

The Samurai Spirit of the Aizu Domain

The life of a samurai was based on a moral code of conduct known as Bushido (the way of the warrior). Great importance was placed on values such as loyalty, courage, courtesy, mercy, frugality, and honor. Samurai were not a monolithic group and research suggests their lifestyle varied depending on the era and the region in which they lived. However, experts agree the Aizu samurai upheld the way of the warrior to the highest degree. Historical sites that bear witness to the samurai spirit can still be found in Aizu-Wakamatsu, and residents are very proud of their cultural heritage.

A righteous way of life

The Aizu samurai lived by the motto “Die in righteousness; do not live in unrighteousness.” This is reflected in two sets of rules for the Aizu domain’s forces, written in the late eighteenth century. One set was for the leaders and one set for the troops. The rules called for respecting the human rights of civilians, including not harming women, children, and the elderly, and refraining from destroying enemy homes, rice fields, and animals.

The Aizu samurai were also well-educated and knowledgeable about cultural activities such as the tea gatherings, poetry writing, and calligraphy, as well as martial arts, horse riding, and swordsmanship. Visitors can learn more about the samurai way of life at some of the well-preserved historical sites in Aizu-Wakamatsu.

Nisshinkan

This school for training sons of samurai aged 10–17 was established in Aizu in 1803. Students received an all-round education to prepare them mentally, physically, and spiritually for a life of service to their daimyo lord. Nisshinkan, located near Tsuruga Castle, was considered the leading educational institution of its type and even welcomed visits from families of other domains eager to learn from the Aizu samurai. Before entering the school, boys aged 6–9 learned the “Rules for Samurai Children,” which were based on respecting others and taking responsibility for one’s actions. The rules are still taught to schoolchildren in Aizu-Wakamatsu as core educational values. Nisshinkan was destroyed during the Boshin War (1868–1869) but, in 1987, it was faithfully recreated on a new site in a suburb of the city.

The Byakkotai (White Tiger Brigade)

This brigade of around 300 members fought in the Boshin War. It was primarily made up of

boys aged 15–17 who had been students at Nisshinkan before the war interrupted their education. During one battle, 20 members of one unit found themselves near Mt. Iimori, cut off from the rest of their troops. After climbing the mountain, they saw smoke rising from the town below. Although this smoke was coming from houses nearby, the boys thought it meant Tsuruga Castle had fallen to the imperial forces. They ultimately chose to take their own lives rather than surrender to the enemy. One boy survived after being rescued by a passing woman. The graves of these teenage fighters are situated on Mt. Iimori.

Aizu Bukeyashiki (Samurai Museum)

The Aizu Bukeyashiki (Samurai Museum) features a carefully reconstructed samurai residence (*bukeyashiki*) based on the home of Saigo Tanomo (1830–1903), chief advisor to the Aizu family and a fighter in the Boshin War. During the war, his wife Chieko (1835–1868) stayed in the family home along with her five young daughters and other female family members. As news of the impending defeat reached them, the women ended their lives rather than face capture by the enemy. Chieko killed her three younger girls with a sword before taking her own life. Her teenage daughters, two younger sisters, and mother-in-law also committed suicide.

Nijima Yae

Nijima Yae (1845–1932) is one of Aizu's most famous women. She was taught to use a gun by her father and fought in the Battle of Aizu (October–November, 1868). When the Aizu forces surrendered to the imperial troops after the month-long siege, Yae is said to have written a poem to express her love for Tsuruga Castle:

Tomorrow night someone from I know not where will gaze upon it here — my castle
drenched in moonlight

Yae survived the war and became an advocate for higher education for women. A statue of her and exhibits about her achievements are on display at Tsuruga Castle.