

The Best of Tokyo

Describing Tokyo to someone who has never been there is a formidable task. After all, how do you describe a city that—as one of my friends visiting Tokyo for the first time put it—seems like part of another planet?

To be sure, Tokyo is very different from Western capitals, but what really sets it apart is its people. Approximately 12.5 million people reside within Tokyo's 2,100 sq. km (811 sq. miles), and almost one-fourth of Japan's total population lives within commuting distance of the city. This translates into a crush of humanity that packs the subways, crowds the sidewalks, and fills the department stores beyond belief. In some parts of the city, the streets are as crowded at 3am as they are at 3pm. With its high-energy, visual overload, Tokyo makes even New York seem like a sleepy, laid-back town.

And yet, despite its limited space for harmonious living, Tokyo remains one of the safest cities in the world, with remarkably little crime or violence. No matter how lost I may become, I know that people will go out of their way to help me. Hardworking, honest, and helpful to strangers, the Japanese are their country's greatest asset.

With Tokyo so densely packed, it comes as no shock to learn that land here is more valuable than gold. Buildings are built practically on top of each other, shaped like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle to fit the existing plots of real estate. More than perhaps any other city in the world, Japan's capital is a concrete jungle, stretching on and on as far as the eye can see, with a few parks but not many trees to break the monotony. Fires, earthquakes, wars, the zeal for modernization, and the price of land have taken their tolls on the city, eradicating almost all evidence of previous centuries. It's as though Tokyo was born only this morning, with all the messy aftermath of a city conceived without plan and interested only in the future.

Thus, first-time visitors to Tokyo are almost invariably disappointed. They come expecting an exotic Asian city, but instead find a megalopolis Westernized to the point of drabness. Used to the grand edifices and monuments of Western cities, visitors look in vain for Tokyo's own monuments to its past—ancient temples, exquisite gardens, Imperial palaces, or whatever else they've imagined. Instead they find what may be, quite arguably, one of the ugliest cities in the world.

So, while Tokyo is one of my favorite cities, my appreciation came only with time. When I first moved here, I was tormented by the unsettling feeling that I was somehow missing out on the "real" Tokyo. Even though I was living and working here, Tokyo seemed beyond my grasp: elusive, vague, and undefined. I felt that the meaning of the city was out there, if only I knew where to look.

With time, I learned that I needn't look farther than my own front window. Tokyo has no center, but rather is made up of a series of small towns and neighborhoods clustered together, each with its own history, flavor, and atmosphere. There are narrow residential streets, ma-and-pa shops, fruit stands, and stores. There's the neighborhood tofu factory, the lunchbox stand, the grocery shop, and the tiny police station, where

the cops know the residents by name and patrol the area by bicycle. There are carefully pruned bonsai trees gracing sidewalks, women in kimono bowing and shuffling down streets, and wooden homes on impossibly narrow streets. Walk in the old downtown neighborhoods of Asakusa or Yanaka and you're worlds apart from the trendy quarters of Harajuku or the high-rises of Shinjuku. Neighborhoods like these make Tokyo lovable and livable.

What's more, once visitors get to know Tokyo better, they learn that you can't judge Tokyo by what it looks like on the outside, for this is a city of interiors. Even those concrete monsters may house interiors that are fascinating in design and innovation. In the basement of that drab building could well be a restaurant with wooden beams, mud walls, and thatched ceiling, imported intact from a farmhouse in the Japan Alps; on its roof could be a small Shinto shrine, while the top floor could house a high-tech bar or a tony French restaurant with dreamy views over the city.

And beneath Tokyo's concrete shell is a thriving cultural life left very much intact. In fact, if you're interested in Japan's performing arts as well as such diverse activities as the tea ceremony or sumo, Tokyo is your best bet for offering the most at any one time. It is rich in museums and claims the largest repository of Japanese art in the world. It also gets my vote as the pop-art capital of the world, so if you're into kitsch or *anime* (Japanese animation), you'll be in high heaven. I can't imagine being bored here for even a minute.

