HIKONE, JAPAN

Flourishing across the ages –

– an extraordinarily attractive city
Part I: The Cultural Heritage of Hikone

Aerial view of Mt. Hikone and Hikone Castle, with Lake Biwa in the background, Hikone Castle Museum in the foreground.

1. Introduction

At the center of the City of Hikone stand the castle and castle complex, much as they have for some 400 years now. Designated as a National Treasure in 1952 by the Japanese government, Hikone Castle was the residence of successive lords of the Ii family of the Hikone domain, one of the most prominent and influential warlord families serving the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867) which completed the reunification of Japan after the Warring States period. Hikone Castle played a pivotal role in securing the military rule which maintained peace for more than 250 years in early modern Japan.

Throughout the Edo Period, the tower and turrets of Hikone Castle symbolized military prestige, and the palace-style buildings of the castle complex served to
project authority and to promote the daimyo culture of early modern Japan. The castle grounds incorporated expansive gardens, as well. The Hikone Castle complex, including the main tower and other castle structures, gardens, have been well preserved, mostly in their original form.

These are properties of outstanding cultural and historical significance, ones of which Japan can be proud, and it is necessary to protect and preserve these assets in order to pass them on to future generations. Hikone Castle has been on the tentative lists for UNESCO World Heritage nomination since 1992.

2. Origin of Hikone Castle

The Warring States (Sengoku) Period of Japanese history lasted from 1467 to 1568. During this period, feudal lords (daimyo) and their samurai armies waged civil war. In 1590 Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598) succeeded in reunifying Japan under his rule. After his death there was a power struggle between a coalition of eastern daimyo led by Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) and a western coalition led by Ishida Mitsunari (1560-1600).

In 1600 the Battle of Sekigahara took place in Mino Province (present-day Gifu Prefecture). This was one of the most famous civil wars in Japan. The western armies supporting the Toyotomi family were defeated by the eastern armies led by Tokugawa Ieyasu, and in 1603 Ieyasu became the founder and first shogun of the Tokugawa Shogunate, establishing his headquarters in Edo (present-day Tokyo).
Sawayama Castle, the former stronghold of the western armies, and located in the strategically important Hikone area, was then given to Ii Naomasa (1561-1602) as a reward for playing a leading role in winning the Battle of Sekigahara. Naomasa became the first daimyo of the Hikone domain. However, in the following year he died as a result of complications from a gunshot wound sustained at Sekigahara. After Naomasa’s death, his chief retainer consulted with Tokugawa Ieyasu about relocating Sawayama Castle. Relocation was authorized and from three potential sites Mt. Hikone was selected as the new location.

### 3. Construction of Hikone Castle

In 1604, construction of Hikone Castle began on Mt. Hikone (a hill also referred to as Konki-yama, which means Mountain of the Golden Turtle), which lay two kilometers west of Sawayama Castle. It took approximately twenty years to complete the Hikone Castle complex. During the first half of the construction period, the main part of the castle (including the honmaru, or main compound, and the kanenomaru, or bell tower) was completed.

The Tokugawa Shogunate had dispatched six commissioners to oversee the construction and requested assistance from neighboring domain lords, endowing the construction the status of a national project. Since the castle was considered to be of strategic importance in controlling domain lords in western Japan who had long been loyal to the Toyotomi family, construction of Hikone Castle was rushed to completion. As a result, wood and stone materials were collected from nearby dismantled castles and temples. For example, the main tower of Hikone Castle was reportedly relocated from the former Ōtsu Castle in Ōmi Province. In modern terms, one could describe Hikone Castle as a castle made from reclaimed materials.

During this first building period, construction of Hikone Castle proceeded at a quick pace. On July 15th, 1604 Tokugawa Hidetada (1579-1632), son of Tokugawa Ieyasu and the next shogun of the Tokugawa Shogunate, sent messengers to the Ii family to inquire about the castle’s construction. Furthermore, on September
20th 1605, Tokugawa Ieyasu himself visited Hikone to view the construction site. Perhaps this reveals the Tokugawa family’s feelings of solicitude for the youthful Ii Naotsugu, who was responsible for such an important task as castle construction. With the strong support of the Tokugawa family, the construction of Hikone Castle progressed smoothly and several years later the main body of the castle was completed.

In 1614 however, the Winter Siege of Osaka Castle took place in an effort to destroy the power of the Toyotomi family. The following year, the Summer Siege of Osaka Castle occurred, and as a result of these battles, the construction of the Hikone Castle was temporarily interrupted. As Ii Naotsugu was poor in health, his younger brother Ii Naotaka fought actively in the Osaka battles in his elder brother’s place. After the battles in Osaka, the construction of the castle was resumed independently by the Ii family of the Hikone domain under Ii Naotaka’s direction, and the majority of the castle complex and surrounding castle town were brought to completion, ushering in an era of peace and prosperity for the city and region which lasted over 250 years.

Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, castles in Japan were demolished one after another because they were viewed as unwelcome relics from the shogunate and feudal domain system. Hikone Castle was no exception and was slated for demolition, as well. However, it was decided to preserve the main tower and some of the turrets of Hikone Castle in response to strong requests by local community leaders and magnates. These included Ōkuma Shigenobu (1838-1922), a leading politician and Councilor of the new government, in power when Emperor Meiji visited Hikone during his imperial tour around the northern part of Japan in 1878.

4. Selected Features of Hikone Castle

♦ Main Tower (Tenshu): A National Treasure of Japan

The construction of Hikone Castle and its castle town began in 1604, over 400 years ago, and took about twenty years to complete. The center of the castle complex and castle town was the main tower, or tenshu (also referred to as a donjon), which is situated in the main compound (or honmaru). A tenshu is the main keep and the most defining feature of a Japanese castle. Although previous castles usually had a defensible structure for residence and/or administration, the architecturally distinct tenshu was first constructed during the late Warring States (Sengoku) period. The daimyo of the Hikone domain, in fact, rarely visited the Tenshu, which served mainly as storage for the suits of armors worn by the successive lords of the Ii family. As previously mentioned, rather than a military fortification, the Tenshu of Hikone Castle, looking out over the castle town, was primarily a symbolic projection of the authority of the Hikone domain.
The Tenshu at Hikone Castle displays a unique design, and this is one reason why the castle has been designated a national treasure, the highest designation for cultural properties in Japan. Although the tower is comparatively small in scale, a diversity of architectural styles can be seen in its roofs, and the exterior of the tower is embellished with various architectural features and designs. Formerly, the Tenshu of Hikone Castle was the five-story tower of another castle, which was relocated to Hikone and reassembled; it appears likely that the Tenshu of Hikone Castle was transferred from Ōtsu Castle (present-day Ōtsu, Shiga Prefecture).

♦ Tenbin Yagura (Balance Turret): An Important Cultural Property of Japan

The turret referred to as Tenbin Yagura is known for its symmetrical beauty. Its name derives from its resemblance in shape to a balance, or pair of scales (tenbin). There are no other examples of turrets with this kind of structural form in Japan. The structure projects a sense of impregnable strength and dignity appropriate to a castle gate. In truth, the structure is not exactly symmetrical. The two-story turrets on each side face different directions, and their latticed windows differ in number. The Tenbin Yagura was built several years after the castle’s construction started. According to the Chronological Record of the Ii Family (Ii Nenpu), the Tenbin Yagura was formerly the Ōtemon gate of Nagahama Castle (in present-day Nagahama City, Shiga Prefecture), which was relocated to Hikone Castle.
The Tenbin Yagura (Balance Turret)

The Tenbin Yagura building has been repaired several times during the last 400 years. The restoration carried out in 1854 was the largest in scale; as not only the building, but also the stone walls were repaired at that time. If one looks carefully at the Tenbin Yagura from the front, one can see that the stone wall on the right side is constructed in the gobō-zumi style (piling up roughly cut natural rocks shaped like a gobō or a burdock); it was made by a group of stonemasons from the northern part of Echizen Province (present-day Fukui Prefecture) at the beginning of the castle’s construction in the early 17th century. In contrast, the stone wall on the left side is made in the otoshi-zumi style (stacking up rectangular cut rocks diagonally) at the end of the Edo Period.

♦ Nishinomaru Sanjū Yagura (Three-story Turret): An Important Cultural Property of Japan

In addition to the Tenshu or main tower, there were two other three-story buildings in the Hikone Castle complex. The one still in existence today is the Nishinomaru Sanjū Yagura, or Three-story Turret in the West Compound. (The other building was demolished in 1868 by order of the new government.) This Three-Story Turret is situated at the northwestern corner of the Nishinomaru, or west compound, which adjoins the honmaru, or main compound. When looking up from the dry moat below, the Three-story Turret appears as if it were standing on a perpendicular cliff. This turret was constructed as a key installation for defense against the enemy from the west (the back
of the castle). It does not have decorative gables like a main castle tower, and its white plastered walls give it a simple yet dignified appearance.

