

Matsue Castle

Matsue Castle is a solemn and imposing hilltop fortress that dominates the city center of Matsue. Originally completed in 1611, during the early Edo period (1603–1867), it is often called “Plover Castle” (Chidori-jo) because its large gables suggest birds in flight. It is one of only 12 Japanese castles that has survived with its basic wooden structure intact. Like most Japanese castles, it was gradually expanded and modified over the years in response to changing defensive and political needs, but its central tower keep (*tenshu*) has remained essentially the same since the 1740s.

Generations of Family Rule

Construction began under Horio Yoshiharu (1542–1611), the local lord and founder of Matsue. The castle was passed down to Kyogoku Tadataka (1593–1637), and when he died without an heir, it was inherited by Matsudaira Naomasa (1601–1666), grandson of the first Tokugawa shogun, Ieyasu (1543–1616). Naomasa became the first daimyo of the Matsue domain, ushering in a long period of cultural and economic prosperity in Matsue, and the Matsudaira family remained in possession of Matsue Castle for 10 generations over 234 years, until the domain system was abolished in 1871 following the Meiji Restoration. Most Japanese castles were destroyed following an order from the new government in 1873, but thanks to fundraising and vocal support from the public and local leaders, the central tower keep of Matsue Castle was preserved. The castle underwent a thorough restoration in the 1950s, and was declared a National Treasure in 2015.

An Ideal Defensive Site

The location of Matsue Castle offered protection against attack—from land or from Lake Shinji—and access to many nearby waterways for transport. A system of moats was dug, most of which still exists, and the excavated earth was used to fill in the marshy ground on the west side of the castle. The Ohashi River functioned as an additional natural defense. Japanese castles are typically divided into successive defensive wards, and at Matsue there are three, with the tower keep (*honmaru*) occupying the highest and most secure location. The second ward (*ninomaru*) was divided into an upper section where the lord’s main residence and buildings for official business were located, and a lower one, which housed barracks. The lowermost ward (*sannomaru*) also contained official residences. All of these structures were dismantled during the Meiji era (1868–1912). A shrine was erected in the upper level of the second

ward in 1899, and a large Western-style guesthouse was added in 1903. Shimane Prefectural Government offices currently stand on the site of the third ward.

Although the castle's massive stone walls (*ishigaki*) remain almost fully intact, numerous gates and other structures were removed in the 1870s. Several gates were reconstructed in 1960 and 1994, and three white-plastered fireproof lookouts called *yagura* were reconstructed atop the stone walls in 2001.

Innovative Design Features

The well-preserved tower keep is the castle's primary attraction. Seen from the exterior, the tower appears to have four stories atop its high sloping stone base, diminishing in size as they rise. The tower is sheathed in black-painted wooden boards, with white fireproof plaster accents. Successive roofs and gables articulate the exterior and shelter the interior spaces. The roof of the uppermost story is crowned by prominent ridge decorations in the form of mythical sea creatures called *shachi-hoko*, which are made of copper-covered wood. The main entrance is sheltered within a secure roofed structure that looks like a miniature castle.

Despite the exterior appearance, the tower has five floors, plus a basement level. A number of the unusual features of the tower are innovations developed in response to issues faced by the builders. At the time Matsue Castle was built, in the first decades of the seventeenth century, the building of castles all over Japan had contributed to widespread deforestation. Because it was difficult to obtain the large timbers preferred for the structural pillars used in this type of construction, the castle's designers utilized clusters of smaller timbers bound together by iron clamps and straps. The 130 pillars of this type are clearly visible.

Additional structural stability was achieved by placing the pillars in sets that extended through two floors, rather than supporting just one. These sets of "through pillars" were staggered vertically to form a strong interlocked structure. In other instances, short pillars were ingeniously supported by horizontal beams that distributed the structural load and made longer pillars unnecessary. Other innovations included the use of removable interior stairways made of lightweight paulownia wood (*kiri*) that could be easily pulled up to prevent attackers from ascending to the upper floors. The basement level was used for storage, and a well was dug to provide a reliable water supply if the castle came under siege. This is the only known example of a well located inside a

Japanese castle tower.

Panorama of the Lords' Domain

Visitors to Matsue Castle today will find informative multilingual historical displays as well as explanations of the castle's design features on each floor. The uppermost story, which served as a lookout, has wide windows on all sides with panoramic vistas of Lake Shinji, the nearby mountains, and the city below—the same perspective shared over the centuries by the lords of the Matsudaira domain.