

Kasugayama Castle Site MAP



Uesugi Kenshin

Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578) was one of the most celebrated warlords of the Sengoku (“Warring States”) period (1467–1568). He was born in what is now the city of Joetsu and rose to become the most powerful figure in Echigo Province (present-day Niigata Prefecture) and all of eastern Japan, during a time of civil war and instability. Kenshin, as he was known, remains a hero for many even today due to his reputation as a benevolent and generous leader.

Early years

Kenshin was born Nagao Kagetora at Kasugayama Castle as the youngest son of local daimyo lord Nagao Tamekage (1486–1542). At the age of six, after his father’s retirement, he was sent to Rinsenji Temple just outside the castle for protection. He remained there for seven years, studying Zen Buddhism, military strategy, and Chinese classics. At the age of 13, he was considered to have reached adulthood and was recalled to the Nagao family. By the age of 18, he had succeeded to the family headship and assumed power as the lord of Kasugayama Castle.



Image: Uesugi Kenshin
(Echigo Joetsu Uesugi Omotenashi Troupe)

Years later he became head of the Uesugi family, which held the post of deputy shogun in the eastern Kanto region, and took the name Uesugi Masatora, later Uesugi Terutora, and finally Uesugi Kenshin. The name Kenshin combines the Chinese characters for “humility” and “faith,” reflecting his devotion to Buddhism and, in particular, Bishamonten, the deity of war. He was sometimes extolled by his followers as the reincarnation of Bishamonten.

The Dragon and the Tiger

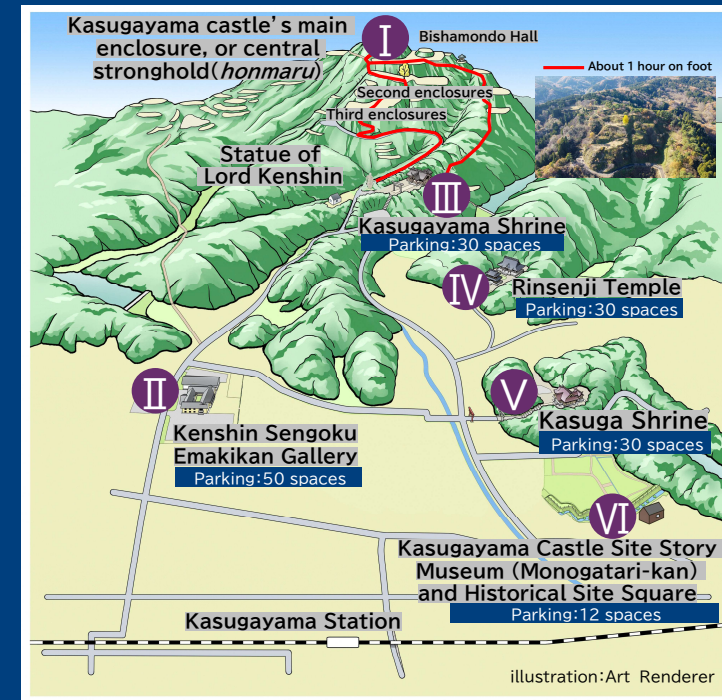
Kenshin’s modern-day following stems from both his skill in battle and stories of his benevolence and generosity. Particularly famous are the five Battles of Kawanakajima (1553–1564), which Kenshin fought in what is now Nagano Prefecture against his longtime rival, the warlord Takeda Shingen, of Kai Province. These confrontations became some of the most celebrated in Japanese history for each leader’s tactical skill and valor. As neither side was able to gain the upper hand, the rivalry between Kenshin and Shingen was likened to that between the Dragon and the Tiger, which in East Asian mythology are described as two eternal but evenly matched adversaries. Kenshin was called the Dragon of Echigo, while Shingen became known as the Tiger of Kai after his home province (today’s Yamanashi Prefecture).