♦ Umaya (Stable) of Hikone Castle: An Important Cultural Property of Japan

This stately stable (umaya) is the only one in existence among the Edo-period castles. The stable has a number of horse stalls and hitching places; a total of 21 horses could be housed there. The stable kept horses available for the successive lords of the Hikone domain. In addition, there used to be another stable for visitors by the entrance of the Omotegoten Palace. There were also horse-riding grounds for training horses at other Ii family residences. Renowned for its martial arts, even in an era of peace, the Hikone domain employed a number of military tacticians and instructors of martial arts, and continued to teach military skills. Horsemanship was no exception. It became popular in the domain to study various kinds of riding techniques under the tutelage of specialists.

♦ Genkyūen Garden: A Place of Scenic Beauty of Japan

The Genkyūen Garden was originally a part of the Ii family palatial residence called the Keyaki-goten (Zelkova Palace). Construction of the garden was begun in 1677 by Ii Naooki (1657-1718), the fourth lord of the Hikone domain, and completed in 1679. It was designated as a Place of Scenic Beauty by the Japanese government in 1951. At present, the garden section of the Keyaki Palace is called Genkyūen, and the palace building section is called Rakurakuen.

Genkyūen was said to have been named after an ancient garden adjoining a Chinese imperial palace building. The Genkyūen garden was probably influenced by the concept of the “Eight Scenic Views of Ōmi Province” and/or the “Eight Scenic Views of Xiaoxiang in China’s Hunan Province,” both of which had been famous as themes of landscape paintings and poetry in Japan. Genkyūen features a circular walking path around a central pond typical of seventeenth century daimyo (Japanese lord) gardens. The garden offers a diversity of changing views to strollers. Water for the pond used to be provided from an outer moat using a system of siphons, and it used to cascade down
over the arranged rocks on the islet before flowing into the pond. Occasionally people would enjoy boating in the pond from a boahouse. At the southeast side of the garden facing Matsubara Inlet of Lake Biwa, there was a small port which opened into the inlet. Traveling by a traditional Japanese roofed pleasure boat (gozabune), from there the lords of the Ii family could visit the Benzaiten-dō temple, Seiryō-ji temple and Ryōtan-ji temple, which retained the Ii family’s graves, and the Ohama Palace (another residence of the Ii family in the Matsubara district of Hikone near Lake Biwa).

♦ Rakurakuen Palace Building: Place of Scenic Beauty of Japan

The Rakurakuen Palace was constructed together with the Genkyūen Garden by Ii Naooki (1657-1718) as the Ii family residence. Originally called the Keyaki-goten or Zelkova Palace, it was later divided into two sections, the Genkyūen Garden and the Rakurakuen Palace Building. After the death of Ii Naooki, in order to economize, the Rakurakuen Palace building was downsized by the order of the Tokugawa Shogunate. In 1812, however, a large scale renovation of the building was carried out when Ii Naonaka (1767-1832), the 11th lord of the Ii family, retired from being the head of the family and the domain. As a result, the scale of the Rakurakuen building was dramatically increased. The size of the renovated Rakurakuen building was ten times larger than the present-day structure, and a garden was newly constructed facing the room. Today the garden has become a dry landscape (karesansui) garden.

♦ Hikone Castle Town

The Hikone castle town was planned and constructed by the Hikone domain as a large-scale civil engineering project. The area where the planned town was to be built was originally marshland. In order to drain the area for construction, the Seri River, which originally flowed into the Matsubara Inlet of Lake Biwa, was diverted to its present-day course - and also straightened and shortened two kilometers in the process). The remaining low lying areas were raised by landfill.
The completed Hikone castle town was laid out in four divisions assigned to the concentric spaces created by three encircling moats. Located inside the inner moat, the first division consisted of the main castle tower complex on the hilltop surrounded by several compounds with turrets, as well as the area of the Omotegoten front palace building, which served as the administrative center of the Hikone domain as well as
the lord’s living quarters (and is now the Hikone Castle Museum).

The second division, located in the area between the inner and middle moats, housed the Keyaki Palace (the present-day Genkyūen garden and Rakurakuen building), built as the Ii family residence. In addition, the second division contained the residences of chief retainers and other high-ranking vassals of the domain.

The third division, located between the middle and outer moats, accommodated the dwellings of both warriors and townspeople. Within the division, residential areas were strictly delineated according to social standing. Samurai residences and Buddhist temples faced the middle and outer moats, with most commoners’ houses located behind them. The large precincts of the Buddhist temples were expected to assume military roles in the event of an emergency, forming a defensive line for the castle town together with the warriors’ residences. The locations of commoners’ houses in the third division were arranged according to occupation. Areas of the division were assigned names such as Aburaya-machi (Oil Sellers Town), Uoya-machi (Fish Dealers Town), Okeya-machi (Wooden-Bucket Makers Town), and Shokunin-machi (Artisans Town).

