

A rare, hand-painted photo of one of Japan's last Samurai, C.1881, created by Austrian photographer Franz von Stillfried-Ratenicz



# LAND OF THE SAMURAI

From their emergence as a military class in the 12<sup>th</sup>-century, to their demise following the Meiji Restoration and end of feudalism in 1868, the samurai played an integral part in shaping Japan's identity. **ROWENA MARELLA-DAW** explores how the legacy of these devoted warriors continues to live on

The samurai is no ordinary warrior. He does not fear death, only the loss of his honour. Yet should he find himself reborn in present-day Tokyo, formerly Edo, capital of the Tokugawa shogunate, the hereditary military dictatorship system that ruled Japan from 1185 to 1868 (Edo was its capital from 1603 to 1868), it might send him running towards Mount Fuji.

Modern Tokyo's jungle of skyscrapers would disorientate him – the Edo he knew was flat, punctuated only by the imposing Edo Castle, wooden houses and rice fields. Shinjuku's blinding neon lights and blaring music would oblige him to wear his flamboyant helmet adorned with horns and fake moustache. A legion of commuters charging out of Shinjuku station armed with mobile phones might provoke his warrior instincts, ready to strike his katana (sword) should anyone attempt to take a selfie with him. Today's electronic heated toilet seats equipped with automatic sprays would surely wipe the scowl from his face. Life as he once knew it was very different.

In the samurai world, everyone knew his place. Theoretically, the emperor sat at the top of the pyramid, but his authority was usurped by the shogun, head honcho of the military government selected by the emperor and thus de facto leader of Japan. Next in line were the daimyōs, feudal lords-cum-warlords who employed warrior-class retainers, or samurai, to protect their domain. Further down the pecking order were peasants and artisans, then the 'lowest of the low', the merchants, whom samurai considered parasites.

The whole of feudal Japan was controlled by the samurai. Over the centuries, the landscape they inhabited, ruled, fought over and spilled blood upon changed beyond recognition, destroyed

by battle fires, earthquakes, and much later in history by Second World War bombings. Yet their legacy lives on through the people, surviving castles, monuments and mansions, not to mention countless epic films depicting their bravery and brutality in equal measure.

A samurai was bound by Bushido, a code of conduct based on frugality, martial arts skills, obedience, loyalty and honour to the death. Unflinching allegiance to his master was the leading principle in any samurai's life. The most legendary example, perhaps, is the Ako incident, which involved 47 rōnin (masterless samurai) joining forces to avenge their master's death. After killing their master's murderer, they turned themselves in and were ordered by the shogunate authorities to commit seppuku (hara-kiri), a ritual suicide by disembowelment involving a 'second', who would chop off the victim's head moments after he had thrust the knife into his belly. All rōnins duly obliged except for one, who was pardoned because of his young age. The shogun also condemned to death the grandson of the man that the rōnins killed. His crime? Being incapable of protecting his family like a samurai should.

In fact and fiction, the samurai is usually portrayed as an all-male army of skilled warriors, and rarely mentioned are the onnabugeisha, the female warriors who fought alongside their male counterparts. Belonging to the elite bushi class, they were trained in martial arts and the naginata, a long spear with a curved blade, effective at disabling riders during cavalry combats. These women were not spared from jigai, the female version of seppuku, which involved slashing their throat.

Tomoe Gozen, one of warlord Minamoto no Yoshinaka's concubines, was exceptionally skilled in the long sword and bow and arrow, so he appointed her as one of his commanders

## LEGENDARY SAMURAI

Japan's three powerful unifiers were Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616), Japan's last shogun.

Differences in their temperament are summed up in a senryu (a three-line unrhymed satirical poem):

"If the cuckoo does not sing, kill it" describes Oda Nobunaga's ruthlessness.

"If the cuckoo does not sing, coax it" sums up Toyotomi Hideyoshi's resourcefulness.

"If the cuckoo does not sing, I will wait until it does" connotes Tokugawa's stoicism.

### BENKEI (1155-1189)

Benkei was a towering warrior monk (he stood 6ft 7in tall), who duelled and defeated his enemies and amassed 999 swords, only to lose his 1,000<sup>th</sup> to warlord Minamoto no Yoshitsune, to whom he then swore allegiance until death. He killed more than 300 soldiers while fighting Yoshitsune's enemies, but it was his heroic death that lives on. Riddled with arrows, he died standing, a moment known as the 'Standing Death of Benkei'.

### MIYAMOTO MUSASHI (1584-1685)

Musashi fought his first duel and killed his opponent at the age of 13 - and didn't lose any of his next 60 duels.

