

History of Kobe Kitano Ijinkan-gai

Japan maintained a policy of national seclusion during the Edo period (1603–1867), with strict prohibitions on trade, travel, and contact with most foreign countries. This policy remained in effect for over 200 years, ending in 1858 with the signing of the Ansei Treaties between Japan and five Western powers. In 1868, Kobe became one of several ports to be opened to foreign trade.

Plans at the time called for the establishment on the Kobe coast of a foreign settlement where non-Japanese were expected to live and work. Due to the turmoil at the end of the Edo period, however, the settlement was not completed by the agreed deadline. The government then decided to allow foreigners to live alongside Japanese citizens in the surrounding neighborhoods between the Ikuta and Uji rivers. Many foreigners were drawn to the Yamate area, where Kobe's Kitano-cho/Yamamoto-dori district was eventually located. It was an appealing rural hillside to the

north of the foreign settlement, with a gentle slope that provided a view of the port and the sea. Beginning in the 1880s, the district developed into a unique foreign residential area that became known as Kitano Ijinkan-gai. *Ijin* is a word for “foreigner,” *kan* means “house,” and *gai* means “district.”

By the mid-twentieth century, Kitano Ijinkan-gai had grown to contain more than 200 Western-style and Japanese-style buildings. The district became known as a place where Japanese and foreigners could live together harmoniously. The foreign influence also brought technological advances and lifestyle changes: Kobe’s Ijinkan-gai was the first place in Japan to be influenced by meat-based cuisine, Western-style clothing, and golf.

The homes of foreigners were called *ijinkan* (“foreigner houses”). Thanks to the presence of skilled non-Japanese architects such as the German Georg de Lalande and the Englishman A. N. Hansell, the designs of many Western-style houses and other buildings in Kobe were of a very high quality. At the same time, there was great hybridization as Japanese design

and construction techniques were combined with Western ones. The carpenters, plasterers, stonemasons, and roofers were usually Japanese, but they developed a progressive “internationalized” skill set. A “Kobe Ijinkan Style” soon emerged, with common features such as verandas, bay windows, brick chimneys, and painted clapboard or plaster exterior walls. The buildings were often connected to a Japanese-style wing that was more comfortable for Japanese employees.

Many of these Western-style buildings have disappeared due to damage caused by World War II, postwar development, and the ravages of time. But thanks to successful preservation efforts that began around 1960, approximately 30 such buildings constructed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remain standing today. This is in marked contrast to other former treaty ports in Japan such as Yokohama or Nagasaki, where little remains of formerly vibrant foreign settlements. For these and other reasons, the numerous Western-style houses of Kitano Ijinkan-gai are precious physical documents of an important era in Japanese and international history and culture.