The fourth division was the area of town which lay beyond the outer moat, and mainly consisted of the houses of the commoners and foot soldiers. High-ranking vassals of the Hikone domain also built spacious second residences there. The foot soldiers of the domain were divided into six groups (for example, the Nakayabu Group and the Seri Group) and given responsibility for defending the castle and castle town. Their houses were built in a line encircling the outer part of the town between the outer moat and the Seri River.

Nowadays, the number of remaining Edo Period (1603-1867) dwellings which formerly housed foot soldiers of the Hikone domain has decreased. However, approximately 30 of the houses still stand in the city. In addition, some of the defensive devices characteristic of a castle town remain intact, such as narrow streets of just 2.7 meters in width which lead to a dead end or bend to make an L-shape.

In summary, in addition to the Tenshu (main tower), turrets and other existing original structures of the castle, Hikone still preserves many distinctive features of a castle town in the Edo Period in Japan.

A lane in present-day Hikone
Part II: Living History

1. Introduction

The City of Hikone lies on the eastern shore of Lake Biwa in Shiga Prefecture, near the center of Japan. Hikone is a cosmopolitan city of over 110,000 inhabitants, and is characterized by a distinguished historical legacy which nurtures a thriving contemporary culture. The city is blessed by both richness of culture and abundance of nature.

Hikone lies within commuting distance of the bustling metropolis of Osaka, the cultural treasure chest of the former imperial capital city Kyoto, and the prefectural capital of Otsu (itself once the imperial capital). Hikone also enjoys especially close ties with other cities along the eastern coasts of Lake Biwa, by virtue of their shared regional “Ōmi” culture and collaborative history. (Ōmi Province is the traditional name for the Lake Biwa area.)

While well-integrated into its region, Hikone also maintains a distinctive identity and spirit, one which feels both fresh and familiar. Contemporary Hikone is a place of boutiques and traditional crafts shops, coffee shops and ethnic restaurants alongside others offering traditional local specialties like Ōmi beef, funazushi (traditional carp sushi), akakabura (pickled red turnip), or the Hikonedom, a local version of a rice bowl dish, and ongoing commercial enterprises of all varieties. Hikone is also a college town, home to three universities - Shiga University, The University of Shiga Prefecture, and Seisen University - whose thousands of students gift the city with their energy and curiosity.

Along with its influential and enduring domestic identity, yet another component trait of contemporary Hikone - a trait with roots in the Ōmi region’s mercantile past - is its international character. The City of Hikone enjoys formal ties with Ann Arbor, Michigan in the U.S. and Xiangtan, Hunan in China and carries out many associated exchange programs and activities together with its sister cities. Hikone is also home to a number of active international associations and to a growing number of international residents.
Hikone Castle, located in the center of the city, has long served as the proud symbol of the city, evolving from projection of feudal power to iconic cultural landmark in the four centuries since its birth. The castle’s striking chalk-white walls are surrounded by trees and set against the cerulean sky and the cobalt blue of Lake Biwa. The three-storied main tower (keep) of the castle tower is classified as a national treasure and remains on the tentative lists of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The keep is surrounded by other nationally important cultural properties.

Along with its long history as a site of many influential historical events and important developments in Japan, Hikone preserves a small-town ambience and maintains a down-to-earth quality by virtue of an enduring connection with nature. A vast expanse of sky above open water endows brightness to the city’s lanes. Lake breezes breathe fresh air through town. Bordered by green mountains and incorporating 18 kilometers of lakefront, the city enjoys a relatively mild temperate climate and distinct seasons.
The outskirts of Hikone quickly give way to agricultural fields and *satoyama* (the traditional Japanese rural communities and their surrounding forested mountains for which Shiga Prefecture is particularly noted). The countryside is a mosaic of geometric shapes and natural contours: buildings in natural materials and earth tones, green hillocks, reflective water and the dark greens and browns of farms interspersed with utility poles receding into the distance, the broad sweep of horizon punctuated by a factory here, an apartment building there.

Influenced perhaps by the abundance of nature, the culture of Hikone has long been marked by creativity. This creativity manifests in a variety of cultural products, both traditional and modern, everyday and occasional. It manifests, for one, in the city’s architecture, which includes temples, shrines, and residences from a range of historical periods. The creativity is evident in the traditional craft associated with Hikone, as well: household Buddhist altars (*butsudan*), each of them handmade through long transmitted techniques and a collaborative process of craftsmen. Primary agricultural products of Hikone include rice, vegetables, and Japanese pears. Industrial products include machinery valves and garments.

