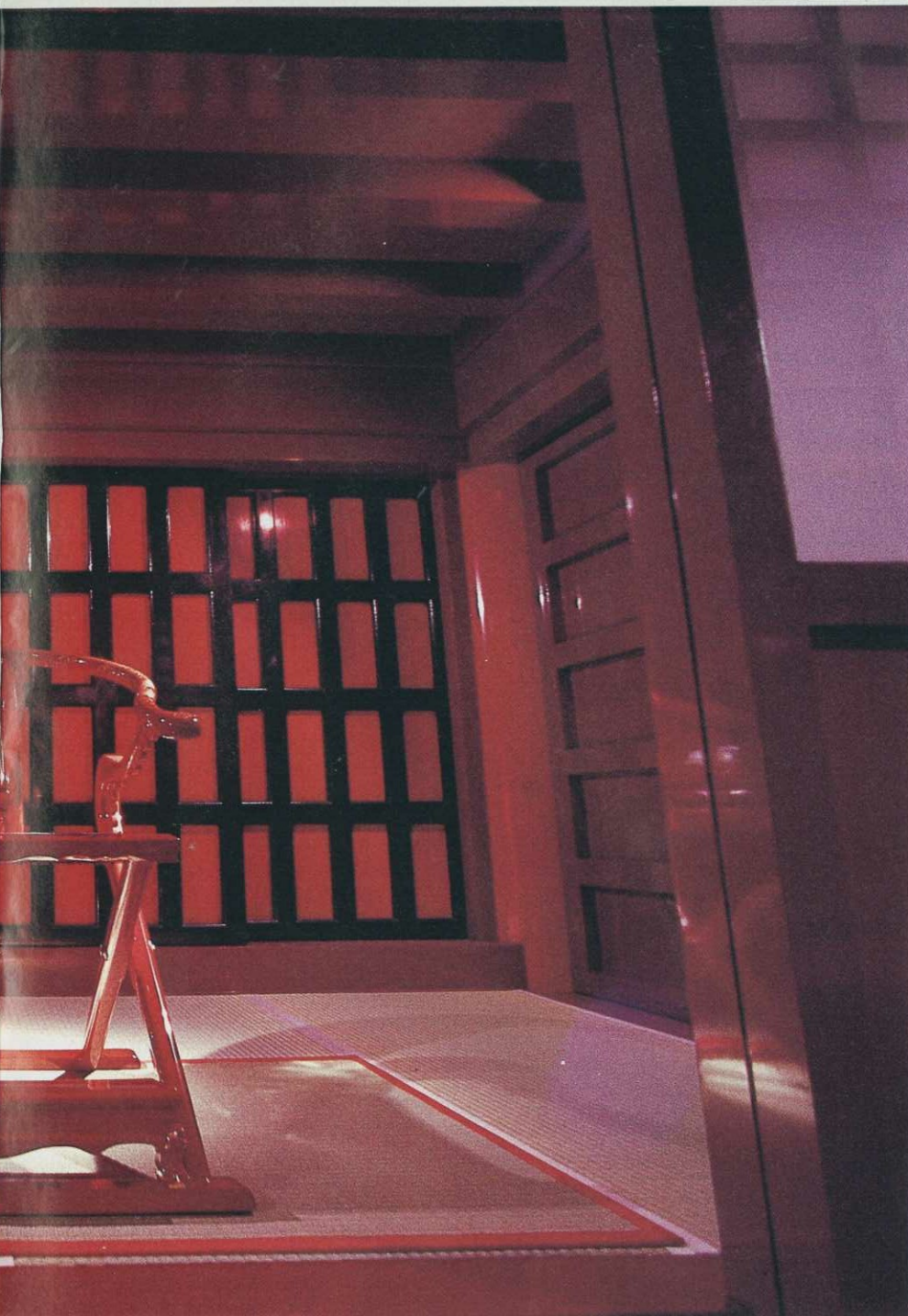
Roiling clouds scud low through the early grey-purple light. A fitful thin rain drifts down. The ornate building before me is at first a large and angular shadow, but as the sky casts off the last of the night, its dragons emerge. From the gables, the columns, the balustrades they stare down. With glowering eyes and mouths held open at half-gape, these guardians of Shuri Castle await the day. They look ready to roar and hiss—or whatever it is that dragons are supposed to do—at my intrusion, but they are stone silent. I am alone with them and their castle—something not easily done. But the right introductions and a little persistent wheedling have in this case succeeded, and I stand where kings and countries and ambassadors and even a commodore have passed. I try to call up their shades, so they can tell me about what they did here and what they saw here. Only the faint patter of the rain answers. It tells me nothing except that I am wet and getting wetter.

Mr. Murata, an official of the project that has overseen the reconstruction of this unique building and my guide on this gloomy morning, interrupts my moist reverie. "Everything's alright," he says, "all the paperwork was in order." He motions for me to follow and we set off across the courtyard's red-and-white-striped stone paving. We enter the *seiden*—the castle's main structure, taking off our shoes and leaving them at the entrance. The floor and the walls and the ceiling gleam with lacquer. It's not paint or some epoxy-based industrial coating. The depth of the color and the sheen confide that it is indeed the real thing.

We ascend a flight of stairs to enter another world of lacquer: the floor is a deep and shining black, as though ground from obsidian. The carmine columns that flank a waist-high dais are entwined with more dragons. The strange and pungent incense of the lacquer—and the cedar beneath it, from which this castle has been rebuilt in the ancient way—pervade the air.

Mr. Murata explains that this level is not normally open to visitors and proceeds to enlighten me about what I am seeing.





"This place is called *usasuka*. The Okinawan king sat here. His attendants here were all women because no men other than he were allowed on this second floor. In back and to the sides of this are rooms that we built according to the old drawings that we found, but we have no idea what they were used for or what kind of items were in them. They were probably for some kind of religious function but no records survive. But we built them anyway."

Across from the tatami-topped and dragon-flanked dais is an alcove with sliding doors that open to give a view of the courtyard below. In this alcove is a red-lacquered wooden chair of Chinese style. It is decorated with gold animals; some of them are dragons. On certain state occasions the Okinawan king sat on just such a throne and looked out on ceremonies or rituals carried below. Perhaps in 1853 the boy king King Sho Tai sat here and watched an impatient Commodore Perry approach between the two flanking buildings, one ornamented in a Ryukyu-Chinese style for the emissaries from China—to whom Okinawan rulers sent tribute missions from 1372 until 1866; the other in a Japanese style for officials of Kyushu's Shimazu clan, who held the real reins of power here between 1609 and the Meiji Restoration in 1868. The Okinawan kingdom, a sprat among whales, bred consummate diplomats in the Confucian tradition.

The wooden castle of Shuri looks out over the hills of Naha to the East China Sea. "It faces west, toward China," Mr. Murata tells me. "A lot of travelers from Taiwan and Hong Kong visit this castle and see a Japan they didn't expect."

As we leave the *seiden*, the guides and guards are getting ready for the day's flood of tourists. There is the distant sigh and rumble of buses and groups of visitors are already passing through *Kankaimon*—The Gate of Joyous Meeting—and heading up the limestone steps. JTI

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