

FACT SHEET

Like European castles, Japanese castles were built as fortresses made of wood and stone and were built to guard ports, roads, river crossings and were built near trade routes. They also served as centers for the government and residences for the ruling authority. They were artistically built, taking advantage of the geographic features of the surroundings, making them grand for all to see.

Japanese castles rose to popularity during Japan's feudal era, about the 16th century as feudal lords fought for control over territory. During the 15th century, the emperor began to lose power, and Japan became a country of warring independent states, each ruling lord trying to enlarge his boundaries. Hundreds of these castles were built as military headquarters, and towns sprung up around them. By the late 1800s, most of these castles were destroyed and others during World War II. Only about a dozen still exist today, and most of them serve as museums.

Many castles were built atop mountains and hills. The more sturdy ones were built with stone foundations. The upper portions were made of wood, including the roof shingles, which made them susceptible to fire and deterioration. Castles consisted of three rings of defense. The main circle (castle tower or keep) was in the center and the best defended portion. It consisted of up to five stories and was the most prominent feature of the castle, seen from many miles away. The second circle was usually where the ruling family lived. Guard towers (turrets) were spaced around the castle walls to monitor traffic and were used for storage. Moats were dug around the castle as a defensive measure and two large gates that were heavily defended permitted people crossing over the bridge to enter.

Matsumoto Castle was built in 1504 as a fort and was originally called Fukushima Castle. When the feudal lord Toyotomi Hideyoshi came to power, he placed Ishikawa Norimasa in charge of the city. Ishikawa fortified the castle and completed the work in 1594. Following the feudal era, in 1872, the castle was to be dismantled. However, the Ishikawa family and the townspeople asked to preserve the castle. Today Matsumoto Castle is listed as a National Treasure of Japan.

Matsumoto Castle is a flat-land castle, not built on a hill. The tower (donjon) has six floors; the third floor has no windows and was designed as a secret floor. The sixth floor was used as a watchtower and includes a shrine in the ceiling to one of the gods. Some of the guard towers were rebuilt as late as 1990. One tower was known as the drum gate used to signal the time and call people for assemblies and emergencies. Another of the guard towers was designed specifically for viewing the moon.