

## Experience Budo: The Way of the Warrior

From aikido to judo, karate to sumo, modern Japanese martial arts are known by many names the world round. But, regardless of the specific style, all can be called budo, meaning “martial way” or “way of the warrior”. Budo dates to the samurai lifestyle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, serves as a bridge between Japan’s past and present, and fascinates millions of people around the world.

In 2018, Japan’s Sports Agency revealed that the no. 1 ranked sport that foreign visitors to Japan want to see is budo in all its many forms. That should come as no surprise considering that “Mixed Martial Arts” (MMA), which combines boxing, judo, karate, wrestling and other disciplines, is widely considered the fastest growing sport with an estimated 450 million fans worldwide, according to Nielsen Sports DNA.

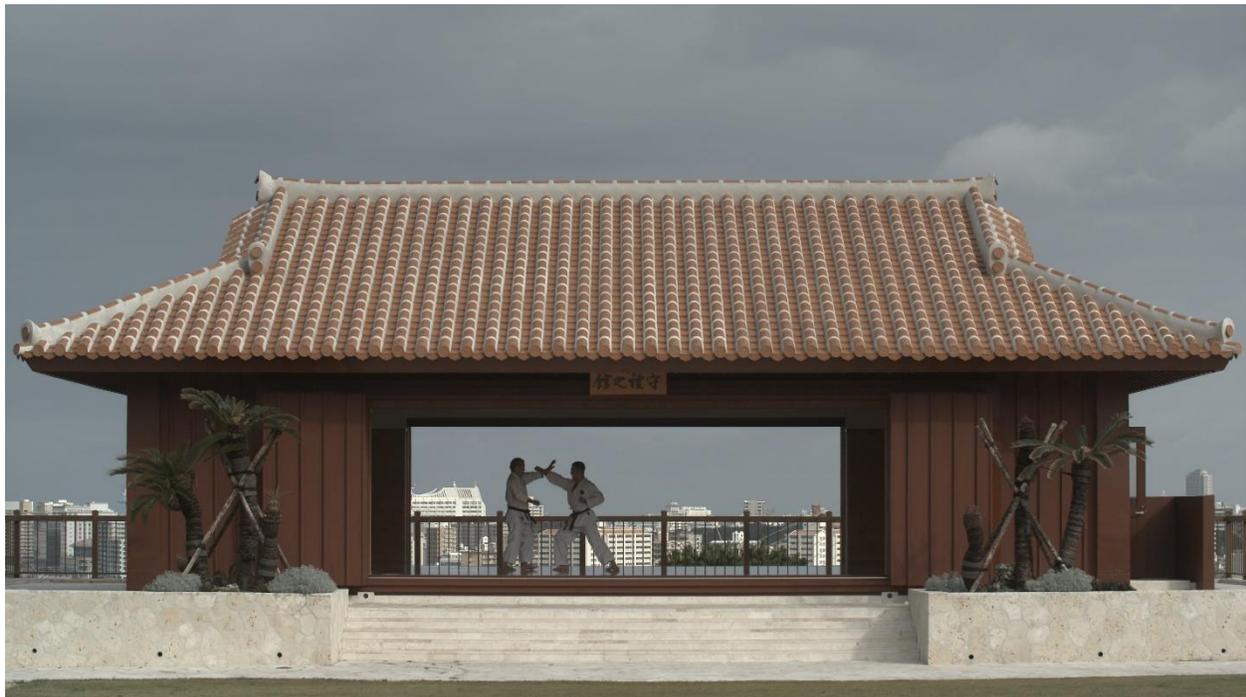
Over the past three years, the smash TV show *Cobra Kai* has tapped into the heightened interest in martial arts, much like the 1980s blockbuster *The Karate Kid* that inspired it. The Netflix show, which features scenes shot in Okinawa—the birthplace of karate—has grabbed viewers in an estimated 73 million households, stimulating yet another wave of Western interest in all things budo.

