
History of Kobe Kitano Ijinkan-gai

Japan maintained a policy of national seclusion during the Edo period (1603–1867), with strict prohibitions on trade, travel, and contact with most foreign countries. This policy remained in effect for over 200 years, ending in 1858 with the signing of the Ansei Treaties between Japan and five Western powers. In 1868, Kobe became one of several ports to be opened to foreign trade.

Plans at the time called for the establishment on the Kobe coast of a foreign settlement where non-Japanese were expected to live and work. Due to the turmoil at the end of the Edo period, however, the settlement was not completed by the agreed deadline. The government then decided to allow foreigners to live alongside Japanese citizens in the surrounding neighborhoods between the Ikuta and Uji rivers. Many foreigners were drawn to the Yamate area, where Kobe’s Kitano-cho/Yamamoto-dori district was eventually located. It was an appealing rural hillside to the north of the foreign settlement, with a gentle slope that provided a view of the port and the sea. Beginning in the 1880s, the district developed into a unique foreign residential area that became known as Kitano Ijinkan-gai. *Ijin* is a word for “foreigner,” *kan* means “house,” and *gai* means “district.”

By the mid-twentieth century, Kitano Ijinkan-gai had grown to contain more than 200 Western-style and Japanese-style buildings. The district became known as a place where Japanese and foreigners could live together harmoniously. The foreign influence also brought technological advances and lifestyle changes: Kobe’s Ijinkan-gai was the first place in Japan to be influenced by meat-based cuisine, Western-style clothing, and golf.

The homes of foreigners were called *ijinkan* (“foreigner houses”). Thanks to the presence of skilled non-Japanese architects such as the German Georg de Lalande and the Englishman A. N. Hansell, the designs of many Western-style houses and other buildings in Kobe were of a very high quality. At the same time, there was great hybridization as Japanese design and construction techniques were combined with Western ones. The carpenters, plasterers, stonemasons, and roofers were usually Japanese, but they developed a progressive “internationalized” skill set. A “Kobe Ijinkan Style” soon emerged, with common features such as verandas, bay windows,

brick chimneys, and painted clapboard or plaster exterior walls. The buildings were often connected to a Japanese-style wing that was more comfortable for Japanese employees.

Many of these Western-style buildings have disappeared due to damage caused by World War II, postwar development, and the ravages of time. But thanks to successful preservation efforts that began around 1960, approximately 30 such buildings constructed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remain standing today. This is in marked contrast to other former treaty ports in Japan such as Yokohama or Nagasaki, where little remains of formerly vibrant foreign settlements. For these and other reasons, the numerous Western-style houses of Kitano Ijinkan-gai are precious physical documents of an important era in Japanese and international history and culture.

Rhine House

Rhine House is a meticulously preserved two-story wooden home built in 1915 for J. R. Drewell. It consists of a main house and a service wing attached in an L configuration, and is considered an outstanding example of the Kobe *ijinkan* style of Western houses. Rhine House now serves as an information center for the Kitano Ijinkan-gai district and the preservation efforts underway on the district's historical buildings. Notable design features of the house include a south-facing porch with paired square columns and a glass-enclosed veranda above; bay windows with decorative details on the eastern and western sides; and wooden louvered door and window shutters. A roof of gray-glazed Japanese tile sits above a Western-style wooden dentiled cornice, and the external walls are sided with thick wooden clapboards highlighted by an ornamental engraved line. Most of these features had become characteristic of Western-style houses in Kobe as early as the 1880s, and they continued to be popular decades later.

The city of Kobe designated Rhine House a Traditional Historic Building in 1980 and an Important Building for the Formation of Landscapes in 2016. Beginning in 2017, the house was entirely dismantled and reassembled to perform earthquake-resistant structural upgrades, and all walls, floors, ceilings, fittings, and decorative moldings were restored to their original state. The house was reopened in 2019. The first floor of

the main house originally included a drawing room, a living room, and a dining room, while the second floor contained bedrooms. The second floor is now devoted to informative exhibits about the history of the house and the foreign settlements in Kobe, including the Kitano-cho/Yamamoto-dori Preservation District. The displays also describe the repair of damage incurred in the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, as well as the more recent dismantling and rebuilding process.

The city of Kobe purchased the house in 1978, and the name “Rhine House” was chosen after receiving public input. The last non-Japanese resident of the house was a German named Oberlein, who lived there until 1968. The name “Rhine” was both an acknowledgement of his native Germany and a pun derived from the strongly linear aspect of the exterior siding, as “Rhine” and “line” are pronounced identically in Japanese. Rhine House is the only *ijinkan* in Kobe where admission is free of charge.

The Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings

Rhine House serves as an information center for the history of the Kitano Ijinkan-gai district and the preservation efforts underway on the many historical buildings there. For more than 200 years during the Edo period (1603–1867), Japan maintained a policy of national seclusion under which trade, travel, and contact with most foreign countries were prohibited. This policy ended in 1858 with the signing of the Ansei Treaties, and in 1868 Kobe became one of several ports opened to foreign trade. However, the completion of the agreed-upon foreign settlement was delayed, and many Western-style residences (*ijinkan*) for foreigners were built in the surrounding neighborhoods of the city. The Yamate area, where the Kitano-cho/Yamamoto-dori district was eventually located, was an attractive rural hillside to the north of the foreign settlement with views of the port and the sea. It developed into a unique foreign residential area in the 1880s, and by the mid-twentieth century it contained more than 200 Western- and Japanese-style buildings.

Many of these Western-style buildings have been lost over the years due to damage from World War II, postwar development, and age, but over 30 such buildings constructed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remain standing today. Most

of these are former residences for foreign consuls or trading company officials. In December 1979, the city of Kobe declared the Kitano-cho/Yamamoto-dori district a Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings, in accordance with the Kobe City Urban Landscape Ordinance. This regulation is designed to preserve culturally significant buildings as groups rather than individually, including streetscape aspects such as gates and walls and environmental features such as gardens, hedges, and trees.

The Kitano-cho/Yamamoto-dori Preservation District contains 34 Western-style buildings and seven Japanese-style buildings designated for protection, and preservation activities are ongoing. The district extends some 750 meters from east to west and 400 meters from north to south. Although most of the Western-style houses were severely damaged in the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of January 1995, all have been restored and reopened to the public. These successful preservation efforts are the result of close mutual cooperation between the Kobe municipal government and local residents, businesspeople, and architectural historians.



観光庁
Japan Tourism Agency