

Tamaudun Royal Mausoleum Overview

Tamaudun is a remarkable mausoleum housing the remains of 19 Ryukyu kings who ruled between 1470 and 1879, and other royal family members. It was built in 1501 by King Sho Shin, third king of the Second Sho Dynasty, to enshrine the remains of his father, King Sho En. Ryukyuans worship the tombs of their ancestors as the shrines of guardian deities, and Tamaudun was intended to embody the king's sovereignty over the Ryukyu Islands, and represent the power of the royal government.

Following the traditional practice of constructing tombs in harmony with natural landforms, the mausoleum has three crypts that began as natural caves below a limestone cliff but were gradually expanded by digging into the bedrock. The design of the exterior facade is based on Ryukyu palace architecture, constructed of beautifully fashioned Ryukyu limestone, with stone details such as rafter ends and doors closely mimicking the form of wooden prototypes. A stone wall in front of the tomb has stone balustrades decorated with carvings of lions, lotuses, dragons, and other figures. The roof is covered with dark gray ceramic tiles, made to mimic thick wooden shingles. A portion of the natural stone cliff face has been retained and integrated into the design. Three stone lions (*shisa*) on pedestals, examples of traditional Ryukyuan stone sculpture, guard the tomb. Though originally finished with gleaming white plaster, the facade is now a handsome, harmonious gray with many contrasting textures.

The eastern crypt (on the left when facing the mausoleum) was intended for the remains of kings and queens, interred in intricately decorated sarcophagi, while the western crypt (on the right) was for other family members. The center crypt was for the temporary interment of the deceased prior to the ritual purification of their bones.

Tamaudun is approached through a wide, dirt-paved outer forecourt and an inner court paved with naturally bleached fragments of branching coral. Built on a deliberately offset axis, these courts have narrow, arched stone gateways with double doors. A stele from 1501 that describes who can be interred in the mausoleum stands in the inner court. Two guardhouses built in 1748 originally stood outside, but only one was rebuilt, in March 2003. Tamaudun suffered a direct hit from American naval shelling during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945, causing considerable damage, particularly to the eastern crypt. Three years of careful restoration using original materials was completed in 1977.