**Shinmachi and Furumachi**

Kumamoto’s old *jokamachi*, or castle town, is located just to the southwest of the castle. It is divided in two by the Tsuboi River, which served as the castle’s inner moat. The area closest to the castle and north of the river is called Shinmachi (“new town”), while the district south of the river is Furumachi (“old town”). One might expect the castle town to be full of ancient houses dating back to the early seventeenth century when Kumamoto Castle was built. Unfortunately, however, Shinmachi was destroyed and Furumachi very badly damaged during the siege of Kumamoto Castle in the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion. As a result, the oldest residences date back no further than 1878. This was always a commercial neighborhood, however, and even today there are venerable shops and restaurants that have roots stretching back to the seventeenth century.

The best way to enjoy Shinmachi and Furumachi is to join a walking tour of the shops. Visitors can try horsemeat sashimi accompanied by local sake, or enjoy mustard-stuffed deep-fried lotus root at the family shop that invented the dish in the 1630s for Hosokawa Tadatoshi, lord of Kumamoto.

*From Medical Emporiums to Coffee Shops*

Shops making and selling traditional crafts such as Higo inlay (Kumamoto-style metalwork) can be found here and there in both Shinmachi and Furumachi. Some owners are happy to let visitors try their own hand at the work. At the huge old Chinese medicine store that once supplied the domain lord (and that has separate entrances for ordinary folk and for staff from the castle), customers can try *shodokukeshigan*, which are “pills that overcome various ills.” Some of the businesses are new, such as the artisanal coffee shop in an imaginatively restored town house and a health-food restaurant located directly overlooking the river. In the old days, the river served as the main street, and some goods were delivered to shops and wholesalers by boat.

Little stone statues of Jizo, the bodhisattva that protects children and wards off fire, and images of Ebisu, the god of commerce, are still common sights in what has long been a district of shopkeepers.

*Castle Town Curiosities*

• There are two bridges of interest that cross the Tsuboi River dividing Shinmachi and Furumachi. They were designed by Hashimoto Kangoro, a Kumamoto native who also designed the famed Nihonbashi and Nijubashi bridges in Tokyo. The bridges are named after the year they were built: Meihachi (“Meiji year eight,” or 1875) and Meiju (“Meiji Year 10,” or 1877). The Meihachi Bridge used to be the site of a castle gate.

• The layout of Furumachi follows the principle of “one block, one temple.” There are no fewer than 24 temples in this part of the town, tucked away down alleys behind the houses. Not many of them have survived in their original form, however. In the old days, samurai used to practice their swordsmanship in the open courtyards of the temple precincts.

• While many of the most striking shops date from the Meiji era (1868–1912), there are a few impressive buildings from the Taisho era (1912–1926). Highlights include a nicely restored bank from 1919 (in Furumachi) and a bookshop built in 1924 (in Shinmachi). Famous customers of the bookshop’s past include distinguished writers like Natsume Soseki (1867–1916), Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), and Mori Ogai (1862–1922).

• Many of the old buildings consist of a shop at the front, a garden or courtyard in the middle (*nakaniwa*), and the shopkeeper’s home at the back, with intricate woodwork on the gates and window screens.