A Majestic Fortress Built for War

Construction on Kumamoto Castle began in 1601 at the behest of Lord Kato Kiyomasa and took seven years to complete, the entire project covering 98 hectares with a perimeter spanning 5.3km. In addition to the Main and Minor Keeps, the castle was originally fortified with 49 turrets, 18 manned gates, and 29 unmanned gates. The castle housed over 100 well, had vast stores of rice, and even had mats made out of edible potato leaves so that castle defenders could last even the longest of sieges.

In contrast to the decorative castles found in Osaka and Nagoya, the first priority when building Kumamoto Castle was military might and strategy. Many of the main buildings were burned down in a fire during the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877, a civil war that broke out between the samurai armies of the South and the westernized National Army and inspired the movie The Last Samurai. In 1960, almost a century later, the citizens of Kumamoto banded together to rebuild the castle keep through a city-wide donation drive. In 2000, the Honmaru Goten Palace was rebuilt, which features an enameled main hall and rare underground entrance.way.

THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF KUMAMOTO CASTLE

A Look to the Future: Rebuilding the Mighty Castle

The earthquakes of 2016 devastated Kumamoto and its castle, resulting in damage to 13 Important Cultural Properties and 20 reconstructions of original buildings, as well as collapse, deformation, or weakening of about 30% of the castle’s stone walls. Reconstruction on the Main Keep—the symbol of the castle—began in 2017, and the shachihoko (decorations placed atop the corners of the keep) were finally replaced in April 2018. Starting on October 5th, 2019, the plaza in front of the Main Keep will be open to the public on Sundays and holidays via a temporary access bridge from the entrance on the west side of the keep. The Nagatai Wall, which spans 242 meters and is the longest such castle wall in Japan, suffered a partial collapse in the earthquake and is also scheduled for repair. Current conditions and ongoing construction work for some of the surrounding buildings and stone walls is expected to be ready for public viewing by Spring 2020. Repairs to the Main Keep are expected to be completed by Spring 2021, after which visitors will once again be able to enter the reconstructed keep. Access ramps and elevators are part of the new construction and will allow more visitors to enjoy the castle than ever before.

Shokun no Ma
A Room Fit for a Shogun

The Grand Hall of the Honmaru Goten Palace was carefully reconstructed based on centuries-old pictures and documents, photos from the 1800s, and on-site excavations. The Shokun no Ma section of the hall is the most formal area, and features stunning wall and ceiling paintings decorated with real gold.

Mushagaeshi Walls
Unscalable Walls of Stone

Mushagaeshi means “warrior-repelling,” and refers to the unique construction of Kumamoto Castle’s stone walls that start with a gentle slope and gradually grow steeper until becoming undiscernible, even for the nimblest of ninja. The photo shows Nijo no hibiki, where two sections of walls built at different times stand next to each other, making it easy to see the differences in stonecutting techniques used in later construction.

Uto Turret
An Original Piece of the Castle

The Uto Turret, an original construction of the castle and a National Treasure, was partially damaged in the earthquakes but still stands as when it was first built. There used to be 4 other turrets of the same size as the Uto Turret, but now it is the only one remaining.

Kumamoto Castle
Address: Honmaru 1-1, Chuo-ku, Kumamoto-shi
HP: http://kumamoto-guide.jp/kumamoto-castle/
Wakuwakuza Kumamoto Castle Museum
Fun Exhibits Reveal all of Kumamoto Castle's Secrets
Check out the Kumamoto Castle Projection Mapping exhibit to see a strikingly realistic recreation of the damage caused by the earthquakes projected on a miniature replica of the castle. Next, check out the Kumamoto Castle Virtual Reality show to see what the castle looked like before the earthquake and see hundreds of years ago. There is also a set of cameras offering live views of the castle, plus a kimono rental room where you can rent different kinds of kimono and samurai outfits and take them out for a stroll around the castle grounds!

