

IRASHAIMASE!

WELCOME TO TOKYO

To explore this massive metropolis requires a good guide to navigate its compelling complexities. Former resident Ellen Boonstra shows you the way.

Anyone who's visited Tokyo can attest to the fact that there's no city quite like it. Honeydew melons the price of a gourmet meal, men bowing their heads while they talk into their state-of-the-art gadgets, trains that whiz past with the speed of a bullet. Everything about the city oozes high-tech, refinement and style, with doses of cuteness (*kawaii*) and quirkiness thrown in for good measure.

Your first impression of Tokyo can be a daunting one, especially when you're handed a map with a maze of colours, which you are expected to use to navigate the city's public transport system. Fear not, because getting from the airport to the city is a cinch via the Narita Express, which whisks travelers to downtown Tokyo in an hour. Alternatively, hop aboard a Limousine Bus, which stops at major hotels across Tokyo and takes only slightly longer than the train.

Itadakimasu ('Bon Appetit')

Three years ago, the illustrious Michelin Guide debuted in Japan and with this year's edition containing 197 listings, good for a collective 216 stars, Tokyo now outshines Paris and even New York as a gastronomical capital. Recent additions to the three-star culinary landscape worth checking out include Esaki (Japanese *nouvelle cuisine*), Yukimura (dishes inspired by Kyoto cuisine) and Sushi Saito.

Like any cosmopolitan city, the 'Big Persimmon' offers a vast array of eateries that run the gamut from stand-up and slurp noodles at your local train station, *kaiten-zushi* (conveyor-belt sushi) and *obento* lunch sets, to elaborate affairs involving sharp, showy knives and blowfish. For a more modest evening out, head over to the nearest *izakaya*. These Japanese-style pubs are to the Japanese what a tapas bar is to Spaniards and a taverna to Greeks; they're a surefire hit for bonding with your Japanese colleagues over a glass of Suntory beer or hot sake. Novice visitors to Tokyo will find a stroll along *Nombei Yokocho* ('Drunkard's Alley') an interesting prelude to a night out. This tiny alleyway next to Shibuya train station is lined with miniscule





Bird eye's view of the famous Shibuya crossing with pedestrian traffic and neon signs at dusk



Right: Chef making *oden* noodles by hand in Shinjuku
Below: Salarymen enjoying after-work food and drinks at Ton Ton Yakitori in Ginza



bars which seat a maximum of four to six people, not including the *mama-san* behind the bar, of course.

An old favourite among Tokyoites is Fukuzushi. Located in the Roppongi entertainment district and tucked away behind the Hard Rock Café, this gem of a restaurant has been around for generations and serves up traditional sushi. Two Rooms Grill & Bar, opened last year by a trio of hotel veterans, has quickly established itself as the latest hotspot to glimpse and be glimpsed. The restaurant has an uber-stylish bar which affords stunning views of the Tokyo skyline.

Fans of the famous Nobu restaurant in Los Angeles will be happy to know that there's a Tokyo branch in the Toranomon area of the city. On the quirkier end of the spectrum, pay a visit to one of the city's theme restaurants like Ninja Restaurant (for hungry ninja fans), the family-friendly Alice in Wonderland Café or Alcatraz ER (yes, expect to be seated in a prison cell!).

Oyasumi Nasai ('Sleep Well')

The hotel experience in Tokyo varies from ultra-luxurious rooms with every conceivable amenity imaginable, to the fascinating 'capsule' hotels (best described as sleeping in a large drawer) and love hotels with 'theme rooms' (use your imagination, then triple it). While the international hotel chains have the advantage of familiarity for Western travellers, those seeking a closer encounter of the cultural kind are best to opt for a traditional ryokan: a Japanese-style inn where guests lay their heads to rest on a futon laid directly on a tatami (straw mat) floor.

The category of off-the-beaten-track boutique hotel is also well represented in Japan's capital. The 12-room bohemian hotel Claska, with its suburban location in Meguro (perhaps a bit out of



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the way) is worth the trek if only for its peculiar interior with some of the beds decorated with Hello Kitty. The design hotel features a lounge bar, DJs and an event space, making it a popular choice for local artists. Looming high above the Tokyo skyline with views to match is the Cerulean Tower Tokyu Hotel, a luxury hotel conveniently located right next to Shibuya station. A more affordable option, also ideally situated in the trendy Shibuya area, is the Granbell Hotel. The rooms, modest in size by Western standards, have been designed in a pop-art fashion. On the premises there's a wonderful diner called Pie of Plate which is open 24 hours. Another establishment receiving excellent marks from savvy travellers is Hotel Niwa, an unpretentious and modern hotel a short walk from Suidobashi Station.



Left: Interior of a Japanese inn

Kaimono Ni Ikou ('Let's Go Shopping')

Designers and trend-spotters from around the world come to Tokyo to be inspired by the originality of Japanese aesthetics. Regardless of how much damage you're planning to do to your credit card, it's a captivating experience to wander around the city. The United Nations of flagship stores is Omotesando-dori, a Parisian-like boulevard starting at Harajuku Station. Don't miss the narrower stretch beyond the Aoyama-dori intersection which includes top Japanese designers like Comme des Garçons, Hanae Mori and Yohji Yamamoto, if only for the striking architecture of the buildings in this street.

The smaller back alleys around Harajuku Station like Takeshita-dori are worth exploring for their street fashion. However, the uncontested winner of high-end shopping with the largest concentration of the city's chicest boutiques, restaurants and cafes remains Ginza, which boasted the most expensive piece of real estate in the world at the height of Japan's bubble economy in the late '80s.

The words 'shopping mall' are too mundane to capture the magnificence of indoor splurging sprees in Tokyo. The newest retail sensation is

One of Tokyo's most intriguing tourist spots is the relatively new area of Odaiba ('Fort')



Above: Manmade beach on Odaiba Island, with in the background the Ferris Wheel and Telecom Centre Building

Tokyo Midtown, an architectural marvel featuring concept stores, restaurants, offices, hotels (like the Ritz-Carlton) and a museum, and Design Sight 21_21, a gallery-cum-workshop by fashion designer Issey Miyake and architect Tadao Ando. Nearby is Roppongi Hills, which has a similar mix of facilities including an outdoor amphitheatre and a few parks. The centrepiece of this mega-complex is the 54-storey Mori Tower, which offers a fantastic vantage point from which to take in the city.

One of Tokyo's most intriguing tourist spots is the relatively new area of Odaiba. Located in the Bay of Tokyo and readily accessible by monorail, this artificial island contains some spectacular attractions like the futuristic Fuji TV Building (make sure to check out the observatory deck), the Venus Fort shopping centre for women (with a realistic sky ceiling similar to Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas) and a couple of manmade beaches.

Sayonara ('Goodbye')

Explaining the complexities of this sprawling, labyrinthine city is impossible in one story or even an entire book. That's what makes the city so compelling, inviting repeat visits and rewarding further explorations. Whatever you do in Tokyo - yukkuri tanoshinde kudasai ('Have a good time, enjoy yourself').



Below: Light show above the fountain at Venus Fort

SMOOTH AS SILK

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