

The Sengoku Train

The Sengoku Train: A Tribute to Ibara History

A trip into the samurai past of Ibara typically begins with a ride on the Ibara Railway. It operates only one line, the Ibara Line, which stretches from Kannabe in Hiroshima Prefecture to Sōja in Okayama Prefecture. Although paper tickets are available at staffed stations, passengers usually must pay in cash as they exit the “one-man car” trains. Several of these one- and two-car trains have unusual decorations and designs that make this line a popular one for train enthusiasts. One of the more striking designs is the history-themed Sengoku Train.

The Sengoku Train is a single-car train decked out in a Sengoku period (1467–1568) theme. Decorations include silhouettes of bows and arrows and the family crests of warriors who governed or invaded this area during a time of fierce rivalries among local warlords. There are also hanging straps adorned with models of samurai helmets emblazoned with the crests

of cities and towns along the railway. Riding this route is like having a guided tour, because there are signs in both Japanese and English with historical facts about the area's important figures, famous battlegrounds, and mountain castles.

The Sengoku Train runs several times a day on an irregular schedule, which can be checked on the Ibara Railway website (Japanese only).

Power in the Sengoku Period

The Sengoku (Warring States) period earned its name from the series of bloody upheavals that resulted when the central government was no longer able to control local warlords, whose familial disputes and attempts to expand their holdings quickly turned violent. It was also a period of popular uprisings, and of both technological development and high-culture accomplishments.

In this period, both military power and regional trade were highly dependent on roads. Primary among these were the *shichidō*, or seven highways, that connected the many provinces of Japan. As one of the *shichidō*, the Old San'yō Road (a precursor to and slightly different route from the modern San'yō Expressway) along the Seto Inland Sea area was a major route connecting western Honshu with the capital city of Kyoto. A portion of this road ran through Ibara along the Oda River. The looming mountains made this an advantageous place for warlords to exert influence over use of the road and river. The ability to project power here led to regular conflict, and many different armies invaded this territory even before the Sengoku period.

The desire to monitor and control traffic along the road led to building strategic fortifications called *yamajiro*, or mountain castles. Rather than towering, thick-walled castles with ornate structures, these *yamajiro* were simple wooden watchtowers and barracks that held supplies and armaments. The routes to these structures were often blocked with earthen mounds and moats built amongst steep terrain. Because the surrounding

mountain terrain provided the primary defense, in a sense it was the mountains themselves that were the “castles.” Warlords used these bases to project power over the road and river and to set up defenses when under siege.

Takakoshi Castle was one of the more prominent *yamajiro* in Ibara. It once stood atop the mountain of the same name to the north of the Old San'yō Road, and although the wooden structures are gone, a commemorative park with a view of the city remains in its place.

Hōjō Sōun: The First Sengoku Daimyo

Takakoshi Castle is known for its links to Ise Shinkurō Moritoki (1432–1519), who was posthumously known as Hōjō Sōun. He was born into the Bitchū Ise family, and although his birthplace is unknown, the fact that his family controlled Takakoshi Castle makes Ibara a possible location. Sōun later became a pivotal daimyo lord of the Sengoku period when he conquered Izu Province. His descendants continued his conquest by taking

control of many parts of the Kantō region, but the family was eventually defeated in 1590 during Toyotomi Hideyoshi's (1537–1598) campaign to unite the country under his control.

Sōun's conquest of Izu is sometimes considered the true beginning of the Sengoku period, as his aggressive acquisition of new domains inspired the ambitions of other daimyo of his time. Although he did not control territory in Ibara later in his life, Sōun's outsized mark on history makes him a favorite local figure. The Sōun no Sato Ebara Station is named after him, and he has a central position in the Sengoku Train livery: it is Sōun's face that is depicted in the center of the badge at the front of the car.