



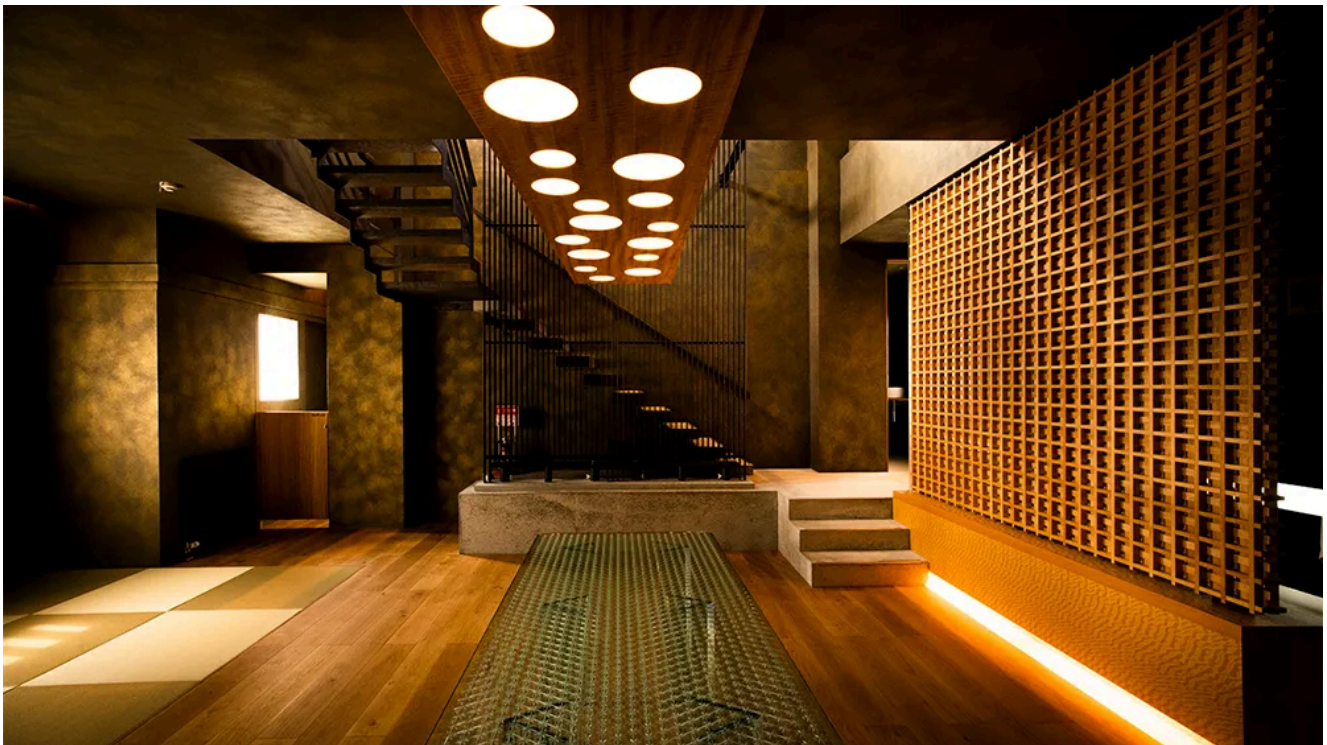
TRAVEL / DESTINATIONS

AUGUST 12, 2023

## Two Historic Japanese Castles Are Opening Their Doors to Overnight Guests

Both Ozu Castle and Hirado Castle, previously unavailable for nightly bookings, are rolling out the red carpet for guests.

By CHRISTOPHER CAMERON 



Jimmy Cohrsen

In 1853, following two centuries of near complete isolation, a fleet of U.S. Navy ships forced Japan to open to trade at the point of a cannon. Yet certain aspects of the country have always remained off-limits, especially to outsiders and those who don't speak the language. Now, as a result of the economic strain imposed by the country's aggressive Covid-19 border closures, that's finally beginning to change.

“The pandemic was tremendously impactful on tourism in Japan, especially in rural areas that relied heavily on it and had few other streams of income,” says

Naomi Mano, founder and CEO of Japan-based hospitality and events-management agency [Luxurique](#). “It motivated the government to take advantage of a huge opportunity when tourism returned. It offered grants to unique venues such as castles, temples, Japanese gardens, and national parks.”

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Which means that a pair of stunning, historic stacked-roof castles, previously closed to overnight guests, are now ready for check-ins. The older of the two, [Ozu Castle](#), is located in the Ehime Prefecture of Shikoku, in southern Japan. Lacking a steady cash flow from day visits, it reopened as a single-booking buyout hotel almost as soon as the pandemic restrictions began—not that tourists could get there, as Japan reopened its borders only late last year.

Dating back to the 14th century but mostly built during the storied Edo period (1603–1868), the [castle](#) rises 63 feet and was home to many of Japan’s most famous warlords. By the late 19th century, its keep had severely deteriorated and the ailing structure was demolished. But all was not lost. The discovery of historic maps and models allowed for a hyper-accurate \$11 million reconstruction using only traditional building and craftsmanship techniques. Today, the four-story Hirayama-style time capsule offers authentic Shogun-era accommodations for up to six people. (Double occupancy starts at roughly \$8,100 per night.)

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At the same time as the Ozu's opening, Hirado Castle was also vying to become Japan's first castle lodgings. But renovations required almost a year to complete, meaning the property didn't welcome customers until April 2021—a move that attracted little, if any, international notice. Located in Nagasaki Prefecture, the estate is situated at the base of Japan's oldest Nanban trading port. Once the seat of the feudal lord of the Matsura clan and the Lord of Hirado, the present castle dates to 1704, having been restored in 1962. Today, it operates on a buyout basis for up to five people (rates start from about \$2,900 per night for two people), with Japanese breakfast, French cuisine for dinner, and exclusive access to its tower.

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Once you've booked, Mano suggests stacking your stay with unique experiences. Bring in a Michelin- starred chef for a private dinner, stage a shamisen play, or hire a *taiko* drummer and a rock band to jam together. Your castle, your rules.

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