

Historical Walk in Akita City

A Self-guided Tour around Senshu Park
and Stories of a Samurai family



Institute for Asian Studies and Regional Collaboration
Akita International University

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A Self-guided Tour around Senshu Park and Stories of a Samurai family

Second Edition

Edited by Yo Negishi

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Guide Map by Yo Negishi

Text by Yo Negishi and Tetsuya Toyoda

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This booklet demonstrates a self-guided historical tour to the Edo-era (17th–19th century), when the Samurai dominated Akita city with its historic buildings and sites such as Kubota Castle and Satake Historical Museum. The site of Kubota Castle is now called Senshu Park, and it has been open to the public since 1890. Please enjoy a historical walk at this location very close to Akita station.





Fig. 1 Walk into the Pre-modern History of Akita City (nearby Matsushita)

History of Senshu Park

Senshu Park was established on the site of the former Kubota Castle. The castle was built in 1603 by Satake Yoshinobu, the first lord of the Akita Domain who had been relegated from Hitachi, and it has been continuously used for 267 years until 1869.

Characteristically, Kubota castle did not have a tower and stone walls. After the Edo ends, the castle area was developed as a modern park. In 1984, a descendent of the Satake family, donated the castle to Akita City, and it became a public park. Today visitors can enjoy historical walk from Samurai to Geisha.

History of the Satake Family in Akita

In the Edo era, the lordship of the Akita domain was assumed by the Satake family who were descended from a legendary Samurai clan, the Genji family (the offspring of Emperor Seiwa); the lord of Akita was particularly distinguished among more than 300 lords.

The Satake family was established in the Satake district of Hitachi Province. This family further prospered throughout the Middle Ages and became one of the major powers (Daimyo) by the 16th century. When Satake Yoshishige (1547–1612) became the lord in 1562, he was one of the major warlords in eastern Japan. His son, Yoshinobu, who succeeded to the lordship in 1570, gained the support of Toyotomi Hideyoshi and was given the territory with an annual revenue of 545,000 koku (stipend).

However, the death of Hideyoshi in 1598 and the subsequent seizure of power by Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of Tokugawa Shogunate, resulted in the demotion of the Satake family to Akita in 1602 with the forced deduction of land and annual revenue. Subsequently, the Satake family ruled the Akita domain until the nineteenth century.



Fig. 2 Portrait of Satake Yoshishige Wearing a Full Set of Samurai Armor
(Hachiman Akita Shrine)



Fig. 3 Black-Lacquered Armor Set (Satake Historical Museum)

Black-Lacquered Armor Set with Deep-Blue Threads

This Samurai armor set was probably used by Satake Yoshishige (1547–1612), the 20th-generation head of the Satake family, who had a large territory in Hitachi province. Yoshishige was well known as one of the bravest Samurai in eastern Japan in the age of provincial wars. It is a representative armor set of the Momoyama era (1568–1600), with its solid construction, body parts in the domaru style, and innovative designs such as the extraordinary finesse of the decorations on the tassets and sleeves.

This armor has a unique decoration on the helmet. The front part represents a hairy caterpillar and the lateral parts black bird feathers. The representation of a hairy caterpillar has three meanings:

- a) A hairy caterpillar eats “leaves,” which are homonymous with “blades (*ha*)” in Japanese.
- b) A hairy caterpillar never moves backwards; similarly, a Satake samurai never retreats.
- c) Hairy caterpillar is pronounced “*kemshi*,” which sounds like “*Gem(n)ji*,” the family from which the Satake clan descended.



Fig. 4 Olive-colored Armor Set (Satake Historical Museum)

Satake Yoshinobu (1570– 1633), first lord of the Akita Domain

Under the order of the government in 1602, Yoshinobu, the son of Satake Yoshishige, moved to Akita from Hitachi to take over the older Castle. In the years that followed, he turned himself into one of the greatest administrators until the end of the Edo period and launched a new era in the history of Akita by building a new castle in Kubota, starting inspections of the territory, making new rules for taxation, and developing the mining industry in the domain.

