

OKAYAMA / KURASHIKI

AN ADVENTURE OF CONTRAST AND DISCOVERY

Bound by one of Japan’s most celebrated seascapes, the Seto Inland Sea, the cities of Okayama and Kurashiki are both unarguably compelling destinations. Yet what draws visitors to each is rather different. Okayama is the prefectural capital, rich in historical heritage built by lords, while Kurashiki was shaped by merchants. Together, they offer an unforgettable experience that can be enjoyed in just two days.

Okayama: A city of lords and legends
Okayama Castle, also known as the “Crow Castle” for its striking black-lacquered walls, is a natural first stop, just 10 minutes from Okayama Station by taxi.

The castle was established as the headquarters of Lord Ukita Naoie during the tumultuous Warring States Period (1482 to 1573) and completed by his son Hideie in 1597.

Visitors can explore the castle’s grounds and structures, from its asymmetrical pentagonal base, which follows the contours of the hill beneath, to its top floor, which offers a panoramic view of the city and Korakuen Garden. During the Okayama Castle Illumination (Ujo-Togenkyou) events in spring, summer and autumn, the area is filled with colorful lights in the evenings.

From the castle, Korakuen is just a 10-minute stroll across the Asahi River. Completed in 1700 as a private retreat for Lord Ikeda Tsunamasa, Korakuen is known as one of Japan’s “three great landscape gardens.” Its wide lawns and winding streams are designed for unhurried strolls and frame the castle in the distance using the *shakkei* (borrowed scenery) technique. In tandem with the castle, the garden opens its gates after dark for Genso Teien, its own illumination events, which create otherworldly beauty with projection mapping and lights.

Returning to Okayama Station, Kibitsu Shrine is about a 15-minute train ride and short walk away. The shrine is dedicated to Kibitsu-hiko-no-Mikoto, the warrior prince whose defeat of the demon Ura is believed to have inspired the Momotaro folktale. The main hall and worship hall, rebuilt in 1425, are National Treasures and the sole surviving examples of the Kibitsu-zukuri architectural style, distinguished by its unique paired hip-and-gable roof composition.

A covered corridor extends 398 meters down to the Hongusha Shrine, with the Okamaden Hall in between, where the Narukama Ritual, in which the future is divined from the



sounds of a boiling cauldron, has been performed for centuries.

Next, visitors can head to the islands of the Seto Inland Sea. About 1 hour and 20 minutes from Okayama Station by bus and ferry, Inujima — Dog Island — floats under a pale, translucent sky, surrounded by a calm sea. Purportedly named after the dog that saved a renowned scholar and statesman, Inujima is a tiny island with around 40 residents, yet its artistic reputation echoes far beyond these calm waters.

The Inujima Seirenscho Art Museum was built within the preserved ruins of a copper refinery and runs entirely without electricity. The site’s towering brick chimneys draw air upward naturally, keeping the interior ventilated. The dark, dense slag bricks left over from the old refinery absorb and release heat to help moderate the temperature inside, working in concert with warmth from the sun and the cool of the earth below.

Unlike conventional galleries, the museum building itself is an art installation. Within its evocative, labyrinthine spaces, the architecture of Hiroshi Sambuichi coalesces with artwork by Yukinori Yanagi. Utilizing motifs inspired by the post-war writer Yukio Mishima, the art challenges visitors to reflect on Japan’s rapid modernization and consumer society.

Between sights, stopping to enjoy a parfait with Okayama’s peaches and grapes will prove the prefecture’s reputation as Japan’s fruit capital.

Kurashiki: Built on craftsmanship
From Okayama, Kurashiki is 20 minutes by train and a step into a different past. In the Kurashiki Bikan Historical Area,

Above: A 398-meter-long corridor extends from the main hall of Kibitsu Shrine. Right: Okayama Castle is nicknamed Ujo (Crow Castle) for its striking black walls.



charming historic streets line picturesque waterways, just a 15-minute walk from Kurashiki Station. The area traces its roots to the 17th century, when Kurashiki flourished as a hub for goods and transport under the Tokugawa shogunate. Wealthy merchants shaped the town, and their storehouses still line the Kurashiki River today.

Rows of white-plastered storehouses, latticed windows and willow-lined canals create a streetscape at once historic and timelessly stylish, drawing visitors from around the world. Many of these storehouses are clad in tiled walls with thick plaster ridges running between them. This technique not only creates a beautiful geometric pattern, but was a traditional fireproofing method.