Address: Ninomaru Goryō, Kumamoto-shi
Hours: 9AM-5:30PM (last entry 4PM) Closed: 12/24, 12/31
Admission: ¥900 (adults), ¥450 (students) ¥300 (senior rentals start at ¥500)

Sakuranobaba Johsaien
The Start of Your Adventure in Kumamoto
Johsaien is a popular spot for visitors to Kumamoto that features the best local food, culture, and tradition, all right at the foot of Kumamoto Castle. Your first stop should be the Wakuwakuza Kumamoto Castle Museum, where you can learn all about the castle in fun and educational exhibits. Next, take a stroll through the 23 shops and restaurants offering tasty local dishes and souvenirs. Volunteers are stationed at the Tourist Info Center and are ready to give you helpful information on anywhere in Kumamoto Prefecture.

Address: Ninomaru Goryō, Kumamoto-shi
Hours: 9AM-5:30PM (some shops have different hours; check website for details)
Closed: 12/24, 12/31
HP: http://www.kumamonotenboriKENJOPERFECT.html
Kato Kiyomasa

A Legendary Daimyo: Still the Pride of Kumamoto

Kato Kiyomasa is best known in Japan for his skill as a military commander. A protégé of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, one of Japan’s most famous historical figures, Kiyomasa worked as a close bodyguard of Toyotomi. He attained legendary status after subduing a tiger in 1592 while fighting for Toyotomi in Korea, a heroic act that is a frequent subject in classical Japanese art. In Kumamoto, however, Kiyomasa is loved for all the ways he improved Kumamoto during his time here as lord.

In addition to being the architect behind Kumamoto Castle, Kiyomasa also promoted education, modernized the construction of numerous canals and waterways to improve agriculture, and built a prosperous domain with a content populace. Many of the levees and riverside constructions he oversaw still benefit Kumamoto to this day. Kiyomasa showed compassion for the common folk by scheduling construction projects for the agricultural off-season and was also devoutly religious. After surviving the invasion of Korea, Kiyomasa showed his thanks to the gods by leading a procession of 100 silk-kites to participate in a ceremony at Fujiwara Hachimangu Shrine, a tradition that lives on today as the Great Festival of Fujiwara Hachimangu Shrine. The brave yet merciful Lord Kato Kiyomasa died in 1611 and was laid to rest at Honmyoji Temple overlooking Kumamoto City. He is also revered as a god at Kato Shrine.

The Man Who Built Kumamoto

Kato Shrine

A Historic Shrine with an Excellent View of the Castle

Kato Shrine, the shrine where Kato Kiyomasa is revered as a god, was built in 1637, as Hiyodoki Shrine and originally stood between the castle keep and Udo Yagura. It was later moved to nearby Kiyomachi in 1874, and then moved again to its current location in 1962. The shrine was renamed Kato Shrine at the 300th-anniversary celebration of Kato Kiyomasa in 1919. Visitors can purchase a shrine stamp book at the shop and have one of the shrine workers stamp it with the seal of Kato Shrine. The stamp book can then be used at any other shrine you visit.

Address: Kamiyama 1-3-1, Chikusho, Kumamoto-ku
Hours: Always open
HP: http://www.katoshiji.or.jp/

Kumamoto Castle Bushotai Samurai

Bringing the Historical Figures of Kumamoto to Life

The Kumamoto Castle Bushotai Samurai are a performing group consisting of the legendary historical warriors and nobility who made Kumamoto what it is today. Kato Kiyomasa, founder of Kumamoto Castle, leads the group of ten, backed by Tatsukawa Tadaki (master of both sword and brush), Kuraoka Kondayu (bassist for Lord Tatsukawa Hideyoshi), and Ama-Imi (daughter of Kiyomasa). You can see the Bushotai performing at regularly scheduled shows at the castle.

HP: http://www.kumamotokukason.or.jp/

Fujisaki Hachimangu Shrine

The Brightly Colored Protector of Kumamoto

In 955AD, the emperor Suzaku prayed for the success and suppression of the Tengu no Iru conflict by building a shrine on a hill to the west of where Kumamoto Castle now stands. The entire shrine burned down in the Satsuma Riot of 1877 and was rebuilt in its current location. Every fall, approximately 20,000 people and over 700 horses come to participate in the Great Festival of Fujisaki Hachimangu, a festival that started over 1,000 years ago and features a parade of historically dressed soldiers and rowdy marchers who bedecked horses throughout the city.

