

Katsuren Castle Ruins

Ryukyu castles, known as *gusuku*, are great surviving monuments to the prosperous eras of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, when Ryukyu progressed from isolated domains to a united kingdom that enjoyed independence and extensive overseas trade. *Gusuku* appear to have been both defensive and spiritual in nature, with military, residential, and ceremonial facilities. Only a few historical records survived, so many questions about their construction and use remain unanswered, and Katsuren Castle is no exception. It dominates the Katsuren peninsula, and from its heights it commands a panoramic view of the ocean and terrain in all directions. It is closely associated with the rise and fall of Lord Amawari, who ruled the region in the fifteenth century.

The construction of stone castles in Okinawa began about one hundred years earlier than on the main islands of Japan. Both Japanese and Ryukyu castles are arranged as a sequence of secure enclosures, or wards, with the most secure ward at the highest elevation. Ryukyu castles have remarkable curved walls of limestone, unlike the more strictly rectilinear layout and sharp corners of Japanese castles. Katsuren Castle is laid out with five such wards on separate levels, each surrounded by massive limestone walls. Though nothing remains of the original wooden structures, archaeological research gives us a good idea of the size and layout of the most important buildings and the lifestyles of their inhabitants. The castle had several fine gates, and a large wooden hall of sophisticated construction. Rather than utilize large multistory defensive towers like Japanese castles did, the builders of Ryukyu castles like Katsuren took advantage of the natural hills.

In addition to the Katsuren Castle Ruins, prominent surviving castle ruins in Okinawa include Shuri Castle, Naka Castle, Nakijin Castle, and Zakimi Castle, all of which are UNESCO World Heritage sites.