

A Castle Where History Comes Alive

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Odawara Castle is the closest fortress to Tokyo with a tower that people can enter. It is becoming a popular destination among visitors to Japan because the castle offers strutting nobles, ninja experiences and the chance to learn about Japan's history and culture in an entertaining way.

TRAVELERS visiting Japan tend to follow the “golden route” that includes Tokyo, Hakone, Mount Fuji, Kyoto and Osaka. Despite being on that well-known track, Odawara Castle was not a well-known spot for tourists until recently. According to the Odawara Tourism Association, it only takes a thirty-minute bullet train ride to get to Odawara from Tokyo, and the castle is just a ten-minute walk from Odawara Station. People can also leisurely tour the castle park grounds and go to the top of the castle tower all in approximately two hours. After that, they can easily move on to Hakone or even go to Izu.”

The city has also capitalized on the castle's history during the Warring States Period—which ran from the mid-fifteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries—when the Fuma ninja clan served the lords of the castle, the powerful Hojo family. The head of the Fuma clan, Kotaro Fuma, appears in many novels, manga and games, so his name is well known even outside of Japan.

The Odawara Tourism Association began its experience programs in February and August 2018, presenting a ninja-star throwing experience, *zazen*

meditation and other dynamic events to inform visitors about the Japanese spirit and culture during the Warring States Period. Visitors can even rent ninja costumes. The programs were a big hit with overseas travelers.

“We decided to go with immersive experiences and discovery programs so that people could learn firsthand instead of just showcasing culture through shows and displays,” Asao states. “In late April of next year, we plan on opening a ninja experience facility in Odawara Castle Park. After learning about the accomplishments of the Hojo family and the





- 1 Visitors to Odawara Castle can rent samurai armor and ninja costumes
- 2 Odawara Castle hosts a popular event at which visitors can take photos with the Hojo Handmade Armor Team
- 3 Volunteers teach visitors iconic ninja poses
- 4 During the meditation section of the ninja experience, those with wandering minds may be corrected with a sharp tap on the shoulder



Fuma ninja clan, visitors will be given a ninja mission to save Odawara Castle. This will be fun for both domestic and international visitors.” Asao clearly has great expectations for this new attraction.

The local senior volunteers are another essential element of Odawara Castle’s charm. While it is not unusual to see staff members welcoming guests while dressed up as historical warlords at castles elsewhere in the country, the “Hojo Handmade Armor Team” that history and armor lovers started here in 1998 were the pioneers of the concept.

The team has 130 members—with an average age of 65—who learned how to make armor out of cardboard with the help of professional armor craftsmen. They wear this surprisingly realistic gear to welcome and entertain visitors. In the spring and fall they host a popular event at Odawara Castle at which visitors are welcome to take photos with the ranks of elaborately dressed samurai and warlords.

“Over the past few years this has become extremely popular with non-Japanese tourists, and people wait in line during the weekends,” says team representative Nobuhiro Morita. “They take photos while shouting out the victory call ‘ei-ei-o!’ and can take home some memorable photos as souvenirs.”

Morita adds that the sword fight demonstrations the team created based on historical events during the Warring States Period are very popular as well. “We also made fake guns, perform military exercises and do *iai* sword quick-draw shows under the direction of a professional instructor. Lots of visitors from outside Japan are very interested in these sorts of shows. By combining hospitality with these realistic touches, we want more people to experience the fun and thrills of Odawara Castle.”

With all this going for it, Odawara Castle is sure to become another major stop along Japan’s “golden route.” 7