He founded the Niten-ryū style of swordsmanship, requiring simultaneous use of two swords - the katana and wakizashi. Later in life Musashi retired to a cave, where he wrote *The Book of Five Rings*, about warfare tactics, strategy and philosophy.



A Samurai bearing typical sword and armour, c.1860

during the Genpei Wars (1180-1185). Like amassing trophies, collecting heads was a post-battle ritual among the victorious, and Tomoe was said to have severed and collected the heads of seven mounted warriors at the Battle of Yokotagawara (1183). She then led a 1,000-strong cavalry to victory during the Battle of Kurikara (1183), and also fought alongside just 300 men against the Taira clan's cavalry of 6,000 warriors. She survived along with just four comrades. Her finest hour came during the Battle of Awazu (1184), when she charged towards 30 mounted warriors and decapitated a top warrior of the Musashi clan. There were other female warriors, as DNA evidence from other battle sites revealed, but it was Tomoe's beauty and military prowess that made her a legend.

## Kyoto – The Imperial Capital

If he were a high-ranking warrior serving the Emperor, then

Kyoto – the imperial capital from 794 to 1868 – would be a samurai's regular haunt. The first military government was established here in 1192 by warlord Minamoto no Yoritomo, who became first shogun of the Kamakura period (1185-1333).

The serenity of modern Kyoto belies centuries of conflict, as battles fought within the city and its periphery left widespread devastation. Unlike Japan's other mega-cities, Kyoto has been spared over-modernisation, its horizon devoid of skyscrapers and neon advertisements, which are banned by law. As the nation's ancient capital of culture and history, it was deliberately spared the US bombing raids of the Second World War, helping to preserve period buildings, palaces and no less than 2,000 surviving temples and shrines.

The samurai lived a frugal life, their sustenance comprising mainly of rice, tofu, fermented vegetables and fish, washed

down with sake to drown their fears and loneliness. Today, Kyoto's Nishiki Market's covered alleyway is a foodie paradise, where stalls selling local delicacies would have tempted even the most steadfast warrior. Not far from here is Nijo Castle, built in 1603 by Tokugawa Ieyasu, first shogun of the Edo period. An elaborate gate leads to well-preserved UNESCO-registered buildings, where corridors covered with tatami (mats made of rice straw) produce a bird-like squeak when anyone walks through, hence the name 'Nightingale' floorboards. It was the security system of its time.

Kyoto's temples and shrines were not just for worship. These sacred grounds offered refuge for warriors, although the monks couldn't guarantee protection. A samurai preparing for battle would stop here to pray for victory or better luck in the next life. Warlord Oda Nobunaga – a powerful daimyō who attempted to unify Japan in the late 16<sup>th</sup>-century – made Honnō-ji Temple his base when he was in town. He committed seppuku here when betrayed by his general, Akechi Mitsuhide, who set the temple on fire. It was rebuilt next to what is now Shiyakusho-mae Station.

## A samurai was bound by Bushido, a code of conduct based on frugality, martial arts skills, obedience, loyalty and honour to the death

On the outskirts of Kyoto, the town of Yamazaki, now home to the Suntory Yamazaki whisky distillery, was where Nobunaga's death was avenged by his loyal general, Toyotomi Hideyoshi during the Battle of Yamazaki in 1582. He then took over the reins of unifying Japan – and when not engaging in battle, invading Korea or crucifying missionaries, he focused his efforts on rebuilding Kyoto, restructuring its war-torn streets and rebuilding temples, although it was not until the Edo period that Kyoto became a prosperous city.

### Iga Ueno – Home of the Ninja

The shinobi or 'ninja' played a vital role in samurai conflicts, and their portrayal as death-defying assassins in modern fiction is just half the story. Specialising in stealth, espionage and guerrilla tactics, they were hired to help the samurai undermine the enemy. And contrary to popular belief, they did not always don black outfits, more often disguising their identity by blending in with the crowd. They were the MI6 of their day. The tranquil city of Iga Ueno in Mie Prefecture was their homeland, and its most notable samurai, Hattori Hanzō, was also a ninja who defended his region against Nobunaga's forces.

The ninja's combat style is referred to as Ninjutsu, but its practice today is just a fraction of what ninjas were capable of. At the Iga Museum of Iga-ryū ([iganinja.jp](http://iganinja.jp)), the Ashura Ninja Group demonstrates traditional Iga-ryū Ninjutsu tactics, agility and weaponry skills, while a guided tour reveals typical escape doors, traps and hiding places for weapons and explosives, alongside an exhibition of gadgets and secret codes.