1 The Most Unforgettable Travel Experiences

- **Taking Part in a Festival.** Tokyo and its surrounding cities offer a myriad of annual festivals, ranging from processions of portable shrines to ladder-top acrobatics. Be ready to battle good-natured crowds, as festivals can be unbelievably packed. See “Tokyo Calendar of Events,” in chapter 2.
- **Strolling a Japanese Landscaped Garden.** There's no better escape from Tokyo's urban jungle than a stroll through one of its landscaped gardens, especially in spring when irises, wisteria, peonies, azaleas, and other flowers are in bloom. Top picks are Rikugien Garden, Shinjuku Gyoen, and—in nearby Yokohama—Sankeien Garden. See “Parks & Gardens,” in chapter 7, and “Yokohama,” in chapter 11.
- **Soaking Away Your Cares.** Tokyo now has its own hot-spring spas, thanks to drilling that released therapeutic waters from deep below the surface. Top on my list is Oedo-Onsen Monogatari, a theme-based spa that emulates bathing houses of yore with its feudal-era replica architecture, shops, restaurants, indoor and outdoor baths, and more. See “Five Unforgettable Ways to Immerse Yourself in Japanese Culture,” in chapter 7.
- **Hunting for Bargains at Flea Markets.** You never know what treasure you might find at one of Tokyo's weekend outdoor flea markets, where vendors sell everything from used kimono to antiques and curios. Go early, and be sure to bargain. See “Shopping A to Z,” in chapter 9.
- **Experiencing the Serenity of the Tea Ceremony.** Developed in the 16th century as a means to achieve inner harmony with nature, the tea ceremony is a highly ritualized process that takes years to learn. You can experience a shortened version at several Tokyo hotels. See “Five Unforgettable Ways to Immerse Yourself in Japanese Culture,” in chapter 7.

- **Getting the Royal Treatment at Department Stores.** Tokyo's department stores are huge, spotless, and filled with merchandise you never knew existed; many also have first-rate art galleries. Shibuya, Shinjuku, and Ginza boast the greatest concentration of department stores. Service in a Japanese department store is an unparalleled experience: Be there when it opens, and you'll see employees lined up at the front door, bowing

to incoming customers. See "Shopping A to Z," in chapter 9.

- **Attending a Kabuki Play at the Kabuki-za Theater.** Kabuki has served as the most popular form of entertainment for the masses since the Edo Period. Watch the audience as they yell their approval; watch the stage for its gorgeous costumes, stunning settings, and easy-to-understand dramas of love, duty, and revenge. See "The Performing Arts," in chapter 10.

2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- **Four Seasons Hotel Tokyo at Chinzan-So** (2-10-8 Sekiguchi, Bunkyo-ku; ☎ 800/819-5053 in the U.S. and Canada, or 03/3943-2222): Set amid luscious grounds, this top-notch property has virtually everything going for it (with the exception of a rather obscure location in north-east Tokyo). Enjoy European comfort blended with Asian decor, one of Tokyo's best and most attractive spas, and rooms with peaceful garden views. See p. 85.
- **Mandarin Oriental, Tokyo** (2-1-1 Nihombashi Marumachi, Chuo-ku; ☎ 866/526-6567 in the U.S. and Canada, or 03/3270-8950): Located across from the famous Mitsukoshi department store, this luxurious property boasts outstanding views, massive guest rooms with sophisticated entertainment centers, a spa, high-end restaurants, and fabrics and textiles made especially for the hotel by artisans throughout Japan. See p. 80.
- **Park Hyatt Tokyo** (3-7-1-2 Nishi-Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku; ☎ 800/233-1234 in the U.S. and Canada, or

03/5322-1234): This was one of my favorite hotels long before it became a *Lost in Translation* celebrity. Quite simply, it's among the most gorgeous and sophisticated hotels in Japan, with rooms to die for, stunning views, and one of Tokyo's best restaurants. It also wins kudos for free entry for hotel guests to its dramatic, sunlit, 20m (66-ft.) indoor pool, on the 47th floor with great views over Tokyo. See p. 80.

- **The Ritz-Carlton, Tokyo** (9-7-1 Akasaka, Minato-ku; ☎ 800/241-3333 in the U.S. and Canada, or 03/3423-8000): Occupying the lofty reaches of Tokyo's tallest building, this luxury property in Tokyo Midtown ranks as one of Japan's best hotels, with Tokyo's largest rooms, complete with two large closets and huge bathrooms with two separate sinks and counters, making it a best bet for couples. It cocoons guests from the mad whirl of central Tokyo with the best that money can buy, including service above and beyond the call of duty. See p. 83.

