

Welcome to White Heron Castle

Himeji Castle, known as “White Heron Castle” for its soaring keep and brilliant white plaster walls, is Japan’s most-visited castle. The main keep was built in 1601 and is one of the oldest surviving castle keeps in Japan.

Because the castle was never besieged, bombed, or burned, more of Himeji’s buildings have survived to the present-day than those of any other Japanese castle. In order to preserve this National Treasure for future visitors, the castle’s keeps, gatehouses, and towers have undergone regular restoration since the early 1900s.

The castle comprises a cluster of keeps surrounded by rings of fortifications called baileys. The only stone structures in Himeji Castle are its foundations; the castle’s buildings are made mostly of wood, earth, and plaster. The complex contains many fine examples of traditional Japanese architecture and craftsmanship, such as the post-and-beam construction of the main keep.

Most of Himeji Castle’s buildings were ostensibly designed for warfare—try counting the nearly 1,000 gun- and arrow-slits that line the castle walls!—but the castle was never attacked. Instead, the castle functioned mainly as a center for administration and the home of Himeji’s daimyo. The daimyo’s palatial residence was destroyed during the Meiji era (1868–1912), and most of the living quarters and offices in the castle have been lost to time. However, the remaining buildings give us some indication of how the ruling classes lived during Japan’s feudal period. The design of the wainscoting in the West Bailey, for example, indicate that it was once used as living quarters for ladies-in-waiting.