Iga Ueno's ninja heritage is evident on every street corner, and even on local train carriages. The owner of Murai Bankoen tea shop, Motoharu Murai, is the grandson of a ninja master who operated a ninja school from 1860 to 1950. Motoharu serves excellent tea grown in the region, and is eager to show his collection of antique samurai and ninja weapons. This charming city is also home to the imposing 16<sup>th</sup>-century Iga Ueno Castle, which has sweeping views of the city and a collection of samurai armour.

### 'Control Gifu and you control Japan'

That was the mantra that galvanised Oda Nobunaga to take control of the region during the tumultuous Sengoku period (1467 to 1567). Although mountainous, the prefecture's central location made it a strategic hub linking the east and west through



Samurai of the Satsuma clan during the 1868-1869 Boshin War

ancient routes and post towns. Nobunaga didn't waste time seizing Inabayama Castle and renaming the castle and town as 'Gifu'. A golden statue stands in his memory outside Gifu Station, and the annual Gifu Nobunaga Festival held in October features a samurai warrior parade.

Winters were harsh for samurai going into battle, and the same snow-covered mountains of Gifu they glimpsed are now known as the Japanese Alps. The city of Takayama in Gifu's Hida region celebrates one of Japan's best spring and autumn festivals, against a backdrop of well-preserved merchant buildings. And a samurai would have killed for a piece of succulent Hida beef, a speciality of this region.

West of Gifu, Sekigahara was the location of the eponymous battle of 1600, when Ieyasu Tokugawa's 74,000-strong army fought the forces of Ishida Mitsunari and Mōri Terumoto, whose 80,000 contingent included powerful samurai clans. Last-minute defections were rife during battles, none more so than at Sekigahara, which swung in Tokugawa's favour. Within a blood-soaked open field, 60,000 severed heads were amassed. It marked the unstoppable rise to power of the Tokugawa shogunate that was to last for nearly 270 years.

### Edo's 'floating world'

Beneath modern-day Tokyo's ultra-modern veneer lurk the shadows of the Edo period. After Ieyasu Tokugawa seized power in 1603 and established his military hegemony here, life changed for the samurai. Many became masterless, some resorting to banditry, while others lost their land to privileged regional daimyōs, who themselves had to travel distances to stay in Edo, where their families were kept hostage. These lords were ordered to personally fund public projects, which eventually depleted their finances – a cunning manoeuvre for averting dissent and uprisings. During the reign of Iemitsu, the third shogun, farmers were banned from consuming the rice they harvested.

With no major battles to fight, the samurai channelled their energies into learning the arts and assuming administrative duties. Each class was confined to live within its own quarter, while every aspect of life was monitored and controlled, leading to clandestine diversions to vent frustration. The Kabuki theatre developed and flourished as a main source of entertainment for samurai, merchants and commoners. Initially, women assumed

both male and female roles, but were later replaced by male performers. A hedonistic sub-culture thrived under the guise of the kabuki, where kagama – adolescent male apprentices who engaged in prostitution – catered to both female and male clientele, including Buddhist priests. Its epicentre was Yoshiwara, Edo's registered red-light district.

Yoshiwara's licensed brothels were confined within a walled compound surrounded by rice fields. Young girls sold by their impoverished parents ended up here, and were forbidden to leave the premises, although those desperate to escape resorted to setting the place on fire. Privileged courtesans based outside the compound inspired fashion trends with their expensive kimonos, all integral to Edo's decadent 'floating world' or ukiyo depicted in woodblock prints from notable artists such as Hokusai and Hiroshige.

Other pleasure dens operated close to Buddhist temples in Sensō-ji and Asakusa, south of Yoshiwara. Merchants and entertainers paid donations to temples for the privilege of trading in these quarters, which thrived until the Second World War. While Asakusa cleaned up over the decades, today it retains its buzzing, Bohemian spirit. As Edo's denizens did centuries past, today's visitors flock to Sensō-ji Temple for worship, then indulge in retail therapy.

### The last samurai

The era of the samurai came to an end when the Meiji Restoration took power back from the Tokugawa shogunate in 1868. The revolution consolidated the political system under the Emperor of Japan, Emperor Meiji. But when the emperor abolished social classes, turned feudal domains into prefectures and conscripted commoners into the army, the samurai, who made up around 10 per cent the Japanese population, and who had wielded a tremendous amount of power, found themselves without purpose, no longer their nation's only armed force. Those loyal to samurai traditions rebelled. Saigō Takamori, who had previously helped to overthrow the Tokugawa regime, led the Satsuma Rebellion from January 1877 to September of the same year. Fatally wounded, he committed seppuku. He is considered Japan's last samurai.