Many stories surrounding the two men’s relationship have been told over the subsequent centuries and have left their mark on Japanese language and culture. According to one legend, when Shingen faced an embargo from his enemies in the landlocked Kai Province, Kenshin sent him salt, an abundant resource in coastal Echigo, despite their rivalry. He thus expressed his belief that wars should be fought with swords, not by depriving civilians of necessities. This gave rise to the proverb “To send salt to your enemy,” and came to define Kenshin as a man who sought to play fair even in war.

An untimely death

By the mid-1560s, Kenshin had expanded his territory significantly beyond his native Echigo and formed an alliance with other notable warlords of the time, including Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), who laid the foundations for Japan’s unification, and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), who would later establish the Tokugawa shogunate. However, by the mid-1570s, his relationship with Nobunaga had soured, and both leaders prepared for battle. Kenshin defeated Nobunaga’s forces in the Battle of Todorigawa in 1577, despite having roughly half the number of soldiers, and his power along the coast of the Sea of Japan was further strengthened. However, Kenshin died suddenly in 1578.

Kenshin remains front of mind for many in present-day Joetsu, where his legend has been celebrated at the Lord Kenshin Festival every year since 1926. Many shrines and temples in the city hold strong historical ties to his life, attracting visitors from around the country who show their respects and pray for success and victory.



Kasugayama Castle Site

Kasugayama Castle was once an expansive mountain fortress and home to Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578), one of the most notable warlords of the Sengoku, or “Warring States,” period (1467–1568). The fortified area of the castle at its peak in the latter half of the sixteenth century covered roughly four square kilometers, occupying much of Mt. Kasugayama.

Although the exact start of the castle’s construction is unknown, the earliest mentions of the castle date back to the fifteenth century, and extensive expansion work was undertaken during the time of Kenshin. The fortress relied on the natural features of the mountain, rather than stone walls, and much of the castle’s former earthen ramparts and dry moats can still be seen today. One of its largest remaining features, the outer enclosure (*sogamae*) at the base of the mountain, stretches 1.2 kilometers between the Joetsu City Archaeological Center and Kasugayama Castle Site Story Museum.

Along the way to the mountaintop, signposts mark some of the castle’s defining features, including the sites of former residences, temples, and defensive structures. The castle’s main enclosure, or central stronghold (*honmaru*), was situated near the top of the mountain at an elevation of roughly 180 meters. From there, Kenshin could observe the castle complex, the Sea of Japan to the north, and the provincial capital at the base of the mountain. The second and third enclosures served as the final lines of defense and retainers and servants lived in their vicinity. Beyond there, the castle grounds extended toward the outer enclosure, encompassing barracks, watchtowers, and fortifications.

After Kenshin’s death in 1578, his adopted son Uesugi Kagekatsu (1556–1623) took control of Kasugayama Castle. In 1598, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), then the de facto ruler of the country, transferred the Uesugi family to Aizu (in present-day Fukushima Prefecture) to secure control of that area. Kagekatsu ceded control of the castle to the Hori daimyo family, who soon abandoned it.

Also on Mt. Kasugayama, roughly halfway up the mountain, is Kasugayama Shrine, originally built in 1901. Kasugayama Shrine and the outer enclosure area are key locations in the annual Lord Kenshin Festival, which takes place in August. Today, Kasugayama Castle is counted among Japan’s “100 famous castles,” and the remnants of the castle were designated a National Historic Site in 1935.

I

View from Kasugayama Castle

The highest point of the former Kasugayama Castle is located at an elevation of 180 meters, offering panoramas of the Joetsu area and insight into its history. The mountain fortress was once home to the renowned warlord Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578) and, beyond the city, much of the current view remains unchanged from his time.

Facing east, a vast expanse of Joetsu is visible, from the Myoko area in the south to the Sea of Japan in the north. Around the middle of the panorama, the Sekikawa River stretches along the Kubiki Plain from right to left, passing some of the city's key locations, including the Naoetsu Station and Takada Station areas.

The Naoetsu Station area was the administrative center of medieval Echigo Province (present-day Niigata Prefecture) and today is the point of departure for historical sites such as Fuchu Hachimangu Shrine. The Takada Station area provides access to the south, including the site of Takada Castle and its castle town.