The Ohara merchant family founded The Ohara Museum of Art here in 1930, Japan’s first private Western art museum. It houses European masterpieces by El Greco and Monet, alongside works from across the world, its Greek Revival facade sitting naturally among the older buildings of the Historic Area.

The area also rewards culinary exploration. The cafe El Greco, local udon shops and the traditional sweet *murasuzume* (adzuki paste wrapped in a crepe-like pancake) stores are popular stops.

Charming boat rides along the canals offer unhurried views of the area. After dark, the district takes on a quieter elegance, with a lighting plan conceived by world-renowned lighting designer Motoko Ishii.

The whole area comes alive during the Heartland Kurashiki festivities each spring and fall. In the spring festival, women dressed as spirits of wisteria and a traditional Seto bride drift down the river by boat; in autumn, lanterns, illuminated willows and projection mapping transform the district after dark.

Right next to the Bikan Historical Area, Kurashiki Ivy Square occupies a complex of ivy-clad red-brick buildings that began life in



A dog statue at a campsite on Inujima is representative of the island’s moniker, which translates to “Dog Island.” OKAYAMA VISITORS & CONVENTION ASSOCIATION

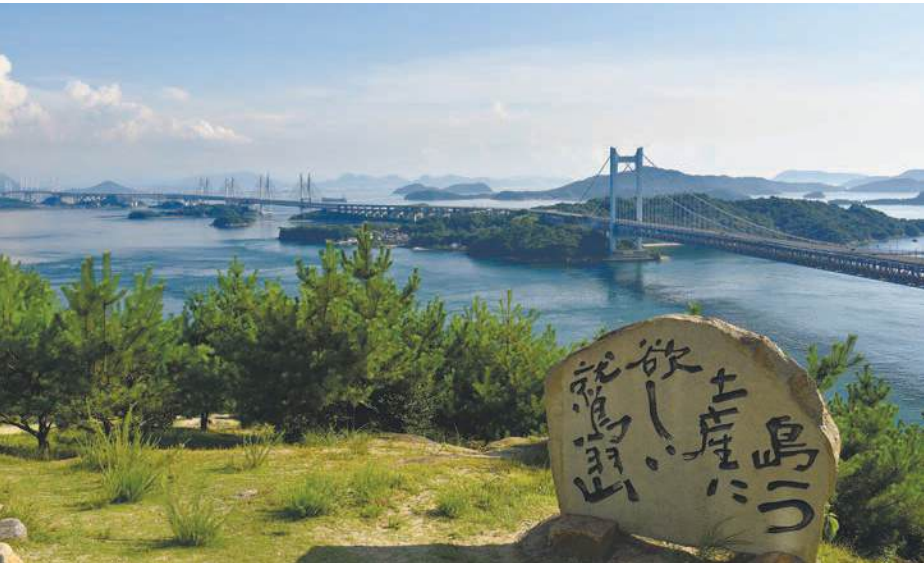
1889 as the Kurabo spinning mill. It now houses a hotel and cultural facilities, welcoming visitors from around the world.

About 50 minutes south by bus from the Bikan Historical Area, Kojima Jeans Street stretches for 400 meters. Lined with shops selling denim crafts, clothes and hand-dyed goods, the area is a testament to Kurashiki’s enduring culture of craftsmanship. A local textile company, Kurabo, developed Japan’s first domestic denim fabric, and artisans in Kurashiki’s Kojima district, drawing on generations of skill in cotton farming and the crafting of *tabi* (split-toed socks) and school uniforms, turned it into something the world would come to admire. Today, brands including Momotaro Jeans, are sought after around the world, and their fabrics adopted by global fashion brands.

After a 30-minute bus ride from Kojima, the journey ends at Mount Washu, within Setonaikai National Park. The 133-meter summit affords a panoramic view of the Seto Ohashi Bridge and more than 50 islands scattered across the Seto Inland Sea. The walk up is unhurried, and worth every step. At sunset, with the view spreading out below, one understands what Okayama and Kurashiki have always shared: the sea that watched both beautiful cities evolve.

