



OUR PUBLICATIONS

Experiencing the Historical Ninja

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As a practitioner of American Eagle Style for thirteen years, and an instructor in the American Martial Arts Institute, I am intrigued by stories of the ninja. As a freelance writer, I have the opportunity to help document the historical ninja and distinguish it from the ninja of fantasy. On a recent cultural exchange tour in Japan, I visited historic sites of the two largest ninja schools, the Iga-ryu and Koga-ryu.

The Iga province is home to the most famous ninja museum in the world. It has appeared in several books and even on Ripley's Believe it or Not!. Situated at the base of Ueno castle, the Iga-ryu museum once served as home to the Shogun's personal assassins. Today the ninja farmhouse is a replica complete with secret passageways, shelves that become stairs, and hidden panels. The original tunnel, once used by ninja to rendezvous with the Shogun, has been dug out and converted into a museum. Glass cases neatly display tools, weapons, and other artifacts ninja may have once used. Managed by the government, the museum has become a tourist attraction that continues to grow in popularity.

Less well known is the Koga ninja farmhouse. It bears the distinction of being the only farmhouse in existence where ninja once lived. Originally surrounded by fields, the structure has stood for nearly three hundred years while a small, rural town has grown around it. Its rural location served the shogun in a different capacity than the Iga-ryu house. Isolation and distance helped to shape its destiny. Ninja last lived on the premises around the middle of the Edo period, approximately two hundred years ago. The farmhouse is now owned and operated by Mr. Mochizuki and the Ohmi Zeizai Foundation, a pharmaceutical company. How did the lair of one of the most famous ninja clans in Japan come to be owned by a pharmaceutical company? And how did its isolation serve the shogun? It all began about six hundred years ago.

Mochizuki Izumonokami came from the Shinano area and was ordered to be the ruler of the Koga region, presiding over fifty-three families. Daily life for the Koga ninja was as farmers, growing primarily herbs used for healing and poisons. Mochizuki traveled as a monk who sold charms and medicines, often supplying ninja with necessary poisons. More importantly, Mochizuki's lifestyle made it convenient to gather information.

As the Mochizuki became well known for their herbs and charms, politicians and the wealthy sought them out. This unique position caught the attention of the Shogun, and the Mochizuki were employed as spies.

In the late 1600's dealing in charms was made illegal and the Mochizuki business specialized in medicinal herbs. Eventually established routes were assigned for sales, and every half-year the supply at each house was examined, refilled, and billed for medicines consumed.

As the ninja clans began to fade in the times of peace and changing culture, the Mochizuki herb farming transitioned into what it is today, the Ohmi Zeizai Pharmaceutical Company. The company is still under the fourteenth generation of the Mochizuki, though they are no longer ninja.

Although no records of an attack on the ninja farmhouse survive, the building was arranged defensively. The Mochizuki were on constant alert. Many enemies sought their elite knowledge, making assassination a threat.

On a tour of the farmhouse you can see many of these defenses and "tricks." Outside appearances suggest a simple home. This façade disguises a three-floor layout designed as an elaborate trap. Every room's functional purpose conceals a revolving door, sliding panel, trapdoor, or other escape mechanism. One room boasts a hidden door that slides away to reveal a ladder ascending to the second story. Imagine an assault on the house. An attacker discovering this would pursue the ninja upwards. His haste would be his undoing. The ninja's true path of escape was a trapdoor beneath the ladder. To his surprise the assailant would discover the second story to be a series of three rooms approximately four foot in height. Unlike the intruder, the ninja were specially trained to fight in these close quarters where a long sword and conventional weapons became virtually useless. This trap could prove fatal. However, the ninja did not assume victory and even here in the heart of the trap were two escape routes. A slotted wall served dual purposes. It allowed the ninja to peek through gaps and spy on the first story, but some of these cross beams were removable allowing the ninja to jump back down to the lower level. An alternative escape route leads up to the third story, a large continuous loft full of its own traps and surprises. This seemingly harmless room could be equally dangerous to the enemy. The ninja also had access to the roof from here.

The first floor possesses many surprises, as well. Behind a rotating door is a small closet size space with a ladder leading upwards. At the slightest pressure, the floorboards drop away into a dark abyss. This well widens at the base, making a climb out impossible. Here the intruder would be held for questioning.

The room of the owner was similarly suited for quick flight. A window was fashioned so that a thin piece of paper, when slid between the frame and window, would trigger a release allowing the window to swing open. The window locked behind the fleeing master. An underground tunnel also provided escape.

These structural defense devices were a small part of the defense of the Koga ninja farmhouse. Today, the house contains glass display cases with antique weapons and original tools of the Koga ninja. A naginata, monk's costume, shuriken, mizu gumo, and ninja katana are but a few of these items on display.

Words are powerful. Unfortunately, words are no substitute for experience. To visit these historic sites is to be transformed. The experience has instilled in me a deeper sense of pride as a traditional martial artist, and I encourage anyone who travels to Japan to take the time to visit these sites.

ABOUT OUR ARCHIVES

The American Martial Arts Institute maintains a library at its main office with records of rank promotions, events, publications, media coverage, photographs, and videos. These are in the form of photo albums, copies of our publications, preserved news articles, and digital files such as videos and photographs from events in our history. In 1998, the American Martial Arts Institute launched its first website. Since then, the website has undergone many updates to keep up with changing technology. Many of our school's events and history are recorded on this website; however, not all testing results are maintained online (although testing records are maintained at our school). Events prior to 1998, are kept at our school library. This webpage documents some of our school's history.

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