Granted ample margins of time and space, along with comfortable environmental conditions, the citizenry of Hikone has been noted for its openness to new ideas and newcomers. The flowering of culture and grassroots creativity which is characteristic of Hikone permeates everyday life in the city. This is the spirit depicted in the Hikone Folding Screen (the Hikone Byobu), the national treasure created in the early Edo Period and displayed annually at the Hikone Castle Museum, where it is part of the permanent collection. The screen depicts citizens engaging each other and involved a range of artistic activities, often displaying natural motifs or companions.
Hikone’s balance of traditional culture, ongoing vitality, and engagement with nature renders it, in the eyes of many, an embodiment of the “real” Japan. Here in Hikone you just may find the Japan you were always looking for: easygoing strolling streets through fragrant neighborhoods, a endless intrigue of rolling clouds, the dark wooden timbers of a temple, a lake surface holding the last light of day, a newly planted rice paddy, waterfowl picking through a stubbled field, uniformed school children passing a roadside jizo statue, fresh elm leaves against a pale blue sky. Hikone itself remains work in progress, a creative enterprise.

Long a crossroads and center of culture, Hikone continues as an important nexus into the present day. It is a site of confluences, a place where culture engages nature, preservation meets dynamism, domestic greets international, sustainability accommodates development, the global turns toward the local, the past animates the present. Over centuries the city has learned and adopted liberally from other regions and cultures, in the process developing a distinctive culture and approach to living which represents an offering, in turn, for the consideration of others.

Whether you are on your first visit or a repeat visitor, temporary resident or permanent one, kindly neighbor or a kindred spirit, present physically or virtually, we would like to extend to you the warmest welcome, home to Hikone. We couldn’t be happier you are here.

2. Roots

Hikon’s roots go back far into prehistory. The Hikone area was first inhabited roughly 8,000 years ago, one of three primary settlements in the area, along with nearby settlements Satone and Nagsone. (Each of the three parallel names ends with the same written character, spelled ne in the romanization, and meaning “root.”)

From earliest times, the Hikone area supplied rice to the imperial court. On top of the hill in the settlement on which Hikone Castle was later built, stood a temple named Hikone Temple. This Buddhist Temple also honored two gods, named Amatsuhikone and Ikutsuhikone. It is said that these gods are the source of the name “Hikone.”

In Japan’s earliest surviving historical record, the Kojiki, which was composed in the imperial court in Nara, the area now named Shiga Prefecture was referred to as “Country of the Nearby Freshwater Sea,” or “Nearby Sea Country” for short. This latter designation, Ōmi Koku in Japanese, was formalized in an imperial document in 701. The proper noun, Ōmi, became widely established over the ensuing centuries,
remaining in currency for over a millennium. The traditional name is still frequently invoked into the present day in place names, historical works, and is often inducted for cultural products such as Ōmi beef. The name “Shiga Prefecture” is much more recent. During the political reorganization of the Meiji Restoration, the prefecture was established as an administrative unit in 1872 and given the name of the county surrounding Otsu, the new prefectural capital, which was “Shiga.”

During the Heian Era (794-1185), Hikone Temple was a favored destination for aristocratic pilgrims from Kyoto for Kannon worship. The road leading to the temple was called Pilgrimage Road. This is the road that became the contemporary Bell Road, an important and popular thoroughfare in Hikone today, running through a vibrant commercial area of town. The name Bell Road refers to the bells that were carried by Buddhist pilgrims.

With the introduction of Buddhism to the imperial court and aristocracy in the sixth and seventh centuries, the Shiga area, which was remarkable then, as now, for its clean winds, clear light, and compellingly beautiful nature, acquired the status as a sacred place of pilgrimage. Over the course of the 400-year Heian Era a large number of temples and monasteries were established in the region, with the Emperor himself making a pilgrimage to Hikone Temple in 1089.

By 1600, however, Hikone Temple had fallen into disrepair. With the building of Hikone Castle on the top of Mt. Hikone, the temple was relocated to the base of the castle hill and refurbished. Ii Naotaka, the second Lord of Hikone, renamed the temple Kitano Temple. Kitano Temple (the former Hikone Temple) served as an important facility for the Ii family throughout the Edo Period (1603-1867). With the policy of separation of Buddhism and Shinto practices in the Meiji Era, Kitano Temple was split into (Buddhist) Kitano Temple and (Shinto) Kitano Shrine. These are located side-by-side near Shiga University, just a short walk from the castle.
From ancient times, Hikone, served as a crossroads for overland commerce and travel, in addition to being a lake port for water-based travel. In the fifth and sixth centuries, settlers arrived in Shiga from the Korean peninsula in large numbers, bringing advanced ceramic technology and carpentry techniques and contributing to the regions cultural and political development. Later, during the Edo Period, delegations of officials from Korea on regular visits to Japan passed through Shiga on their way to Edo along what was referred to by locals as the “Korean Road” (*Chosenjin Kaido*).