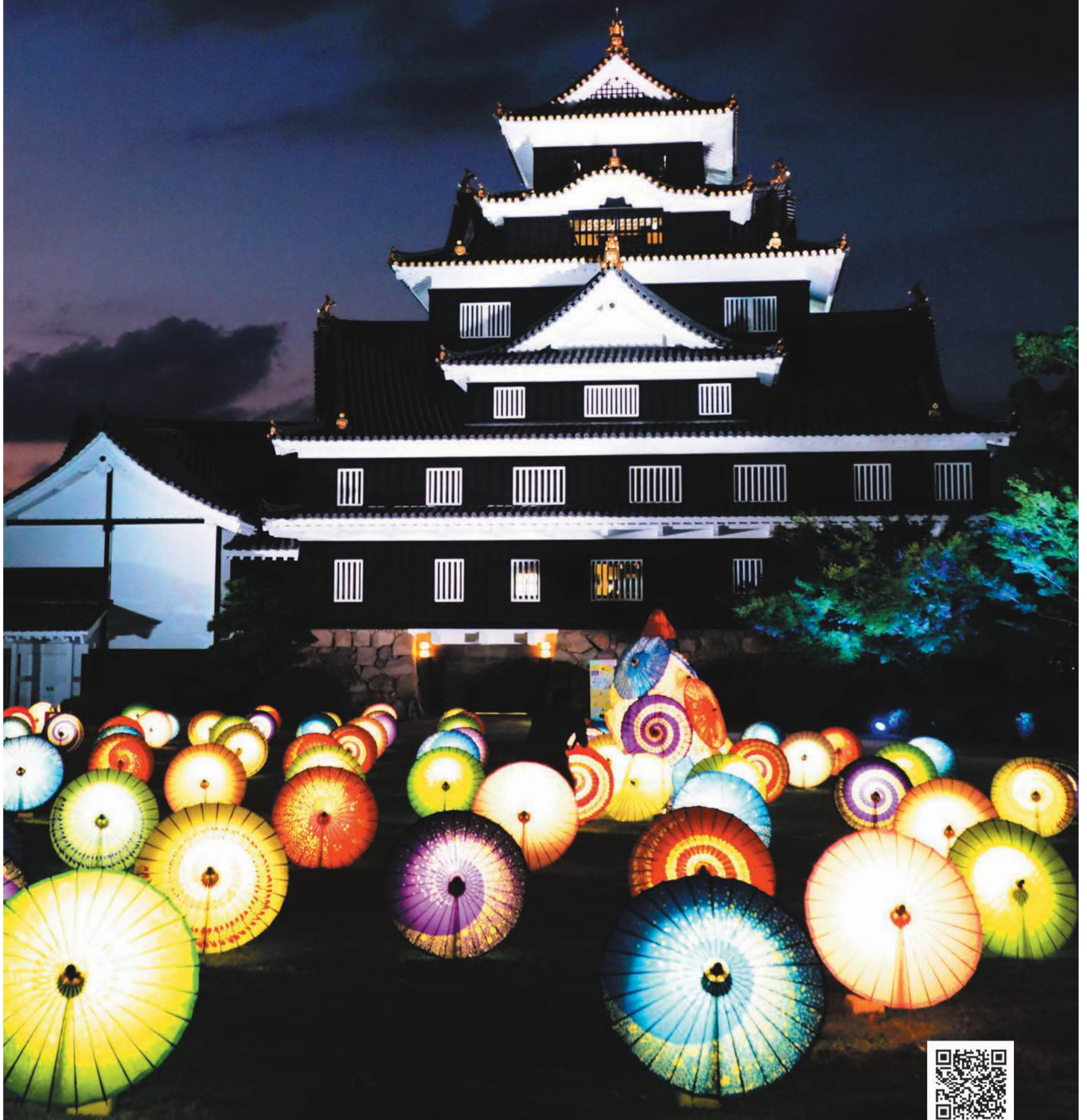


Left: Women dressed as wisteria spirits travel down the canals of the Kurashiki Bikan Historical Area during the spring Heartland Kurashiki festival.



Far left: An observation area on Mount Washu provides a stunning view of the Seto Ohashi Bridge. Left: Denim jeans hang from a telephone wire in Kojima Jeans Street in Kurashiki.

Okayama city shines through a delicate symphony of colors



*The Okayama Castle Illumination is a limited-time, seasonal event and the illuminated umbrellas may not be featured.