

Katsuren Historic Sites

The Gate to the First Ward

The gate to the highest and most important ward of the castle, now known as the First Ward, was a beautiful stone arch topped by a painted roofed structure, visible from afar and once celebrated in poetry. It is reached by a spectacular curved defensive stone stairway. Only the stairs and lower part of the gate survive. A carved stone arabesque decoration was excavated near the gate that suggests the architectural sophistication of Katsuren Castle at its peak.

Remains of the Second Ward Ceremonial Hall

A large wooden ceremonial hall, or Seiden, once stood in the Second Ward, dominating the entire castle. Nothing survives except its foundations, from which many aspects can be determined. The building was 17 meters by 14.5 meters, and similar in plan to a Buddhist temple hall. Four unusual rectangular stone-walled structures were located under the floor, and though they are appropriate in size for storage or hiding, their purpose has yet to be determined. At a time when many important Ryukyuan buildings were roofed with thatch or wooden boards, this Seiden had a beautiful roof of imported tiles, attesting to the wealth and overseas cultural contacts of Katsuren's lords. This and Katsuren's other wooden buildings were burned down when the castle was captured and Lord Amawari was defeated in 1458.

Circular Reservoir

This curious circular underground reservoir is made of clay-lined stone and is 7.5 meters in diameter. Much about it remains a mystery, however, including when and why it was built and how it was used. It may have been used for drinking water, though the castle has several good wells; perhaps it was a security supply for when the castle came under attack. It is also possible that it preserved a special supply of water used for rituals. As no records of it survive, the answer will probably never be known.

Buried Human Skeleton

The well-preserved skeleton of a child about four years of age was discovered near the southeastern wall of the Third Ward during excavations in 1985. When and why the child was buried here remain a mystery. The burial may have been part of a ritual to ward off bad luck, although such practices are not otherwise known in the Ryukyus. No records or other information survives.

Gate to the Third Ward

This robust roofed wooden gate was securely integrated into the sloping stone wall, with thick wooden pillars set into four deep vertical notches in the stone. It is called a *shikyaku-mon*, or “four-legged gate.” Gates built like this are sturdy and also indicate high status and are found in temples and castles in mainland Japan as well. Despite its name, notches in other foundation stones suggest that this gate originally had six pillars.

Raised Platform of the Second Ward

Unlike the other wards in Katsuren Castle, which are separated by tall stone walls and gates, the Second and Third Wards are distinguished by a 2-meter change in level. A thick limestone retaining wall of rectangular blocks with three wide stone staircases was built to separate the Second Ward from the wide plaza of the Third Ward immediately below. The 4-meter-long wall is almost perfectly straight, and soil fill covered with limestone gravel was used to level the entire platform behind it. The large wooden Seiden was constructed on top of this. This part of the castle forms a well-planned ceremonial complex based on earlier Chinese prototypes. Remains of older platform wall sections have been found, which suggests that the entire ward, including the Seiden, was rebuilt at least twice.