3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- **Hilltop Hotel** (1-1 Surugadai, in Kanda; ☎ 03/3293-2311): Established in 1937, this unassuming hotel

is the closest that Tokyo has to a historic hotel. With an Art Deco facade, it boasts such endearing touches as

fringed lampshades, doilies, cherry-wood furniture, velvet curtains, and old-fashioned heaters. With only 74 rooms, it also boasts a surprising number of restaurants and bars. See p. 100.

- **Hotel Century Southern Tower** (2-2-1 Yoyogi, Shibuya-ku; ☎ 03/5354-0111): Occupying the top floors of a Shinjuku skyscraper just a couple minutes' walk from Shinjuku Station, this bright and modern property offers great views, a convenient location, and comfortable rooms. See p. 96.
- **Ginza Washington Hotel** (7-10-1 Ginza, Chuo-ku; ☎ 03/6686-1000): Although rooms are tiny, they're smartly decorated. Even better is this hotel's location, smack dab in the Ginza. See p. 92.
- **Park Hotel Tokyo** (1-7-1 Higashi Shimbashi, Minato-ku; ☎ 03/6252-1111): An attractive 10-story light-filled lobby, restaurants offering organic dishes, rooms with views of Tokyo Bay or Tokyo Tower, and walking distance from the Ginza make this a good alternative to similarly designed but pricier hotels. See p. 93.

4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- **Feasting on a Kaiseki Meal:** Although expensive, a *kaiseki* feast, consisting of dish after dish of artfully displayed delectables, may well be the most beautiful and memorable meal you'll ever have. Splurge at least once on the most expensive kaiseki meal you can afford, and you'll feel like royalty. See "Tips on Dining, Japanese Style," in chapter 6.
- **Dining with a View:** There's no way you can forget you're in Tokyo when you're dining with views of the city as far as you can see. This category has many options, not all of them expensive. However, the very top splurge has long been the **New York Grill**, located on the 52nd floor of the Park Hyatt Tokyo hotel (☎ 03/5322-1234). Surrounded by glass, it offers great American cuisine, live jazz, and breathtaking views of the endless city. On clear days, you can see Mount Fuji, making this the closest you can get to dining on a cloud. See p. 133.
- **Rubbing Elbows in a Yakitori-ya:** There's no better place to observe Tokyo's army of office workers at play than at a *yakitori-ya*, a drinking man's pub that also sells skewered grilled chicken and bar snacks. It's fun, noisy, and boisterous. See "Tips on Dining, Japanese Style," in chapter 6.

5 The Best Things to Do for Free (or Almost)

- **Catching the Action at Tsukiji Fish Market.** Get up early your first morning in Japan (you'll probably be wide awake with jet lag, anyway) and head straight for the country's largest fish market, where you can watch the seafood auctions, browse through stalls of seafood, and sample the freshest sushi you'll ever have. See p. 165.
- **Sitting Pretty in Shinjuku.** On the 45th floor of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Office (TMG), designed by well-known architect Kenzo Tange, an observatory offers a bird's-eye view of Shinjuku's cluster of skyscrapers, the never-ending metropolis, and, on fine winter days, Mount Fuji. Best of all, it's free. See p. 180.

- **Walking the Imperial Moat.** It's an easy, 4.8km (3-mile) walk around the Imperial Palace moat, especially beautiful in spring when the many cherry blossoms are aflame. Don't miss the attached (and free) East Garden. See p. 160.
- **Appreciating the Beauty of Ikebana.** After seeing how flowers, branches, and vases can be combined into works of art, you'll never be able to simply throw flowers into a vase again. You can learn the basics of *ikebana*, Japanese flower arranging, at several schools in Tokyo. Exhibitions of ikebana are held regularly at Yasukuni Shrine and department stores. Shows are often free. See "Five Unforgettable Ways to Immerse Yourself in Japanese Culture," in chapter 7.
- **Visiting Company Showrooms.** Several of Tokyo's biggest companies have showrooms, including Toyota, Panasonic, and Sony, where you can ogle their latest products for free. Panasonic even has a cool house of the future (reservations required). See "Specialty Museums & Exhibition Halls," in chapter 7.