Address: Fujisaki Hachimangu, Chikusho, Kumamoto-ku
Hours: Mid-Oct to mid-Mar: 8AM–6PM, other months: 8AM–5PM
HP: http://www.fujisakigumo.or.jp/

Honnmyoji Temple

A Nichiren Buddhist Temple with 400 Years of History

The temple shrine of the Holy Buddha was originally built by Kiyomasa for his father in Osaka in 1585 and was relocated within the walls of Kumamoto Castle after Kiyomasa became lord of the Higo Domain (modern-day Kumamoto). Kiyomasa’s dying wish was for it to be built at a height equal to that of the keep of Kumamoto Castle, and out of respect for the great lord, his grave was built atop a hill overlooking the city. Shortly after, Honmyoji Temple was moved from this castle to its current location just below Kiyomasa’s grave. Every year on July 23rd, the Temple Festival is held at Honmyoji to commemorate Kiyomasa.

Address: Honmyoji 4-13-1, Non-non, Kumamoto-shi
Hours: Always open
HP: http://www.honnmyoji.jp/
Miyamoto Musashi was born in 1584 in Harima (modern day Hyogo Prefecture). By the age of 29, he had already fought in 60 duels and won every single one. He began to further study and pursue the martial arts and founded the niten iki ryu style of swordfighting, a style characterized by dual wielding swords. Musashi came to Kumamoto in 1640 as a special guest of Hosokawa Tadaotoki, first lord of the Kumamoto Domain, and he spent his remaining years here enjoying tea, zen, painting, and writing. A few of his unique ink paintings are available for viewing at the Shimada Museum of Arts. When Musashi sensed he had not but a short time left to live, he hermitized himself away in Reigando Cave on Mt. Kirpo (the mountain to the west of Kumamoto City) to author his masterwork on military strategy, The Book of Five Rings. When he passed away on May 19th, 1645, it was his dying wish to continue to protect the lord of Kumamoto, and so he was supposedly buried upright, in full armor and helmet, along one of the old thoroughfares into the city.

A Life Spent Perfecting the Way of the Warrior

Reigando Cave & Gohyakurakan (Unganzenji Temple)
The Mythical Spot Where Musashi Discovers The Book of Five Rings

To the west of Kumamoto City, deep in the forested hills of Mt. Kirpo, lies Unganzenji Temple. Head even deeper in the forest and you’ll find the fabled Reigando Cave. When Musashi came to the realization that he didn’t have much longer to live, he removed himself from public life and hermitized himself away for two years in this cave to author The Book of Five Rings, his masterwork outlining his philosophies on military strategy. Along the winding path from the temple to the cave are hundreds of small Buddha statues (the Gohyakurakan), all carved by the same artist about 200 years ago. Look closely and you’ll notice that no two statues are alike. In the exhibit building next to the temple, you can find a painting by Musashi, as well as an actual wooden sword used by Musashi in one of his many duels.

The Shimada Museum of Arts
A Quiet Art Museum that Shows Musashis Many Faces

The Shimada Museum of Arts is a gallery of the classical works of art and historical documents that Matsuo Shimada, a researcher of historical art from Kumamoto, spent his life collecting. Many of the pieces are related to Miyamoto Musashi, and there are even metal and wooden swords supposedly used by Musashi on display. To show that Musashi was much more than just a fighter, the museum also houses some of Musashi’s paintings. After your visit, stop by the museum’s café or enjoy a look at the museum’s 19th-century-style traditional Japanese garden.

Address: Shimada-shi, Kumamoto-ken, Shimada-mura, 1-12-8, Shimada
Hours: 10AM-5PM (last entry 4:30PM)
Closed: Mondays (open holidays), when setting up new exhibits
Admission: Normal admission for main gallery ¥700 (children & students ¥300), seniors, and HS students, admission to attached gallery’s free
Web: http://www.shimada-museum.net/index.php

Musashizuka Park
Final Resting Place of Swordmaster Miyamoto Musashi

The great swordsman Miyamoto Musashi was invited to Kumamoto by Lord Hosokawa Tadatoshi and Kumamoto ended up being where Musashi would spend his final years. The last words of Musashi were supposedly that, even in death, he wished to protect his lord, and so he was buried standing upright in full armor wielding a sword along one of the main highways into Kumamoto, at the site of modern-day Musashizuka Park. The park features a statue of Musashi as the blacksmith Musashi, as well as a Japanese garden and teahouse. The park is a popular spot for locals to stop by for some quiet time amidst the hustle and bustle of the surrounding city.