Olive-colored Armor Set with Black Threads

This Samurai armor set was probably used by Satake Yoshinobu, the first Satake lord to rule the Akita domain. A black hairy decoration made of black Asiatic bear hair represents caterpillar, as is used in an armor set of Satake Yoshishige. There is a bullet mark on the surface of armor.



Fig. 5 Seiki, the Main Flag (Satake Historical Museum)

Seiki (The Main Flag) Donated by Tomonori Takeshima

This is the most representative flags used by the Satake family. This flag was made following all the rules and rituals for samurai flags. The gold foil on the emblem—five-spoked fans—of the family remains vivid. The old record of The Honorable Armors refers to this as one of the “three deep-blue flags with nine gold fans and gold leather rings, for two of which gold fans are from gold coins of the Keicho period (1596–1615).” This record thus indicates the high purity of the gold used. The rings to connect the flag to the pole are made of gold-foiled leather on which secret signs, such as an Abe-no-Seimei star sign for protection and four vertical lines with five horizontal lines to represent nine Chinese characters from warriors' magical spells, are sewn with white thread.

Note: Abe-no-Seimei was the most famous “Onmyoji”, a diviner and astrologer worked for the emperor, in the 10th century AD.



Fig. 6 Illustrated Map of Kubota Castle Town (Satake Historical Museum)

Notes: North at Left; Green as Samurai District and Pink as District for Merchants and Artisans

Construction and Development of the Castle Town of Kubota, Akita Domain

In 1603, a new castle was constructed on Shimmei hill in Kubota, and as soon as it was completed Lord Satake started the construction of a castle town around it. The construction of the castle town was an important project that took nearly thirty years to complete. It now makes up the core part of downtown Akita.

As drawn in the illustrated map, the flow of the Asahi River was moved to the western side of the town to develop a samurai district (inner town, painted in green) on the eastern shore of the river and a district for merchants and artisans (outer town, painted in pink) on the western shore. Taihei River served as a defense on the southern front and the Buddhism temples constructed on the outermost side of town as defense, religious barrier in other words, on the western side. The structure divided by hierarchy is common in castle towns of premodern Japan.



Fig. 8 Katana owned by Umedu Masakage (Satake Historical Museum)

Katana (Japanese Samurai Sword) owned by Umedu Masakage

This is a Katana (Japanese Sword) actually used in Akita Domain of the Edo period to assist in the ritual act of Hara-kiri (a form of ritual suicide originally practiced by Samurai families). Katana is characterized by its distinctive appearance: a curved, slender, single-edged blade with a circular or squared guard (tsuba) and decorated long grip (tsuka).



Fig. 9 Representation of Osumi-yagura (Senshu Park)

Osumi-Yagura (" Tower in the Corner")

→ ④ in the MAP

Osumi-Yagura ("tower in the corner") was one of the original eight watchtowers in the Kubota castle and was located on the highest ground, 45 meters above sea level, at the northwestern corner of the main enclosure. It also functioned as a storage space for weapons in the Edo period.

In celebration of the centenary of the city of Akita and with hope for the continued development of the city into the next century, it was reconstructed as a historic symbol of Senshu Park. The first two floors are built based on the archival records and the results of archaeological excavation. The third floor was added as an observation floor, which offers views of the entire city.



Fig. 10 Representation of Main Gate (Senshu Park)

The Main Gate of Kubota Castle → ③ in the MAP

The main gate, called “Ichinomon,” was an important strategic location for the protection of the castle. The headquarters for the guards and a guardhouse were situated at the gate on the left side, providing the first line of defense against attacks on the castle.

The main gate was first remodeled in 1622, and required additional repairs several times in later years, probably after incurring fire damage. The present wooden structure with a tiled roof was rebuilt based on historical records and archeological finds.



Fig. 11 Satake Historical Museum (Senshu Park)

Satake Historical Museum

→ ② in the MAP

Satake Historical Museum is located in Senshu Historical Park and exhibits many materials of a Samurai clan, namely, the Satake family of the Akita domain. There is a special exhibition in each season.