This summer, many people will get a more formal introduction to Japanese martial arts through the Summer Olympic Games. Judo was introduced as an Olympic sport for men at the Tokyo 1964 Games, then for women in 1992, and karate is due to take its first bow at the Tokyo 2021 Games (originally slated for 2020). So, there is no better time to become more acquainted with all things budo.

While in Japan, visitors can see and experience many forms of martial arts—such as kendo (the way of the sword), karate-do (the way of empty hand), and iaido (the way of preparedness)—by visiting the places where budo has deep roots.

### **Karate: From King’s Defense to Olympic Sport**

Everyone thinks they know karate, but they’d be crazy to think it is just about punching, kicking and chopping. With karate at the Olympics for the first time in 2021, it’s a great time to learn more about this dynamic sport.



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## *Okinawa Karate Kaikan*

Start at birthplace of karate, on the island of Okinawa, about 2 hours and 30 minutes from Tokyo by plane. There, one finds the [Okinawa Karate Kaikan](#). Opened in 2017, the complex is dedicated to karate and contains various facilities, including multiple dojos and a museum, where visitors can learn more about the Okinawan martial art. The center has foreign staff to support visitors in multiple languages.

Karate is primarily a striking art, using punching, kicking, knee strikes, elbow strikes and open-hand techniques such as knife-hands, spear-hands and palm-heel strikes against an opponent. In some styles, grappling, throws, joint locks, restraints and vital-point strikes are also incorporated. Karate can be practiced as an art, exercise, self-defense, or as a sport. Although a lot of karate technique is indeed empty-handed, weapons comprise an important training activity in some styles of karate.

With self-development being a core concept in karate, training often emphasizes psychological aspects such as perseverance, fearlessness, virtue and leadership skills. In other words, karate is as much about the mind as it is about the body.

Karate practice in Okinawa dates back to the times when the region was known as the Ryukyu Kingdom and karate was practiced in order to defend the king. This martial art, which takes some inspiration from Chinese kung fu, gained popularity in the rest of Japan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Later, after World War II, karate became popular with U.S. servicemen stationed in Okinawa and eventually gained popularity overseas.

After the inclusion of judo at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and various budo practices in the James Bond thriller *You Only Live Twice* in 1967, western interest in karate and other Japanese martial arts skyrocketed. By the 1970s, martial arts films became a mainstream genre that further popularized Asian martial arts in general, though most westerners would have been hard pressed to distinguish one style from another.

These days, karate is more popular than ever. Web Japan (sponsored by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs) estimates 50 million karate practitioners worldwide, while the World Karate Federation claims there are 100 million around the world.

### **iaido: The Art of Preparedness**

Given the diversity of martial arts in Japan, it should come as no surprise that budo has many birthplaces.

Murayama City in Yamagata Prefecture in northwestern Japan lays claim to iaido, the traditional art of swordsmanship that emphasizes awareness and capability of quickly drawing the sword in response to a sudden attack. Iaido is fundamental to other forms of Japanese swordsmanship and samurai tradition, but unlike some other sword based budo practices like the combative kendo, iaido is more meditative in practice, because the opponent is purely imaginative.

laidoka—people who practice iaido—execute four main movements: the smooth, controlled drawing of the sword from its scabbard, striking or cutting an opponent, removing blood from the blade with a slice through the air, and then replacing the sword in the scabbard as neatly as it came out. Neophytes of iaido start learning with a wooden sword (bokken) but most practitioners use a blunt-edged blade. More experienced laidoka use a sword that is a razor-sharp edge and can cut through just about anything.



*Iaido practice*

Iaido is said to have been developed by famous swordsman Hayashizaki Jinsuke Shigenobu during Japan's Warring States period in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and into the early Edo period in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Today, Murayama is home to Kumano Iai Ryo Shrine, Japan's only shrine dedicated to the "God of Iai". Iaido is such a part of culture in Murayama there is even an Iaido club at a local elementary school.