6 The Best Offbeat Experiences

- **Viewing Cherry Blossoms at Ueno Park.** Ueno Park is famous throughout Japan for its 1,000 cherry trees, attracting multitudes of company employees and organizations. It's not, however, the communing with nature you might think, as everyone drinks, eats, dances, and sings karaoke, seemingly oblivious to the shimmering blossoms above. Observing Tokyoites at play here is a cultural experience you won't forget. See "Parks & Gardens," in chapter 7 and "Walking Tour: Ueno," in chapter 8.
- **Watching the Big Guys Wrestle.** Nothing beats watching huge, almost-nude sumo wrestlers, most weighing well over 300 pounds, throw each other around. Matches are held in Tokyo in January, May, and September; catch one on TV if you can't make it in person. Great fun and not to be missed. See "Spectator Sports," in chapter 7.
- **Browsing the Electronics Shops of Akihabara Electric Town.** Even if you don't buy anything, it's great fun—and very educational—to see the latest in electronic gadgetry in Japan's largest electronics district, which offers many products unknown in Western markets. In recent years, shops specializing in *manga* (Japanese comic books) and anime have also opened. See "Shopping A to Z," in chapter 9.
- **Getting a Massage.** After a hard day of work or sightseeing, nothing beats a relaxing massage. *Shiatsu*, or pressure-point massage, is available in the privacy of your room at virtually all first-class and most medium-range Tokyo hotels, as well as at a number of clinics in the city, many of which offer acupuncture as well. See "Five Unforgettable Ways to Immerse Yourself in Japanese Culture," in chapter 7.

7 The Best Neighborhoods for Getting Lost

- **Strolling Through Asakusa.** No place better conveys the atmosphere of old Tokyo than Asakusa. Sensoji Temple is the city's oldest and most popular temple, and Nakamise Dori, the pedestrian lane leading to the temple, is lined with shops selling souvenirs and traditional Japanese

goods. As in days of yore, arrive by boat via the Sumida River. See “Walking Tour: Asakusa,” in chapter 8.

- **Hanging Out in Harajuku.** Nothing beats Sunday in Harajuku, where you can begin the day leisurely with brunch, stroll the promenade of Omotesando Dori, shop the area’s many boutiques, take in a museum or two and perhaps a flea market, visit Meiji Shrine, and then relax over drinks at a sidewalk cafe watching the hordes of teeny-boppers parading past. See “Walking Tour: Harajuku & Aoyama,” in chapter 8.
- **Escaping Big-City Life in the Temple Town of Yanaka.** With its many

temples, offbeat attractions, sloping hills, and peaceful narrow streets, Yanaka makes for a wonderful half-day escape from the crowds of Tokyo. See “Walking Tour: Yanaka,” in chapter 8.

- **Taking a Spin Through Kabuki-cho.** Shinjuku’s Kabuki-cho has the craziest nightlife in all of Tokyo, with countless strip joints, porn shops, restaurants, bars, and the greatest concentration of neon (and drunks) you’re likely to see anywhere. It’s a fascinating place for an evening stroll. See “The Club & Music Scene,” in chapter 10.

8 The Best Museums

- **Tokyo National Museum** (Ueno Park, Taito-ku; ☎ 03/3822-1111): Even professed museum-phobes should make a point of visiting the largest museum of Japanese art in the world, where you can see everything from samurai armor and lacquerware to kimono and woodblock prints. If you visit only one museum in Tokyo, this should be it. See p. 164.
- **Edo-Tokyo Museum** (1-4-1 Yokoyama, Sumida-ku; ☎ 03/3626-9974): Housed in a high-tech modern building, this ambitious museum chronicles the fascinating and somewhat tumultuous history of Tokyo (known as Edo during the Feudal Period), with models, replicas, artifacts, and dioramas. Guided tours in English are available for free. See p. 160.
- **Mori Art Museum** (6-10-1 Roppongi, Minato-ku; ☎ 03/5777-8600): Tokyo’s highest museum, on

the 53rd floor of Mori Tower in Roppongi Hills, offers fantastic views of Tokyo along with innovative shows of emerging and established artists from around the world. And it’s open late most nights, too, making it my top pick for a romantic cultural experience. See p. 173.

- **Open-Air Folk House Museum** (7-1-1 Masugata, Tama-ku, Kawasaki; ☎ 044/922-2181): It’s in the neighboring town of Kawasaki, but the 30-minute train ride to this “village” of 34 traditional houses and historic buildings in a beautiful wooded setting makes for a lovely, educational outing. And the photographs you’ll get of thatched farmhouses and other architectural gems will make you feel you’ve left Tokyo—not to mention the 21st century—far behind. See p. 178.