

# About the Castle on the Hill

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

From this vantage point atop the roof of my hotel, I can look across the rooftops of the city. A graceful building is bathed in light. Out of place and of another world, it dominates the end of the broad avenue that leads away from the steel and glass of the main station, and it stands aloof above the surrounding modern urban maze. *Shirasagijo*, The White Heron Castle, is what sets Himeji, this smallish city in Hyogo Prefecture, apart from all others in Japan. As a once-feudal country, Japan has an assortment of castles: Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Hiroshima and other cities each have their own, but the majority are only a collection of moats and walls and the occasional outbuilding. Most of those imposing donjons that do appear complete have been reconstructed in concrete within this century. Osaka's—complete with elevators—was built in 1930, Nagoya's in 1960. Some other, smaller, regional castles—Kakegawa in Shizuoka Prefecture and Shuri on the island of Okinawa—have been rebuilt in recent years with traditional materials and methods. Himeji, however, can boast of the finest and most complete example of Japan's castle architecture and it alone has survived nearly intact from the days of feuding warlords and their armor-clad legions. Topography, architectural tradition, *senjo-jutsu* (the art of tactics), and *chikujo-jutsu* (the art of fortifications) at that time defined three types of castle: plains, hill and mountain. The White Heron is a hill castle. No original examples of the others have weathered the ravages of war and fire and earthquake.

The castle site, called Himeyama ("Princess Mountain") even though it is nothing more than a small hill sticking up from the alluvial lowland around it, was first fortified in the early 14th century; the first "castle" recorded on the site went up in 1346, although it was a simple affair and nothing to compare with the Shirasagijo that we see now. In 1608–9, the present donjon (*tenshukaku*—"heaven-guarding tower") was constructed during a spate of building that saw the construction of many of Japan's more famous

castles; among them are those of Hikone, Kumamoto, and Edo—now Tokyo's Imperial Palace.

To a non-Japanese observer, The White Heron may seem from a distance to be just a large house or temple set on a hilltop. A closer look reveals that this castle was clearly built for war, and while European medieval castles emphasized the impregnability of their outer defenses, Japanese castles such as this one were designed to be as defensible as possible if the stout outer defenses were in fact breached. The *tenshukaku* sits within a set of concentric walled *maru* ("circles"), and each of these has a confusing system of multiple moats and gates designed to divide and confuse an invading force. Nothing can be approached directly and the rammed-earth and stone ramparts are fenestrated to allow bowmen and musketeers interlocking and enfilading fields of fire. The stairstepping sets of stone walls are not freestanding, but are a succession of man-made cliffs that cannot be breached by frontal impact or by tunneling underneath. And as the gates draw nearer to the towering main donjon, they become smaller and narrower and require at least a 90-degree turn within a confined and vulnerable space. These gates are called *mizu-no-mon* ("water gates"—but nothing to do with a disgraced U.S. president), a symbolic name selected from the five elements of Oriental alchemy—earth, water, fire, wood, metal. Fire symbolized attack; water quenches fire.

Suddenly, the lights around the castle go out and the *tenshukaku* is a dark silhouette against a dark sky. The electric fires have been quenched. I make my way down the narrow exterior stairs, my mind passing out of the time of lords and their warriors. Below, the cars speed by, leaving the castle behind them, asleep in its shadows.

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