

Kuroshima Preservation District

The village of Kuroshima hugs a hillside facing the Sea of Japan, its houses characterized by black glazed roof tiles and gray clapboard exteriors. Kuroshima was home to shipowners and sailors, and some houses reflect the wealth and status that shipowners attained in the Edo period (1603–1867). The village grew from about 150 households in the mid-Edo period to more than 500 by the late nineteenth century. Merchant ships plied the coastal waters from Osaka to Hokkaido, and shipowners made and lost fortunes along the way.

The risks and riches of the sea

Wooden ships called *kitamaebune* (northern-bound ships) operated along the Sea of Japan coast in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, since transporting goods by sea was faster and easier than by land. Starting from Osaka in spring, crews would load their ships with cotton, sake, paper, tobacco, and other goods, and buy and sell at ports along the way at a considerable markup. Once they reached Hokkaido, they would load up with seafood and kelp to sell on the way back to Osaka. The round trip took close to a year for the early *kitamaebune*, but the potential profits were considerable. In the Edo period, a shipowner could make the equivalent of ¥100 million in today's money for each round trip.

By the 1870s, the ships were larger and faster. They could transport hundreds of tons of goods and make three or four round trips per year. The shipowners were among the wealthiest merchants in Japan and could build large houses, furnished with the finest materials from around the country. However, weather conditions along the Sea of Japan were volatile and there was an ever-present risk of shipwreck. To pray for safe voyages, shipowners offered votives and pictures of their ships at shrines and temples and installed large, ornate altars in their homes.

Coastal living

The houses of Kuroshima are clad in clapboard to protect them from the strong, salty winds off the Sea of Japan. The glossy black roof tiles, seen on many houses along the Noto Peninsula, are thickly glazed and fired at a high temperature to resist moisture, heat and cold, and also to protect against fire. Many shipowners' houses back onto the seafront to allow the easy transfer of goods between their warehouses—situated at the back of the houses—and their boats.

The Former Kadomi Residence

The Kadomi family was among the wealthiest shipowners in Kuroshima. They were active in business from 1843 to 1897 and owned seven ships. Their residence has been restored and is open to the public. The home has rooms at the front for business, and for the family at the back, arranged around a *tsuboniwa* inner garden. An altar room with large Buddhist and Shinto altars indicates the importance of faith to the shipowners. A small room at the back of the house has windows that face the sea. It is believed that the master of the house often sat here, where he could see his ships in the bay.

Four plaster-walled storehouses (*kura*) behind the house protected the family's most precious possessions and commodities from fire and theft. The largest storehouse held furniture, artwork, and kimono. The other three were for salt and salt-preserved products, adzuki beans, and rice, for trade. The storehouses now hold displays of shipping-related items, including several scale models of *kitamaebune*. Such models were given to a shipowner by the shipwright when a new vessel was completed.

Visitors can learn more about the history of the town and the life of Kuroshima's sailors and shipping families at the Kuroshima Tenryo Kitamaebune Museum, a few minutes on foot from the Former Kadomi Residence.

Both facilities are open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (Closed on Mondays.)