

RYU

Ryūno Zaseki, the 'Seat of the Dragon' is located centrally on the southern coast of Jwar, the largest of those islands that form the Jwar Isles. Ryu sits on a hill crafted by the violent surges of a then young volcano. Local legend however weaves a very different tale. Some would have you believe that an age old dragon named Arashi lays trapped beneath this mound of rock. Arashi was the scourge of man, he hunted and slaughtered any unlucky enough to cross his path. Arashi's long running war against mankind eventually became his downfall. Forced into action, a now long forgotten Kami could no longer sit by as Arashi wiped out an entire race of such curious creatures. The Kami was as cunning as Arashi was strong, he hatched an incredible plan and tricked Arashi, trapping him underground, but that is a longer story for another to tell. The dragon, it is told, resides to this day beneath Ryu, breathing gently in his long slumber.

This apparently was not always the case. When Arashi first realised his entrapment he fought furiously against his earthly tomb. He writhed in agonising frustration that made the world tremble under the feet of man. Breathing fire hot enough to burn entire cities, he forced the rock to melt, driving it upwards, creating the hill we see today whilst sending plumes of burning death into the air to rain down across the land. With the last of his strength he made an attempt to flee through this hole in the earth that he had created. Conveniently it was all in vain it would seem, as I am here to write about it. With his energy depleted, backwards he fell to his prison. Exhausted he succumbed to a deep slumber. Now whenever a cup on a shelf tinkles gently in Jwar, people believe that Arashi is stirring in his sleep. Or if the ground shakes you'll hear comments that "Arashi must be having a nightmare". Folk would tell you that the city's pleasant hot springs (of which I will describe in detail later) are warmed by the heat from his breath. I leave it up to the reader to decide upon the validity of these tales of tall hills.

Now, this mount that Ryu sits so proudly upon lies firmly on a peninsula of land created by the splitting of the river Sune-Kudansu, meaning the snake dance. So named because of the way it winds back and forth, dancing down through the mountains of Ro-Kan to the sea. Just before it reaches its destination it splits to give the appearance of a

long snake's tongue, licking down to taste the salty waters of the Azure Sea.

With the raging Sune-Kudansu on three sides and the sea at its back, Ryu is easily defended. When you combine this with the fact that any marauding force, that overcomes these natural defences, find themselves pitching battle up a steep hill towards fortified positions... Well let's just say this has made Ryu the last bastion that many mighty clans have found themselves establishing as their stronghold. This appropriately leads me to an important point; Ryu from which the Prefecture gains its name, has had many rulers in its time but its name has remained the same. The Takashi clan's affinity with the dragon offering fitting similarities.

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Approaching Ryu, the first thing one would notice is the two colossal water wheels that turn endlessly in the ever flowing river; one located on each side of the city. These wheels are certainly a wonder to behold and there is not an engineering feat in the known world that I have seen that comes close to matching their ingenuity. I will not profess to understand how, but they serve the city by forcing water to its very peak. This provides delightfully fresh water to the finest of citizens and allows for an unrivalled and complex system of sewers, canals and tunnels that return waste to the Azure Sea. This has allowed the city of Ryu to grow faster and larger than most.

One could sit and idly while away the hours until the sun goes down, watching the wheels turn. As the evening draws to a close, exhausted yet content, fishermen draw in their nets one last time before returning to the ports of Ryu. A plentiful catch, reaped once again from the Sune-Kudansu's ever bountiful twin estuaries, nestled safely in

their holds. The sun glistening off the gentle waves we so often get in the cycle of the Golden Harvest, but I allow myself to digress, reminiscing about carefree days gone by.

To enter Ryu on foot, one has to cross the Sune-Kudansu and has only two options, the North or South Bridge. Both bridges are wide enough to allow four carts to cross side by side. These bridges are adorned by dragon statues along their edge and are marshalled by the Takashi clan's ashigaru at all times; charged with ensuring order and maintaining the flow of people. The hustle and bustle of the bridges is something to behold, all land traffic for such a mammoth city bottlenecked at the two entry points. The city has sprawled outwards at these points, merchants setting up stalls and shops, hawking their wares, hoping to meet the needs of weary travellers before they gain entry to the city proper. Temporary places to stay sprung into existence, spreading from the city much like the way mushrooms thrive in the shade of a tree. Immigrants from across the Jwar Isles, these Burakumin, gather in the shanty towns on the outskirts of Ryu. Crime is rife and life cheap, here where the ashigaru rarely venture, but as always I will endeavour not to dwell on negatives.