III

Kasugayama Shrine

Kasugayama Shrine is situated halfway up Mt. Kasugayama and enshrines the warlord Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578) as a Shinto deity. Kenshin was known as a formidable leader in battle, and the shrine is often visited by those praying for success.

Around 300,000 people visit the shrine annually to pay their respects to Kenshin's legacy and pray for good fortune.

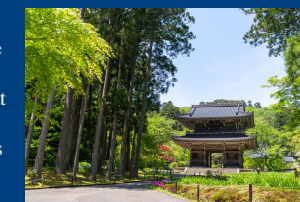


IV

Rinsenji Temple

The vast grounds of the Soto Zen temple Rinsenji in Joetsu were once home to Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578), one of the most influential warlords of the Sengoku ("Warring States") period (1467–1568).

The conflict-ridden Sengoku period was a dangerous time, and especially so for the children of prominent warlords. Kenshin entered Rinsenji Temple on his father's orders at the age of six, for protection as well as to receive an education. He lived at the temple until he was 13, studying Zen Buddhism, Chinese classics, and military strategy. His time at Rinsenji is said to have had a profound influence on the virtues for which he would become known later in life.



The temple grounds include a museum, large water lily pond, and cemetery. The cemetery features a stone pillar erected by the Uesugi family in the early 1900s to mark the 350th anniversary of Kenshin's death.

The temple's current main gate was relocated from Kasugayama Castle, Kenshin's stronghold. Some of its pillars date to the Muromachi period (1336–1573).

V

Kasuga Shrine

Kasuga Shrine is a Shinto shrine at the base of Mt. Kasugayama. The mountain was named after the shrine, which stood at the top of Mt. Kasugayama for roughly 500 years until 1452, when it was relocated to make way for Kasugayama Castle. It served as the guardian of the castle, which was the stronghold of famed warlord Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578). Its new location was to the northeast of the castle, a direction traditionally regarded as inauspicious. The location was chosen so that the deity could ward off evil spirits thought to come from that direction.

The origins of the shrine can be traced back to the Nara period (710–794), when officials from Nara, the capital at the time, arrived in Echigo Province (present-day Niigata Prefecture) to govern the area. The officials are said to have found that Mt. Kasugayama resembled the sacred Mt. Mikasa in Nara, the mountain adjacent to Kasuga Taisha Shrine, the guardian of the eighth-century capital city. They therefore decided to establish a new Kasuga shrine on top of the mountain.



VI

Kasugayama Castle Site Story Museum(Monogatari-kan) and Historical Site Square

The Kasugayama Castle Site Story Museum is a historical museum and guidance facility at the foot of the Kasugayama Castle Site. Exhibits at the museum are focused on the former castle as well as the life of its most famous lord, Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578).

At the center of the exhibition is a short documentary film that explains the life of Kenshin and his significance in Japanese history and the Joetsu area. The video also explores his long-held rivalry with Takeda Shingen (1521–1573) and the Battles of Kawanakajima fought between the two.

The area surrounding the museum is a historical site and encompasses restored dry moats, pathways, and topography from Uesugi's time. Water irises planted in the moats bloom early in summer. The grounds, known as the Kasugayama Castle Historical Site Square, are where the Battles of Kawanakajima reenactments take place during the annual Lord Kenshin Festival in August.



II

Echigo Joetsu Uesugi Omotenashi Troupe and Kenshin Sengoku Emakikan Gallery

The samurai-themed Echigo Joetsu Uesugi Omotenashi Troupe was formed to promote tourism and local culture in Joetsu through live combat reenactments, talks, and tours of historic sites. The ensemble embodies historical figures, including the warlord Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578) and some of his retainers.

Uesugi Kenshin, the lord of Kasugayama Castle in the sixteenth century, is a common subject of the Gallery's exhibitions. The Omotenashi Troupe can be booked to provide guidance to exhibition visitors, who can also try on replica samurai armor for a photo opportunity.



Website



Instagram



YouTube

Visitors to the Kenshin Sengoku Emakikan Gallery are asked to make a contribution of 500 yen per person to support tourism promotion in the Kasugayama area as well as the preservation and management of the Kasugayama Castle Site.