Address: Time: 5-1-223, Tonada-nagai, Kitaku, Kumamoto-shi
Open 24 hours
Open year-round
Admission: Free
The Hosokawa Clan

Suizenji Park
A Garden of Traditional Japanese Beauty Built by the Hosokawas

In the place were Suizenji now stands today, Hosokawa Tadatoshi, the first Hosokawa Lord of Kumamoto, discovered a natural spring and decided to build a teahouse nearby. His grandson Tadatsune then transformed the surrounding area into a sprawling park designed to recreate different views along the Tatsukawa River, including views of Mt. Fuji. Suizenji Shrine is located within the park and is where members of the Hosokawa family are enshrined. At the shrine shop, you can purchase a shime stamp box designed over 400 years ago by Hosokawa Gunjaku, wife of Lord Tadatsune and a convert to Christianity. You can get the stamp signed and stamped at any other shrine you visit. A wide variety of kimonos are also available for rental just outside the park and make for great photos amidst the traditional Japanese backdrop of Suizenji.

Address: Suizenji Koen 8-4, Chuo-ku, Kumamoto-shi
Hours: 7:00AM-6:00PM (Nov-Feb 8:00AM-5:30PM), last entry 30 min before closing
Price: 1,500 yen for seniors and students

Kokindenju no Ma
A Teahouse Transplanted from Kyoto to Kumamoto

The Kokindenju no Ma is a rare, taisho-period teahouse located on the grounds of Suizenji Park. The building was originally built around 400 years ago in Kyoto and was granted to the Hosokawas in 1871. In 1912, the entire building was dismantled and transported to Suizenji Park, where it was rebuilt as it once stood in Kyoto. Kokindenju no Ma offers serene views of the park and visitors can enjoy a traditional sweet and bowl of matcha green tea inside. Address: Suizenji Koen 8-4, Chuo-ku, Kumamoto-shi
Hours: 10:00AM-4:00PM, last entry 30 min before closing
Price: 1,500 yen (limited)

Tatsuda Nature Park
(Taishoji Temple)

A Nature Park that Houses the Family Temple of the Hosokawas

Tatsuda Nature Park has been on loan to Kumamoto City from the Hosokawa family since 1935 and holds a special place in the hearts of the residents of Kumamoto. The site of Taishoji Temple, the family temple of the Hosokawas, is located in the park, as well as the graves of the first and second Hosokawa kents and their wives, and the Hosokawa, a teahouse built according to the designs of tea ceremony master Hosokawa Tadatoshi. Tea ceremonies are still held in the Koishojo to this day and are performed in the unique Higo school style of tea ceremony. Address: Kurogawa 4-10, Chuo-ku, Kumamoto-shi
Hours: 7:30AM-5:00PM (Nov-Feb 8:00AM-4:30PM), last entry 30 min before closing
Open: Mon-Sat.
Price: 1,500 yen

The Original Architects of Modern Kumamoto Culture

Now in its 18th generation, the Hosokawa clan ruled over Kumamoto for 235 years. For centuries, the Hosokawas have held both the aesthetic and martial arts in equal esteem and contributed to their independent development in Kumamoto. The Hosokawas are especially well-known for tea ceremony. Sen no Rikyu, the father of modern tea ceremony, considered Hosokawa Tadatsuki, the second-generation head of the family, his favorite pupil. The Hosokawas also built Suizenji Park and Taishoji Temple, which is still used as their family temple. The Hosokawas were also integral in the development of Higo Zogan, a local style of intricate metal inlay, and Karatsu renko, a spacy local delicacy of lotus root stuffed with mustard miso and fried. Legendary swordsman Miyamoto Musashi was invited to Kumamoto by the Hosokawas, and it is here that he took interest in the arts of painting and tea ceremony. The Hosokawas have had an astounding effect on the art and military cultures of Kumamoto and a number of precious artifacts and classical documents related to the Hosokawa family are on display at the Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Art.