But don't be put off from visiting this great city by the inevitable poverty on the wrong side of the city limits. Once you have navigated the slum districts and been herded across the bridge you will be confronted by the gates of Ryu. What a sight awaits you. The gates are seated in the gaping maw of a building, built by master artisans to resemble a dragon's head, seemingly emerging from the ground like Arashi reawakened. One literally enters the dragon as he passes through the gates and into the city proper. If one was to look up during this passage, one may feel slightly disconcerted by the nostrils that double up as death holes. Each nostril manned by a team of

men, stoking the fires, through night and day, under their bubbling oil pots. As dusk gathers these fires lend a certain majesty to the Dragon Gates, the flickering glow making the dragon look like it is slowly stirring back to life. One can only ponder what effect this will have on the morale of an invading force, camped, ready to attack on the morn. In addition to these defences the most prominent left handed archers from across the Prefecture are selected to maintain kill zones covering the bridge, looking out from their roost in the dragon's eyes. In recent years for many of these marksmen the bow has given way to the arquebus, but not all, some still see the arquebus as breaking with the tenets of Bushido. To give you some idea of scale, each eye can hold three ranks of ten men, stepped to allow each man an unimpeded view of the bridge.

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Having passed through the shade of the Dragon Gates allow your other senses to guide you while your eyes adjust to catch up. Smell the catch of the day crisping nicely on open grills; taste them alongside noodles swimming in an exotic soup of fresh herbs and dried spices brought by traders from local islands. Hear the sounds of merchants jostling and vying to attract customers to their goods, bards and actors practising their songs and plays in the hope of attracting an invite to perform for the Kyunin in the samurai district. This merchant district is at the bottom of the hill and its denizens occupy the lowest social class present in Ryu but they still have a status most of the Burakumin on the other side of the gates can only dream of. This has confused many visitors that hail from outside the Empire. Seemingly in their lands, merchants can gain great status from the money they make off other's toil. Here, however, in the Empire they consider the fact that merchants actually produce nothing but moons, to fill their own purses, somewhat distasteful. On a personal note my own thoughts are that merchants are a necessary evil. If for example one wants to delight in the burning sensation of eating a fire pepper, tokened dragon peppers in recent years, then we head to the port markets in the hope of finding one. Who else would travel the seas to bring the myriad of goods we now have available to us but a wily merchant in the hope of turning a profit.





The ascent of the hill takes us from the vibrant merchant district, onwards and upwards, towards the artisan district. There is not a distinct line to denote where one district ends and another starts but you slowly leave behind streets lined with shops and warehouses, the sounds of merchants' hollers replaced by the hissing sounds of glowing steel thrust into buckets of water by weapon smiths or the 'thunk thunk' of workers chipping away at bamboo to make cooking utensils and an array of other items. There is not much to do here, although I could sit and watch skilled workers ply their trade as readily as listen to a bard sing. There is something to be said for a life-time's dedication to an art that one is able to witness here that is somewhat inspiring.

When one finally climbs through the relative drudgery of these lower levels your next experience is the pleasure district of Ryu, visitors can gladly wash away their day's toil and worries in the hot baths. These delightful, naturally occurring springs bubble up from the ground and great buildings have, in turn, sprung up around them. Geishas sway down the streets with their characteristic walk ready for their evening performances at the many tea houses.

Those that have a keen mind will have noticed from my account that the city of Ryu gets more affluent as you scale the heights of the city and this is down to a myriad of reasons. This can be seen in most of the cities of which I have recounted my experiences and so I will only describe the factors that are unique to Ryu. The first being the magnificent hot springs, these occur only at the higher reaches of the hill. The second deriving from Ryu's water wheels, the water that supplies the city is divided into waste and fresh. However as you can imagine, fresh water that has run through all the other districts is never going to be the same experience. The merchant's murky glass in stark contrast to the crystal clear water sipped by the samurai. A perfect simile for their respective status.

This leads me on to the samurai district, wide and well maintained, the streets are lined with weeping cherry trees. The trees produce prolific amounts of blossom in the summer that peels off in sweet smelling waves, floating away on gentle breezes. If one can pull one's self away from the pleasure district they will, I believe, find it difficult not to be impressed by the civility on show here where the samurai prevail. In fact, I would go so far as to

say, save perhaps for the Imperial court of 'Sen no Machi', the samurai district of Ryu is the most refined and sophisticated area in the known world, at least in my experience. Here people bow to each other as they pass in the street and one can walk the streets without fear of being molested or disturbed as members of the Burakumin and Hinin are rarely seen here. The samurai are also the only people who can carry weapons within the city, as you can imagine decreasing the possibility of crime further.

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Here in the samurai district, great mansions house the populace, beautifully maintained ornamental gardens provide a place to sit and contemplate one's existence or their path, as most owners are strong believers in Michi. Or one can lounge in the shade of a willow watching the ancient Koi carp swim lazily yet gracefully around their ponds, like lords in their watery palaces. As you walk along you can trail your hand in the cool water of the Sune-Kudansu channelled here into raised canals. While in the samurai district one can almost measure the power, control and influence of each clan in the Prefecture by comparing the opulence and grandeur of the residences they maintain here. The Minimoto and Ito clan residences are deserving of a special mention, situated across from each other, they are by far the most impressive, the Bear and the Snake eyeing each other warily.

These homes of the samurai district surround, yet sit in the shade of, Ryu's castle which houses the ruling family of the Prefecture of Ryu, the Takashi clan, and their loyal retainers. Alas I can go into no further description as I have never had the pleasure of an invitation into such distinguished company. From the outside it sits formidably at the top of the city, the inhabitants looking down from their lofty position upon all those that serve them.