

Shuri Castle and the Kingdom of Ryukyu

Shuri Castle is the greatest architectural monument of the Second Sho Dynasty of the Kingdom of Ryukyu, which lasted from 1469 to 1879. While a castle is believed to have existed on the site even earlier, it was under the dynasty's rule that its size and importance greatly expanded.

The history of Okinawa is tumultuous, with periods of prosperity and decline as rulers struggled to accommodate the influence of the larger powers that surrounded the kingdom: China, mainland Japan, and Korea. Ryukyu transitioned from being led by many independent warlords to a tripartite division in the fourteenth century called the Sanzan ("Three Mountains") era, and then to a unified kingdom under the First Sho Dynasty in 1429. When the last king of the First Sho Dynasty, Sho Toku (1441–1469), was killed in a coup d'état, leaving no heir, the royal court elected Sho En (1415–1476) as king and established the Second Sho Dynasty. Under the stewardship of the dynasty's third king, Sho Shin (1465–1526), the Kingdom enjoyed a long period of peace and prosperity. Sho Shin encouraged the arts, improved the port infrastructure of Naha, and greatly expanded the kingdom's international trade. He oversaw the building of many monuments, temples, villas, gardens, and bridges, particularly the expansion and beautification of Shuri Castle.

Though none of Sho Shin's successors was able to achieve the same degree of peace, prosperity, and cultural achievement, the castle remained the seat of the royal court, the administrative and cultural heart of the Ryukyu Islands, and the residence of the royal family until Okinawa became part of Japan in 1879. Following the family's departure, Shuri Castle was used as a military barracks and a school before becoming a Shinto shrine in 1925.

What Are Gusuku?

Gusuku like Shuri Castle are symbols of the prosperous era of the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, when the Ryukyu Islands progressed from isolated domains to a united kingdom that enjoyed independence and extensive overseas trade. In addition to Shuri Castle, prominent surviving castle ruins in Okinawa include Nakijin Gusuku, Zakimi Gusuku, Katsuren Gusuku, and Nakagusuku, all of which are part of a collective UNESCO World Heritage site. Although Shuri Castle is well documented, only a few historical records of most of the other *gusuku* have survived, and many questions about their construction and use

remain unanswered. What is clear, however, is that *gusuku* were both defensive and spiritual in nature, with military, residential, and ceremonial facilities. All have walls of limestone, and though little to nothing remains of their original wooden structures, archeological and historical research have given us a good idea of the size and layout of the most important buildings and the lifestyles of their inhabitants.

Both Japanese and Ryukyuan castles are arranged as a sequence of protected enclosures, or wards, with the most secure one at the highest elevation. But Ryukyuan castle walls are usually undulating and organic in form, while Japanese castles are more strictly rectilinear, with sharp corners. Moreover, Ryukyuan castles did not have the large, multistory defensive wooden towers of mainland Japanese castles.

The Castle Structure

Shuri Castle was constructed on a prominent hill that rises about 130 meters above sea level at its highest point. The panoramic view of the surrounding terrain and the presence of freshwater sources made this an excellent site for a castle. The structure initially consisted of one main enclosed ward; a second outer defensive perimeter was added in about the mid-sixteenth century. The organically curved defensive walls are made of closely fitted Ryukyuan limestone about 3 meters thick and from 6 to 15 meters high. The walls of the broad, terraced inner ward sheltered the most important ceremonial, residential, and administrative buildings of the kingdom, including a main hall called the Seiden. These structures were grouped around a series of courtyards aligned along an east-west axis.

At its peak, Shuri Castle had thirteen gates, including four with large stone arches cut into the defensive walls in a distinctively Chinese manner. Others had a Chinese-style roof that covered a notably Japanese design—a wooden gatehouse that spanned a full break in the walls. Gatehouses and the most important buildings were lacquered red. Shuri Castle was notable for a large ceremonial and sacred wooded area called the Kyo no Uchi, which had several stone-walled sites for worship that were considered important to the nation's welfare. Approximately 10 such sites were located within the castle walls.

A Major Cultural Center

Under the Second Sho Dynasty, the district around Shuri Castle developed into a flourishing, internationally oriented cultural, political, and financial center, as well as a community of

cultured government officials and the aristocracy. The area surrounding the castle was skillfully landscaped with prominent water features and bridges. Important temples and other religious sites were built nearby, as were princely palaces and grand aristocratic residences. Important institutions devoted to overseas trade, education, arts and craft production were established close to the castle.

The Kingdom of Ryukyu had close relations with China and Japan, and envoys from those nations made important diplomatic visits to Shuri. This made it a primary center of cultural influences from abroad, and the unique synthesis that evolved is reflected in the design and technical aspects of Shuri Castle. Overall, the ceremonial spaces of the castle were designed to emulate the Forbidden City of Beijing, with elements and motifs borrowed from Chinese palace architecture. Some important buildings were constructed according to Japanese design principles, while other aspects can be traced to Korean precedents. But the imposing fortress walls and functional layout of the castle wards are uniquely Ryukyuan.

A Cycle of Fires and Rebuilding

Shuri Castle was destroyed five times and has been repeatedly reconstructed. It burned down in 1453, 1660, and 1709, and suffered a devastating naval bombardment during the Battle of Okinawa in May 1945. Meticulous restoration of several main buildings, the stone walls and gates was completed in 1992, but a large fire in October 2019 destroyed the Seiden and several other structures. Efforts to reconstruct those buildings are currently underway.