From Japan's tumultuous past through to its rapid modernisation, one thing that remains untouched is the samurai legacy of discipline, self-sacrifice and reverence deeply rooted in the nation's psyche. In the words of Paul Tierney, Walk Japan's expert guide, "doing what one is told without questioning authority and the willingness to do that task to the utmost of one's ability manifests the samurai spirit in modern-day Japan and its people. You still see this in how society here raises its children and the top-down corporate culture of Japan."

During my sojourn in Japan, I watched sushi chefs carve raw fish with the concentration, skill and precision of a skilled warrior. The tea ceremony once performed by samurai tea masters remains a sacred ritual, while simplicity and minimalism in design, arts and day-to-day living hark back to their frugal past. The Japanese take politeness to a level unseen anywhere else, most prominently when hotel staff stay in bowing position until the guest is out of sight. A shogun would have expected nothing less. Cherry blossoms may come and go. Robots and vending machines may take over one day. But through thick and thin, the samurai spirit will prevail. 🍵



Japanese samurai in armour, 1860s

## JAPAN'S SAMURAI ATTRACTIONS

### TOEI KYOTO STUDIO PARK

Samurai movies have long been a staple of Japanese culture, and the famous Toei Studio in Kyoto, home to hundreds of films and TV series, is renowned for producing period samurai and ninja films, including the recently released *Blade of the Immortal*, directed by Takashi Miike. The studio incorporates a theme park with behind-the-scenes tours, fight demonstrations, shows, a museum, and a sprawling film location backlot with authentic Edo-period streets and buildings to explore.

[toei-eigamura.com](http://toei-eigamura.com)

### SAMURAI MUSEUM OF TOKYO

Shinjuku was once the samurai's domain, which makes it a fitting home for the Samurai Museum of Tokyo. A guided tour across two floors reveals traditional armour, various types of kabuto (helmet), depictions of battles and prominent shoguns. Visitors can have their photos taken wearing samurai outfits, learn about calligraphy, samurai swords, and watch a sword battle performance.

[samuraimuseum.jp](http://samuraimuseum.jp)

### EDO-TOKYO MUSEUM

The Edo-Tokyo Museum takes visitors on a fascinating journey back to Edo times through to post-war Tokyo. Permanent scale models showcase period buildings, palaces, commoner and samurai quarters, landmarks such as Nihonbashi Bridge, and life on the streets. A special area is also dedicated to the Kabuki theatre.

[edo-tokyo-museum.or.jp](http://edo-tokyo-museum.or.jp)

## WHERE TO STAY

### THE CAPITOL HOTEL TOKYU

The Capitol Hotel Tokyu owes its calming aura to its contemporary Japanese decor, water features and landscaped gardens, in perfect harmony with the 500-year-old Hie Shinto shrine next door. The shrine is dedicated to the Tokugawa shoguns, who are enshrined here as kami (gods). The hotel is popular with visiting dignitaries for its proximity to the National Diet Building, the equivalent of the Houses of Parliament. Views of the Imperial Palace and city skyline can be seen from its top-floor suites, and a few laps at the 20-metre indoor pool would soothe the stresses of a modern-day samurai. The hotel's Suiyen restaurant serves kaiseki, teppanyaki, shabu-shabu and sushi, all expertly prepared by chef Minoru Tsuge and his team. My kaiseki dinner brought together delicate flavours and textures presented with artistic flair. The Capitol Hotel Tokyu is close to the lively Akasaka district, frequented by local 'salarymen' for its myriad restaurants and bars.