In Hikone, the Korean Road met the Nakasendo Highway, an extremely important artery during the Edo Period. The highway was one of five main long-distance routes established by the Edo government, and one of the two primary routes (along with the Tokaido Highway) linking the cities of Edo and Kyoto. Hikone, finally, was also the place where the Nakasendo Highway was met by the Hokkoku Road, an important route for long distance travel running to northern Japan.

Because of its location on Lake Biwa, its proximity to Kyoto, and its role as a transportation hub, the Hikone area has long been recognized as being of strategic importance. As both castle town and travel nexus, Hikone naturally also became a site of significant cultural interchange and commercial development.

*Map of Hikone during the Edo Period*
The construction of Hikone Castle and surrounding castle town beginning in 1604, as a result of turns of events surrounding the climactic Battle of Sekigahara, brought an era of stability, prosperity and importance to Hikone. For thirteen generations and the full 265 years of the Edo Period, the Ii family administered Hikone from the castle complex. This peaceful period continued until the dramatic opening of the country by American Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853 and the resignation by the shogun of his powers in 1867, marking the end of the Edo Period and the beginning of the Meiji Restoration.

The 13th and final Lord of Hikone, Ii Naosuke, was one of the most influential political figures of the turbulent late Edo Period. Some Japanese of the time were opposed to opening up the country, while others were in favor of it. Naosuke aligned with the faction in favor of opening the country and signed a treaty between the U.S. and Japan which established trade between the two countries, and was later assassinated, largely as a result.

The end of the shogunate era (Edo Period) and the dismantling of the feudal system forced samurai in the Hikone area and many townspeople to find new livelihoods and the population of the city dramatically decreased as many left in search of work. Over time, however, the city adjusted and adapted its economy, developing strong transportation, educational, and industrial bases. The city recovered its bearings and began to attract people and flourish again.
The poet Matsuo Bashō numbers among those who have appreciated the nature and culture of the Hikone area. The itinerant Bashō passed through Hikone frequently as he travelled between Kyoto and Edo (Tokyo), teaching and writing poetry as he did. Hikone was the hometown of some of Bashō’s patrons and close followers.

Bashō put up at Menshōji Temple in Hikone on his way from Zeze, in southern Shiga, to Tokyo in the fall of 1691. Menshōji Temple had been moved from a more central location in Hikone to the Hirata district some one hundred years previously. Bashō seemed taken with the temple grounds, which grew dense with bamboo and trees, its earth and rocks covered with moss. “It truly is a venerable grove,” he wrote, “affecting in its appearance of antiquity.” Bashō composed the following haiku as greeting to the head priest of the temple, Riyū:

A gesture
to the garden’s hundred years -
fallen leaves

Bashō, who was a native of neighboring Mie Prefecture, cherished a lifelong affection for Shiga Prefecture (or Ōmi, as it was referred to at the time), as well. Cumulatively, the poet spent a great deal of time in areas surrounding Lake Biwa over the course of his life, composing both longer works and many haiku in the area. Bashō’s grave, in keeping with the poet’s own wishes, is located in Otsu, Shiga.
4. A Flow into the Present

Hikone is a walking city, and is comprised of distinctive neighborhoods, each with their individual attractions and traditions, and all harmonized by the characteristic nature of the city. Water is one of the unifying natural elements of Hikone, linking Lake Biwa with surrounding rice paddies and irrigation canals, streams and rivers running through town, castle moats, and public fountains. Flowers are another recurring natural motif: vases of blossoms placed as votive offerings at shrines, wildflowers blooming in vacant lots and the fringes of fields, potted plants outside the entranceways to homes, seasonal syncopated flowerings of shrubs and trees, the city rose garden, the chrysanthemum exhibit held each fall. The official flower of the Hikone is the Japanese iris.
As previously discussed in Part I, during the Edo Period, many neighborhoods were named after the prevailing role that their inhabitants filled for the castle town: oil sellers district, bucket makers district, and so on. The castle town population included merchants, craftsmen, and farmers in addition to foot soldiers, samurai administrators and retainers. In all, over 100 occupations were assigned specific districts of the town to dwell in, and there were originally 53 districts to the Hikone castle town, with inhabitants ordered according to role and place in the feudal hierarchy. Most of contemporary Hikone has evolved away from the detailed social organization of the original castle town, and even the names of most of the city’s quarters have changed or been reassigned. Yet, here and there a traditional name is glimpsed, and the former days remain palpable in house design and street lay-out, as well as in the city’s wealth of historical and cultural sites.

