

## Kokyo Gaien National Garden

Kokyo Gaien National Garden is a park in central Tokyo, covering a little over a square kilometer. The national garden includes three museums and is popular with people for its fascinating history and natural environment. The grounds ring the Imperial Palace, residence of the emperor, and include a landscaped plaza in front of the palace, 12 moats, and Kitanomaru Garden. These grounds were all once part of Edo Castle, originally built in 1457. Its moats as well as several gates, bridges, watchtowers, and impressive stone walls remain. Many are designated Special Historic Sites and Important Cultural Properties of Japan.

The castle was built during a time of conflict and political upheaval. It was constructed to protect Kamakura, the headquarters of the shogunate of the time, south of modern-day Tokyo. The Tokugawa shogunate, the feudal government that ruled the country from 1603 to 1867, expanded the castle making it the largest such stronghold ever built in Japan.

Over the centuries, Edo Castle was damaged by fire time and again. A fire in 1873 burned most of the castle to the ground. From 1874 to 1945, Kitanomaru Garden was occupied by the Imperial Guard.

### Walking Itinerary

Nanko Rest House, in the southernmost corner of the garden, is an excellent starting point when exploring Kokyo Gaien. Its exhibitions provide historical context and its restaurant offers Edo-inspired cuisine. In front of Nanko Rest House, you will find almost 2,000 carefully manicured Japanese black pine trees (*Pinus thunbergii*) and the statue of legendary samurai Kusunoki Masashige (1294–1336), noted for his loyalty to the emperor.

From here, head to Sakuradamon Gate, then north along the moat, past Nijubashi Bridge, the Imperial Palace itself and Tatsumi Watchtower. Wadakura Fountain Park, commemorating the marriages of the Emperor (r. 2019–) and the Heisei Emperor Emeritus (r. 1989–2019), is across the road from the watchtower. It is a good spot for a break and a bite to eat in the park's restaurant. From there, you can enter the East Gardens of the Imperial Palace via the Otemon Gate or continue around the outside of the palace grounds, walking along the Ote-bori moat.

The East Garden is the only part of the inner Imperial Palace that is open to the public year-round. These grounds would once have been the most heavily fortified part of Edo

Castle, protected from attack by high walls, strong gates and guards. Now, all that remain of the castle are moats, gates, guardhouses, and the foundation of the castle keep, which burned down in 1657 and was never rebuilt. You can still see the traces of scorching on some of the stonework, giving an idea of the intensity of the fire.

Both the Ote-bori moat and East Gardens routes will take you to Kitahanebashi Gate, one of the very few drawbridges in Japan. From there, walk towards Kitanomaru Garden, where you can explore its wooded gardens and two Edo-period (1603–1867) gates. Exit through Tayasumon Gate before continuing counterclockwise around the moats, along the edge of Chidorigafuchi Moat, and back to the start of your route. After sunset, Sakuradamon Gate is lit up, making a spectacular end to a loop of Kokyo Gaien. If you would rather skip some sections, there are numerous subway stations within easy reach of the Kokyo Gaien grounds. The 5-kilometer course around the moats is also popular with runners.