



# Japanese Castles

It was chilly and overcast on a March afternoon in 2006, and I could have used some sunshine for the photographic endeavor I had in mind. But I'm proud, nevertheless, of the image I captured above. This is Japan's "White Heron" castle in Himeji west of Osaka, 400 years old in its current configuration, a cultural treasure that never suffered from warfare or fire as so many Japanese castles have. Such snapshots are not as easy to compose as they might seem. Typically, you find yourself looking up at a towering structure and photographing unsatisfactory portions of it. I had to find a hilltop some distance away. That did the trick. If only the sun had cooperated, to highlight the brightness of a heron in flight, the fanciful image that Japanese apply to this *grandame* of a castle. Inside, Yoshi and I donned slippers and climbed steep wooden stairways to the top. Along the way, we easily visualized the *samurai* who once trod the polished floors. A few days earlier we had toured Osaka Castle, the main tower of which is shown at right. This was a different story. Osaka Castle, more than 400 years old, has a significant military history, a sad tale of destruction and reconstruction several times over. In 1615, at the end of what was called the Summer Battle of Osaka,

the castle was destroyed by the first Tokugawa *shogun*, who found it expedient to kill a teenager who might challenge him. In a prolonged siege, the castle went up in flames and the young challenger died. The tower was rebuilt, even more ornately, but burned again within decades. Nothing was done for a couple of centuries. Then, in the first half of the 20th century, it was





rebuilt again in respect for its historical importance. Today it looks just like a castle on the outside, but inside it is a high-tech, fluorescent-lit, air-conditioned museum for modern-day tourists. It even has elevators to take everybody up and down. Yes, it is educational and convenient, but I didn't like it. I like my castles raw, not overcooked. But I had a marvelous guide at Osaka Castle, an old friend, Norio Matsumura, the Osaka-based president of a large chain of Nissan Motors dealerships. The next day his wife Michiko would arrive from distant Tokyo to have dinner with Yoshi and me. Above, Norio and I pose against ancient stone fortifications that rise out of a moat. Stones don't burn. The castle's tower pokes up in the distance above our heads. Notice that I'm clutching my journal, into which I jot things on such trips. I've seen lots of Japanese castles. Many were needed in the civil wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most are just ruins, but quite a few are still whole, even today, hundreds of years after they were built. In 1999, when I returned to Japan for the first time in 34 years, as an old man now, I photographed Matsumoto's castle in Nagano Prefecture, which lies next-door to Yoshi's Gunma homelands. I was using film cameras then, rather than digital ones. The image at right was scanned from a glossy photograph. In contrast to the "White Heron" in Himeji, it's called the "Black Crow." I don't know

why these castles have bird nicknames. Of course we climbed to the top of this one, too, when I was seven years younger and in better shape. Why not take the elevator? The "Black Crow," thank goodness, doesn't have one. While the "White Heron" carries a light architectural grace, the 16<sup>th</sup>-century "Black Crow" is a bull-necked bastion, and it also was never involved in military action, although there were wars with neighbors back then. A stone hitching post still stands at a busy intersection a couple of blocks away. You see, Nagano Prefecture is land-locked, far from the sea, and the hitching post was a humane white-flag area for delivery of salt by the enemy.



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