Visitors to Murayama can learn basic Iaido moves from ranked Iaidoka in a [local training hall at Murayama Iai Shinbukan](#), and even try cutting with an actual sword. Iaido-themed tour programs and services are available through travel agencies. From Tokyo, Murayama is approximately 3.5 hours by train.

### **Kendo: The Way of the Sword**

For something a bit more action-packed, try kendo. A kendo match typically consists of two competitors wearing samurai-inspired protective gear while striking blows against each other with bamboo swords.

By one estimate, there are nearly 200,000 people in Japan who have acquired a kendo rank, and the sport is growing popular overseas too. When the International Kendo Federation was founded in 1970, it included 17 countries, but now the number is more than 60. At the 2018 World Kendo Championship, there were 631 participants—the most ever for the event.

Though kendo's birthplace is said to be Nikko in Tochigi prefecture, the sport is perhaps most popular in Miyazaki on the southern island of Kyushu, home to the top kendo armor makers and swordsmiths. Miyazaki is popular as a mecca of martial arts with fans coming from around the world, such as the French Kendo Federation national team. Moreover, Miyazaki is a popular location of training camps for professional sports teams and Olympic athletes alike, thanks in part to its mild year-round weather.

Miyazaki is home to one of Japan's top swordsmiths, Mr. Kunimasa Matsuba, who uses traditional techniques to forge some of the world's finest samurai swords. [The Society for Preservation of Japanese Art Swords](#) has bestowed upon Mr. Matsuba the highest rank of swordsmith. In his workshop, he and his assistants make swords by heating steel to 1,300-1,400 degrees Fahrenheit, repeatedly folding and striking the metal to forge resilient blades, a technique passed down from generation to generation.

Miyazaki also is home to kendo's top armor makers, including Mr. Ryuzo Tada, owner of [Nippon Budo Miyazaki](#) and high-ranking kendo practitioner and instructor. Mr. Tada learned the craft from his grandfather and over the past two decades has become the go-to equipment repairer and exporter of competitive kendo equipment in Japan.

While in Miyazaki, one can visit the Udo Jingu Shrine, located on the Nichinan coast south of the city. Legend has it, this brightly lacquered shrine set in a cave on the side of a cliff overlooking the ocean is where swordsman Iko Aisu had a divine revelation to create Kage-ryu, one of the original schools of Japanese swordsmanship at the end of the 15th century. From Tokyo, Miyazaki is a two-hour flight.



*Kendo*

### **Budo in everyday life**

Part of what makes the budo so fascinating is its diversity. While combat training is fundamental to martial arts, the budo culture also has a gentler side. Budo's principles of form and movement can be seen in Japanese artistic traditions such as calligraphy, tea ceremony and flower arranging.

While some budo practices may seem too esoteric for everyday life, others are ubiquitous.

Consider the modest bow, known as ojigi in general, or rei when used in karate dojos at the start and finish of competition. Historically, bowing is closely associated with the samurai, perhaps the most iconic of budo practitioners, immortalized in classics of Japanese cinema such as Akira Kurasawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) as well as Hollywood hits like *The Last Samurai* (2003).

Bowing is fundamental in both budo practice and everyday life in Japan. It is commonly used as a sign of salutation, reverence, apology or gratitude in social, business or religious situations. American businessmen who come to Japan are encouraged to learn how to bow as a show of manners and etiquette.

Such civility is an essential component of Japanese work and life, useful to managers and executives at Fortune 1000 companies who are said to spend up to 13 percent of their work time (equivalent to seven weeks per year) cleaning up problems caused by incivility and repairing relationships between employees. Even if bowing isn't customary in American office parks, the spirit of the Japanese bow is at the heart of any hard-fought negotiation. It's a good business practice.

From its steadfast civility to its meticulous physicality, budo offers seemingly endless variations and opportunities for discovery. Of course, the ultimate way to experience budo culture and practices is to visit Japan, after when international travel conditions normalize. Regardless, the world of budo will be here, bowing to greet all comers.