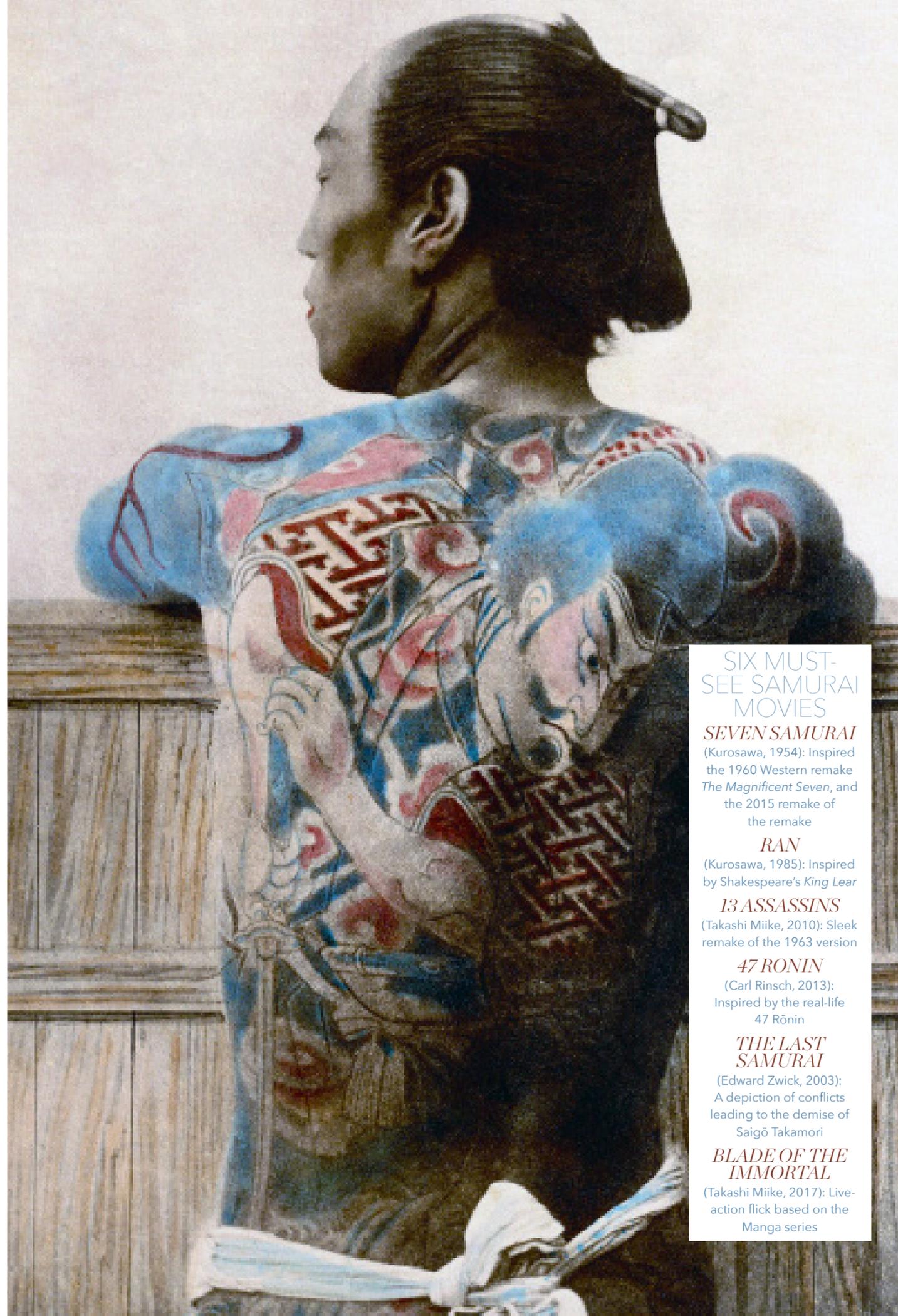
[tokyuhotels.co.jp/capitol-h/](http://tokyuhotels.co.jp/capitol-h/)

### WALK JAPAN

During my walking tour of Tokyo, Walk Japan's guide, Paul Tierney, took me back to an era ruled by the Tokugawa shogunate, visiting old samurai haunts, commoner neighbourhoods and landmarks where decisive battles and events led to the hegemony's rise and demise. It helped me visualise another side of Tokyo, where shadows of the samurai still hover, where its legacy remains ingrained in the lives of 21<sup>st</sup>-century denizens.

*Walk Japan's Tokyo Tour is a two-day walking tour for up to 12 participants, with tours running up to November 2018. Prices start at JPY28,000 per person (approximately £183) and includes local travel transfers from the tour starting point, [walkjapan.com](http://walkjapan.com)*

PHOTOGRAPH: FELICE BEATO



### SIX MUST-SEE SAMURAI MOVIES

#### SEVEN SAMURAI

(Kurosawa, 1954): Inspired the 1960 Western remake *The Magnificent Seven*, and the 2015 remake of the remake

#### RAN

(Kurosawa, 1985): Inspired by Shakespeare's *King Lear*

#### 13 ASSASSINS

(Takashi Miike, 2010): Sleek remake of the 1963 version

#### 47 RONIN

(Carl Rinsch, 2013): Inspired by the real-life 47 Rōnin

#### THE LAST SAMURAI

(Edward Zwick, 2003): A depiction of conflicts leading to the demise of Saigō Takamori

#### BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

(Takashi Miike, 2017): Live-action flick based on the Manga series