

## **Samurai Houses**

Well over a thousand samurai lived in the castle town of Murakami in the late seventeenth century. Although their population later decreased, districts reserved for samurai residences made up a significant portion of the town throughout the Edo period (1603–1867), and a handful of such properties still remain in Murakami today.

In modern terms, samurai homes were a form of company housing. They were built by the domain for its employees, many of whom were warriors only in name. During the relatively peaceful Edo period, mid-ranking samurai were often tasked with administrative work such as record-keeping and the supervision of local industries, which many combined with subsistence farming or fishing. Most samurai of this status led comfortable lives, especially in comparison to ordinary townspeople, but were hardly wealthy.

Five houses built for mid-ranking samurai have been preserved in Murakami. The oldest and most notable is the **Wakabayashi House**, which

was constructed in the late eighteenth century. It is located some distance from the castle site, on the outer rim of what in Edo-period Murakami was the samurai district, and was inhabited by a family whose head commanded a troop of foot soldiers.

The thatched-roof house is in the *magariya* (“bent house”) style, built in an L-shape with clearly demarcated living and reception areas. Entrance to the house is through the earthen-floored area (*doma*) by the living room, which centers on an *irori* hearth. A fire was kept going in the hearth at all times to keep the house warm and dry. Next to the *irori* is a ladder leading to the attic, which was mainly used for storage. Beyond the living space are the family’s sleeping rooms and a room used to receive guests of lower rank than the head of the household.

The other side of the house was for the exclusive use of important guests, mainly higher-ranking officials. Such visitors would enter via the veranda, which leads to a pair of rooms with tatami-mat floors. The inner chamber, where the host would entertain guests, has an alcove (*tokonoma*) to display decorative objects, sliding paper panels (*fusuma*) to let in light, and a view of the adjacent garden.

Such reception rooms indicate the importance of hierarchy and formalities in samurai society and are also found in the other four houses. Those buildings are all rectangular and are smaller than the Wakabayashi House, as they were provided to somewhat lower-ranking samurai.

Three of the houses are in Maizuru Park. The **Fujii House** dates to 1850 and was the home of a mid-level samurai whose official duties included overseeing construction work in the castle town. Nearby, the smaller **Takaoka** and **Iwama Houses** exemplify more modest samurai dwellings, being nearly devoid of ornamental details. Just south of the park is the **Narita House**, with architectural characteristics that suggest it may be the most recent of the five houses.

The Wakabayashi House is a nationally designated Important Cultural Property, while the other four structures have been registered as cultural properties by the city of Murakami.