

Gamagori Classic Hotel

The castle-like Gamagori Classic Hotel makes a dramatic sight on a hill overlooking the island of Takeshima and Mikawa Bay. The facility was established in 1934 and has a storied history. It opened as one of the country's first government-designated hotels for international tourists and soon counted an American all-star baseball team featuring Babe Ruth among its guests. The building's distinctive architecture and furnishings have been maintained largely as they were when the hotel opened, save for the addition of modern conveniences, and provide a glimpse of life and tastes in that era. The hotel is a registered Tangible Cultural Property, as are the three annex buildings on the landscaped grounds.

A passion project

What is now the Gamagori Classic Hotel was established by Taki Nobushiro (1868–1938), a Nagoya-based businessman who made his fortune in the textile trade. The Taki family had a holiday home in

Gamagori, and Nobushiro loved the landscape of Mikawa Bay. He resolved to turn Gamagori into a tourist destination, and in 1912, he opened an inn called Tokiwakan on the coast opposite Takeshima.

Taki invited famous literary figures, including Kawabata Yasunari (1899–1972), Tanizaki Junichiro (1886–1965), and Shiga Naoya (1883–1971) to stay at the Tokiwakan and write about Gamagori. Mentions in these authors' works helped spread the word about the place, and this initial success strengthened Taki's commitment to developing the Takeshima area. In the early 1930s, he financed the construction of a permanent bridge to Takeshima and built a Western-style hotel on the hill above the Tokiwakan.

Taki's decision was supported by the national government, which sought to attract international visitors to Japan as a means of correcting the country's negative trade balance. Public financing was available for constructing Western-style hotels to accommodate foreign tourists, and Taki successfully lobbied for a portion of these funds. When his hotel opened in 1934 as the Gamagori Hotel, it was immediately designated an "international tourist hotel," which was a prerequisite for hosting guests

from overseas.

Guests of honor

Only months after its opening, the Gamagori Hotel accommodated perhaps the most renowned group of international visitors in its history. In November 1934, the American Major League All-Stars baseball team used the hotel as its base for exhibition games in nearby Nagoya and Shizuoka. The team was led by the legendary Babe Ruth (1895–1948) and also included greats such as Lou Gehrig (1903–1941) and Jimmie Foxx (1907–1967). The Americans played 18 games, mainly against Japanese all-star teams, during a month-long tour of the country that attracted widespread attention and fostered goodwill between the United States and Japan at a time when political relations were strained.

Baseball diplomacy, however, could not stop the two countries from going to war, and the Japanese army requisitioned the Gamagori Hotel for use as a hospital during World War II. After the war was over, the U.S. military followed suit, turning the hotel and its surroundings into a

recreational facility known as the Takeshima Rest Center. Until 1952, discharged military personnel rested and recuperated there before their journey back across the Pacific.

The hotel was renovated and reopened after the end of the U.S. Occupation, and in 1957, it hosted Emperor Showa (1901–1989) and Empress Kojun (1903–2000). Another renovation was completed in 2012, at which time it was renamed Gamagori Classic Hotel.

Views from the past

The main building was designed to appeal to visitors from abroad and incorporates elements of traditional Japanese temple and castle architecture, such as decorative gables, sweeping eaves, and tower-like extensions. The rooms and restaurants look out over the grounds toward Takeshima and Mikawa Bay and retain many of their original design features. These include Art Deco furnishings such as chandeliers and a

flower-themed elevator dial in the lobby, marble windowsills, and bronze detailing. In particular, the Royal Suite room and the hotel's main dining

room evoke the atmosphere of the 1930s.

The main building is a registered Tangible Cultural Property, as are the three annex buildings. Two of these, The Cove and Oshukutei, were built in 1916 as part of the Tokiwakan inn, which was demolished in 1982. The third is the Rokkakudo, a six-sided structure from 1936 that was originally a waiting room for the Oshukutei teahouse.

The Gamagori Classic Hotel is one of the nine members of the Japan Classic Hotels Association. Member hotels were established prior to World War II and have been designated for preservation due to their cultural and/or architectural significance.