Rising from Mt. Hikone and surrounded by woods, Hikone Castle is considered to be, together with Himeji Castle, one of the most beautiful castles in Japan. It is one of four castles in Japan designated as National Treasures. (In addition to Himeji Castle, the others are Matsumoto Castle and Inuyama Castle.) The castle was constructed in the early 17th century and has served since as an orienting presence, visible from most points in the city and surrounding countryside.

The castle itself has been not only visible from every quarter of the city, but audible, as well. The castle bell was placed carefully so that its sound would reach the entire town. It is still rung five times every day, at three-hour intervals beginning from 6 a.m., resonating time reassuringly at regular intervals across the city.
The reverberations of the bell are surely received, as well, by the many natural lives which thrive within the castle compound: moat carp, black and white swans, mallard ducks, egrets, kites, and gulls. The castle bell raises a harmony with the crying of cicadas in the trees and the chirping of crickets from the castle garden: this combination of sounds, in fact, is recognized as one of the 100 important soundscapes of Japan, one celebrated through an event each autumn, much like the cherry trees are celebrated in the spring.

Not far from the castle, beginning at an intersection just across the outer moat, runs Yumekyobashi Castle Road. This is a newly developed area which features arts and crafts shops, tea houses, restaurants, and boutiques along with private houses. Architecture in the “old new town” was done in the style of an Edo era castle town; houses have white walls with dark woodwork and lattice. The area has been designed to recreate the atmosphere of the merchants’ houses of the Edo Period.

Nanamagari (meaning “seven curves”) Street, also known as the Buddhist Altar Street, is a winding stretch of road located not far from the Seri River. Buddhist altars are the Hikone area’s trademark traditional industry. Production of the altars dates back to the Edo Period, when craftsmen of armory and weapons, it is said, abandoned their former occupations to begin fashioning the altars, instead. Shops of artisans who make the altars in the traditional manner stand side by side along this street. Artisans specialize in one of seven different elements involved in the construction of the altars - wood carving, lacquering, gold leaf, metal fittings, pictures, central palaces, and main frame - making the altars a collaborative process.
Ubiquitous throughout Hikone are likenesses of the city’s beloved official mascot character, a samurai kitty named Hikonyan. The endearing Hikonyan has become one of the most popular characters throughout Japan and, increasingly, the world, a welcoming guardian presence in the city. Hikonyan is attired in the distinctive red horned traditional samurai helmet of the Ii clan. Hikonyan has undertaken goodwill missions to France and other destinations and is always met with warm hospitality. The more you know Hikonyan, the more you love it. Hikonyan is Hikone’s most widely recognized goodwill ambassador.
Events and festivals take place in Hikone throughout the year, many of them seasonal and traditional. These include the Hikone Castle Cherry Blossom Festival and the Hikone Castle Town Prosperous Market in spring, the Hikone Yukata Festival, Hikone Great Firework Festival, Hikone Tanabata Festival, Hikone Buddhist Lantern Festival, and Hikone Bayashi Whole Dance Competition in summer, and Listening to the Insects at Genkyuen, Parade of Little Edo Hikone Castle, and Genkyu-en in a Brocade of Autumn Colors in fall.

5. Sidebar: Lake Biwa

Lake Biwa, ringed with forested mountains and the largest lake in Japan, occupying one sixth of the prefecture, has exerted a particularly strong and benevolent influence on Hikone since prehistoric times. The lake has a circumference of 235 kilometers and a depth of just over 100 meters at its deepest point. Lake Biwa is also one of the oldest lakes in the world, one of a handful classified as ancient lakes, along with Lake Baikal in Russia and Lake Titicaca in Peru.
If we trace far enough back, Shiga Prefecture once lay under the ocean. The volcanic activity of Mt. Ibuki, the tallest mountain in the prefecture and one of its prominent symbols, drew the ocean floor up out of the sea around 300 million years ago. Lake Biwa was born about 40 million years ago, somewhat south of its present location. The lake, in fact, continues its incremental journey northward, even into the present day; it is speculated that the lake is on a journey millions of year long toward the Sea of Japan. By roughly 4 million years ago the Lake Biwa had basically assumed its present position and shape - which is that of a Japanese biwa, a stringed musical instrument which is similar to a lute, and hence its name.

For prehistoric humans, the lake was a source of ready protein with its carp and freshwater clams, and settlements emerged along its banks. When wet field rice farming was introduced to Japan from China roughly 2,000 years ago, the marshlands on the fringes of smaller satellite lakes (naiko) and feeder streams proved to be fertile ground for raising the grain.