Higo Zogan
Precious Gold and Silver Intricately Inlaid in Pitch Black Metal—on Art with Roots in Martial Culture

Higo Zogan was developed by a gunsmith serving Lord Hosokawa Tadatsuki as a way to decorate gun barrels and sword guards. Higo Zogan is characterized by its intricate yet understated designs that reflect the military tradition the art was born from. Deep black metal is decorated with sparkling gold and silver to create elegant yet understated designs that are distinctly Japanese in flavor. Although Higo Zogan originally began as a way of decorating weapons, when wars were outlawed in Japan, Higo Zogan became a popular decoration for jewels and other accessories and is now available on a variety of different objects including cufflinks, pendants, fountain pens, and more.

Address: Eisei Bunko Gallery at the Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Art
An Art Museum near the Castle with Hosokawa-Related Exhibits

Eisei Bunko is an organization that preserves and researches over 750 years’ worth of cultural properties, precious art works, and classical documents. The Eisei Bunko Gallery opened in 2008, features a number of historical objects from the Hosokawa Collection on loan from Eisei Bunko. Works by artists like Tsuchiya Kōitsu, Chinen Morita, and other artists with a connection to Kumamoto are also available for viewing. The Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Art art from a variety of different disciplines on display and is an excellent place to stop by during a trip to the castle.

Address: 1-1, Chuo-ku, Kumamoto-shi
Hours: 9:00AM-4:50PM (Nov-Feb 8:30AM-4:30PM)
Closed: Mondays and the following days of holidays
Admission: 2,000 yen for access to 2nd floor gallery and requires a ticket (1,000 yen), 2,000 yen for access to 3rd floor gallery, only admissions for the 2nd floor gallery are available for kids (min age 10) and students (min age 13).
Website: http://www.museum.pref.kumamoto.jp
Kumamoto Gourmet

Kumamoto Ramen
Black Roasted Garlic is the Secret to True Kumamoto Ramen
Kumamoto Ramen has roots in Kurume Ramen, the birthplace of the tonkotsu-style of ramen, which made its way to Kumamoto via Tenma. Traditionally, Kumamoto Ramen consists of noodles of medium thickness in a tonkotsu-based broth mixed with chicken broth and topped with black roasted garlic chips and black garlic oil. The garlic mesh is with mild tonkotsu broth to make a creamy, hearty soup. A popular topping on Kumamoto Ramen is Akaushi (Kumamoto beef brisket).

Kumamoto • Houppe
Address: Houppe, 6-1-10, Chuo-ku, Kumamoto-shi
Hours: 11:30AM-3:30PM, 5:30PM-9:00PM
Open: Wednesday

Horsemehat Cuisine
A Low-Calorie, Low-Cholesterol Superfood
Kumamoto Prefecture is Japan’s leading producer of horsemeat. The consumption of horsemeat supposedly began long ago with Kato Kiyomasa. Horsemeat is rich in vitamins and minerals while being low in both calories and cholesterol. The most popular way to eat horsemeat is as an “Ikarashi”-marinated horsemeat roll cut into small pieces and served with rice.

Superme • Ikarashi
Address: Ikarashi, 21-12, Chuo-ku, Kumamoto-shi
Hours: 11:30AM-5:00PM, 5:30PM-9:00PM
Open: Wednesday

Local Sake
Expertly Crafted Sake Made with Superior Ingredients and Pure Water
Good sake is essentially made of good water. Kumamoto Prefecture is blessed with excellent water resources, as it’s home to 650 natural springs and 100% of tap water in Kumamoto City is groundwater. Having water of such good quality in such abundance means that the rice and fruits grown with this water are also going to be of excellent quality, resulting in some really superb sakes. Kumamoto sake is especially unique because it is brewed to be good in both cold and warm sake in the warm Kumamoto climate. This Kumamoto breed can create a richer, more aromatic kind of sake and is now used by breweries all throughout Japan. In recent years, sakes and beer breweries have also opened in Kumamoto and are making a name for themselves both domestically and overseas.