Access: 10 min. walk from Akita station

Entry fee: 100 yen

Opening hours: 9:00–16:30



Fig. 12 *Kawabata-geisha* Girls in the Past Days at a Banquet Hall



Fig. 13 Revived Modern *Kawabata-geisha* Girls (" *Akita Maiko*") at Matsushita

Stories of Kawabata-geisha

After the stories of Samurai from the Edo era, this booklet introduces another historical character in Akita city: Kawabata-geisha. “Kawabata,” or “river coast,” refers to the area in southern-downtown Akita, which has long been the district of entertainment since the Meiji era in the late nineteenth century. Geisha, who are still well-known Japanese cultural icons around the world, were the main players of the Kawabata district for a long time. They entertained guests with skilled performances of traditional arts, dance and song. One such art was a local Kouta, a traditional ballad that the Kawabata-geisha would perform exclusively .

Revived Kawabata-geisya, “Akita Maiko”

After a lengthy period of suspension, Geisha culture has witnessed a renewed revival thanks to the younger generations. Learning from senior Geisha, members of “Akita Maiko” (revived Kawabata-geisha) show us traditional performances dressed in an elegant Kimono with elaborated hairstyle. Visitors can meet them at a renovated historical building “Matsushita” located nearby Satake Historical Museum.



Fig. 14 Renovated Historical Building "Akita Culture and Industry Facility Matsushita"

Matsushita: Cafe, Sake Bar, and Akita Maiko Theater

→ ① in the MAP

Matsushita, a historical building at Senshu Park, was built in 1916 and was once used as a traditional Japanese-style luxury restaurant (Ryotei). After the WWII, a lot of Geisha gave performances there. The building has now been renovated as a cafe, sake bar, and theater for Akita Maiko. Visitors can enjoy not only regular performances by Akita Maiko but also sake tasting, as well as traditional Japanese-style banquet rooms emblazoned with historical furnishings.

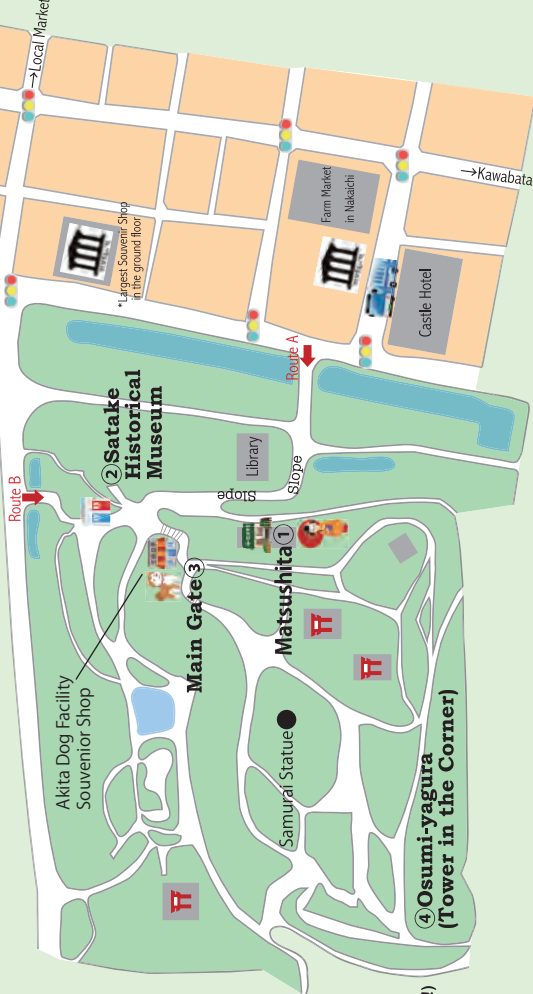
Map for Historical Walk in Senshu Park, Akita City



③ Main Gate of Kubota Castle



① Akita Culture and Industry Facility Matsushita



④ Osumi-yagura

NOTE:

Route A with a bit tough slope (good exercise!)

Route B is flat path with a gentle slope