Water transportation developed on Lake Biwa, as well as systems of waterways and canals which became important to the economic activity and development of the region and the country as a whole. Ōmi merchants (Ōmishonin) from Hikone and other cities around Lake Biwa travelled far and wide, along road and water
transportation routes as far north as Hokkaido and as far south as Vietnam, linking these through widespread trading and mercantile networks. The trading activity of the Ōmi merchants brought prosperity to the cities along the lake. The merchants based their work on a philosophy summarized in a saying which is still widely admired and invoked today: “Good for the seller, good for the buyer, and good for society” - in Japanese, “San po yoshi.” The phrase describes a triply felicitous win-win-win situation.

With the development of trains and later the automobile, Lake Biwa no longer filled a role as a route for transportation or commerce. Today, Lake Biwa supports mainly fishing and recreational activities, along with a passenger ferry boat service. On a given day, one can find sailors and windsurfers out on Lake Biwa, fishers trawling or casting from shore, long-distance and short-distance cyclists on the paths that ring the lake, and joggers and strollers along the streams and waterways which traverse the city. The nearby mountains offer hiking courses, ski areas, paragliding, golf, and other recreational opportunities.

About 120 bona fide rivers and hundreds of other, smaller streams flow into Lake Biwa from its encircling mountains. Several of the rivers enter the lake through the City of Hikone, the primary rivers of the city being the Seri River and the Inukami River. A single river exits Lake Biwa on the southern end, the Seta River, which subsequently proceeds to Osaka Bay and the Pacific Ocean. Lake Biwa serves as a source of freshwater for Osaka and, via canal, for Kyoto, as well as for Shiga Prefecture, today.

Building on its mercantile past and historic identity as an overland and water transport crossroads, Hikone enjoys a growing reputation as a site of increasing contemporary international and intercultural interchange. The city remains proud of its identity and traditions, while also embracing, as it always has, innovation and cross-pollination between cultures. Contemporary elected officials and city administrators turn cosmopolitan sensibilities and international experiences to shaping the city by bringing out the best in its own tradition and those of others.

Hikone, like Shiga Prefecture, boasts a growing population of foreign residents
and a higher percentage of international citizens than the national average. Public documents are produced in English and Portuguese as well as in Japanese. The local public prefectural university (The University of Shiga Prefecture) offers a minor in Ōmi regional studies and operates a full slate of public seminars and local and regional collaborations between students and citizen groups. USP has also opened a Department of Intercultural Communications and developed an international faculty as part of its ongoing internationalization.

Both USP and Shiga University, a national university with a campus adjacent to Hikone Castle, operate a range of outgoing and incoming study abroad programs. A consortium of Michigan public universities operates the Japan Center for Michigan Universities (JCMU) in Hikone, as well, offering the opportunity for students from all over the United States to study Japanese language and culture in Hikone and adding to the international presence in the city. The City of Hikone enjoys vital relations with its sister cities, Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A. and Xiangtan, Hunan, China, collaborating homestay experiences abroad for groups of municipal junior high school students on an annual and semi-annual basis.
Hikone is home to a number of working residents from South American countries. The City of Hikone sponsors a number of initiatives to aid international residents and foster cooperation and provide living assistance. The International Exchange Lounge offers books and newspapers in a number of languages and provides a meeting place for Japanese and foreign residents. The city’s community newsletter of bulletin (Koho Hikone) is published in English, Portuguese, and Chinese in addition to Japanese and provided all residents with accessible, up-to-date local information. A guidebook, “Living in Hikone,” is published in the three languages annually, offering concrete guidance on daily life, governmental procedures, and medical services. The city’s web pages are provided in English and Portuguese, as well. In order to promote multiculturalism, Hikone sponsors The Council for Hikone Foreign Residents in order to elicit and address the concerns of foreign residents.

Citizens’ groups in Hikone provide a range of assistances, including Japanese language lessons, to further advance international understanding and cooperation. The Hikone Friendship Association (HIFA) organizes junior high school exchanges...
with schools in the U.S. and China, and has established relations with sister associations in India and Korea. The HIFA offers Korean, English, and Japanese language classes. The Japan-China Friendship Association holds a Chinese New Year’s Day celebration and operates a free meeting place in order to deepen the understanding of Chinese culture. The group Voice translates and edits the municipal community newsletter, *Koho Hikone*, into English and Portuguese, offers Japanese language classes for foreign residents, and organizes international exchange events to support people from overseas. The organization Grupo IPE helps Brazilian residents adjust to life in the Hikone area, providing information in Portuguese.

The City of Hikone aims to accommodate a diverse population who can live with security and happiness in the city, taking pride in their roots, as well. Hikone aims for a multicultural society where everyone can live peacefully and with respect for each other’s culture.