Kumamoto Sake Co., Ltd. Address: 10-1, Chuo-ku, Kumamoto-shi
Hours: 10:00AM-6:00PM
Open: Tuesday

Kumamoto-shi Sake · Kurokawa Address: 1-30-3, Chuo-ku, Kumamoto-shi
Hours: 10:00AM-9:00PM
Closed: Monday

Sushi
Enjoy Excellent Amakusa Seafood in Downtown Kumamoto
The Amakusa area is a bustling waterfront area and is a seafood lover’s paradise, with everything from access to Amakusa prawns, sea urchins, squid, sea beans, pike conger, cutlass fish, and much more. Many of Amakusa’s sashimi chefs are very creative in their preparation and presentation and famous people come from far and wide to taste in Amakusa. Because of the snow proximity to the sea of Amakusa, excellent Amakusa sashimi is available all year long in downtown Kumamoto. The charm of Amakusa seafood lies in its fresh ingredients delivered daily from the market and seasoned with salt or spicy sauce before serving. Amakusa-style sashimi respects the flavors of the basic ingredients while adding a bit of kick to brighten the eyes and the mouth.

Sushi Nakahara
Address: Nakahara, 1-30-3, Chuo-ku, Kumamoto-shi
Hours: 11:30AM-9:00PM
Closed: Monday

Kumamoto Wagyu Beef
Akaushi Beef: Melt-in-Your-Mouth Savory Goodness
This dish is a melt-in-your-mouth beef served in a special bowl topped with Akaushi beef. The bowl is filled with a special sauce made from Akaushi beef, giving it a rich, delicious flavor. Akaushi beef is known for its melt-in-your-mouth texture and savory goodness.

Akaushi Steak Yatai
Address: 10-1, Chuo-ku, Kumamoto-shi
Hours: 5:00PM-9:00PM
Closed: Monday

Karashi Renkon
An Addictive Combo of Crunch & Spice
Karashi Renkon is a local dish made by stuffing the pot-starch root with a mix of spicy mustard and rice. Dipping the root in a wasabi-based sauce cools and spices it, enhancing the flavor of the renkon and making it a truly addictive snack. The dish supposedly got its start as a hedge food for one of the customers of a restaurant in Kumamoto who was sick at the time. When cut, the pot-starch root also resembles the logo of the restaurant, hence its name. This dish is popular to pair with a beer or some local noizuku.

Akaushi Renkon
Address: Akaushi Renkon, 10-1, Chuo-ku, Kumamoto-shi
Hours: 11:30AM-9:00PM
Closed: Monday
Closed: Monday

URL: https://www.enkoukaqui.com/

Kumamoto: A Land of Wonders
Events in Kumamoto City

Events Fusing Tradition with Modern Life

Fun events are held throughout the year in Kumamoto, including the Kumamoto Oshiro Matsuri held once in spring and once in fall; the Kumamoto Castle Tsuboi River Garden Party where you can see brightly dressed women as they parade through town; the Suejiri Matsuri held in Suejiri Park; and the Great Festival of Fujisaki Hachimangu Shrine, a festival with over 1200 years of history and famed for its decorated horses on parade. There are also a number of new events started by young residents in recent years, like the Mizuakari festival where 6000 volunteers band together to carve bamboo into beautiful lanterns, and the popular Christmas Market held at different locations throughout the world. There are many more events in addition to these that celebrate local cuisine, the changing of the seasons, religious traditions, and more. Check out the Kumamoto City Official Guide website for current and future events.

Event Calendar

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Map of Kyushu & Kumamoto

Access

Shiden (Kumamoto City Tram)

Kumamoto City Tram and Bus 1-Day Pass

One Day Pass

Kumamoto city tram allows

How to Get on the Bus and Tram

1. Enter from the back door and take a ticket. There is no need to take a ticket on tram because the fare doesn’t change.
2. When your destination is called, press the buttons.
3. Check your fare on the board at the front of the bus. For example, you have a ticket with a 2 on it. You should pay the fare amount that appears below the 2 on the board. In this case 20 yen. Tram fare is always 110 yen per adult and 50 yen per child.
4. Buy your fare and ticket in the fare box next to the driver’s seat. If you need change, use the change machine attached to the fare box.