

Tokyo

Asia's Cool, Cute and Kooky Capital

TEXT
IAN SELDRUP

VITALS

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| NAME | Tokyo (originally Edo) |
| ADDRESS | Honshu, the main island of Japan |
| SIZE | 2,187 square kilometres |
| POPULATION | 12.8 million (5,847 per square kilometre) |
| WEATHER | Winter (Nov–Mar): 0–10°C, dry, clear; spring (Mar–May): 11–15°C, some rain; rainy season (Jun–Jul): high humidity; summer (Jul–Sep): 20–35°C, very humid, rain aplenty; autumn (Sep–Nov): 10–25°C, rain and occasional typhoons |
| MONEY | The currency is the yen (¥100 = US\$1.02 or €0.73). Banks are open 9am–3pm (Mon–Fri). Most ATMs are 24 hours, but not all. |
| NATIONAL AIRLINE | Japanese Airlines, JAL (www.jal.co.jp/en) |
| WEBSITE | www.metro.tokyo.jp/ENGLISH |

IN A NUTSHELL

As any self-respecting resident of the planet's "world cities" will tell you, there's nowhere quite like the Japanese capital. Despite being vast and sprawling, Tokyo still runs like a well-oiled machine and it somehow manages to be even quirkiest and cooler than you imagined it. To some extent, its reputation as a ruinously expensive city isn't justified (unless you're planning to buy or rent a property) and there are countless affordable options when it comes to accommodation and dining out.

With its comparatively tiny community of *gaijin* (foreigners), Tokyo retains much of the authenticity that characterises this most homogeneous of Asian countries. This guarantees that virtually wherever you venture you will always be met with tremendous politeness, shyness bordering indifference, and highly questionable English skills – all of which only add to the charm.

There's so much to do that Tokyo can easily keep you engaged for days. Each of the various districts has particular draws. For well-heeled shoppers, the place to be seen in is Ginza, crammed as it is with upscale department stores and designer boutiques. Catch some Kabuki theatre while you're here and come back early morning for the extraordinary Tsukiji Fish Market, the largest of its kind in Asia.

For a different flavour, head to Harajuku on a Sunday to see Omotesando's street performers and the famously wacky Hello-Kitty-meets-punk-rock fashions of certain young Tokyoites. End your days with snacks at an *izakaya*, clubbing in Roppongi, Shibuya and Shinjuku, or a boozy night of karaoke with the salarymen.

GETTING THERE AND AROUND

Narita International Airport sees traffic from every corner of the globe and all the major airlines are represented. Narita's location 60 kilometres from central Tokyo means that visitors get an immediate appreciation of the city's scale – and the budget required. It will cost you about ¥3,000 (US\$30 or €22) to take the 50-minute ride to Tokyo and Shibuya stations on the JR Narita Express train (www.jreast.co.jp/e/nex) or via the Airport Limousine Bus (www.limousinebus.co.jp/en).

The Keisei Skyliner (www.keisei.co.jp/keisei/tetudou/keisei_us/top.html) is cheaper at ¥1,920 (US\$20 or €14) but only goes as far as Nippori and Ueno stations. Getting around is a breeze using the city's two main rapid transit railway networks: the circular Yamanote Line and the nine lines of the Tokyo Metro.



10 PLUSES

1. Low crime rate
2. Great shopping (Ginza, Shinjuku, Shibuya, Harajuku)
3. Fabulous food (*sushi* – rice and raw fish, bite-sized; *yakitori* – grilled chicken or veggies on skewers)
4. Mt. Fuji (just down the road)
5. Clean, efficient trains and subways
6. Politeness of the Tokyoites
7. Authenticity (lack of *gaijin*)
8. Clubbing (Roppongi, Shibuya)
9. "100 yen" shops for ultra-cheap souvenirs (kites, chopsticks and origami paper)
10. Free view from the 45th floor of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building



Stefano Cellai / Photolibary

10 MINUSES

1. High suicide rate (not applicable to tourists)
2. Whale meat on the menu
3. Terrible congestion
4. Waiting for The Big One (no, that rumble wasn't a heavy truck going by)
5. Yakuza, the local mafia
6. Meguro Parasite Museum (over 300 species to see; enough said)
7. Narita Airport is some 60 kilometres from downtown
8. Taxi drivers often get lost
9. Low English proficiency
10. Pricy (but worth the expense)



10 MUST-SEES AND MUST-DOS

1. Witness the *sakura* (cherry blossoms) at the Imperial Palace (Chiyoda)
2. Get your sumo fix at Ryogoku Kokugikan sporting arena (check the official Nihon Sumo Kyokai website at www.sumo.or.jp/eng for tickets)
3. Pass the time at Ueno Park and its museums (Tokyo National Museum, The National Science Museum and Shitamachi Museum)



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4. Browse the electronic gadgets of Akihabara and pick up a last-season bargain
5. Chill out at a trendy nightclub in Shibuya, like Womb (www.womb.co.jp)
6. Stay in a *ryokan*, an affordable traditional Japanese hotel
7. Calm your nerves at the Meiji Shrine, a Shinto shrine in Shibuya and an oasis of tranquility
8. Enjoy a traditional *onsen* hot spring bath (yes, even in Tokyo), such as Seta Onsen Sanganoyu (www.setaonsen.co.jp/english)
9. Splash out on clothes at Omotesando road, Harajuku's amazing fashion mecca
10. Wind down at an atmospheric *izakaya*, a Japanese-style drinking hole serving tasty tidbits

ESSENTIAL EATS

- Heavenly sushi breakfast at a tiny restaurant near Tsukiji Fish Market
- All-you-can-eat *shabu shabu* (hot pot) at Mo Mo Paradise in Ikebukuro (Tel: +81-3 5958 4141)
- Upmarket Fukuzushi in Roppongi (Tel: +81-3 3402 4116) for unforgettable fresh sushi



ESSENTIAL STAYS

- Ryokan Kangetsu (www.kangetsu.com) gives you the authentic Japanese-style hotel experience, complete with public bathing, futons, and tatami flooring for upwards of around ¥9,000/night for two (US\$92 or €66)
- Capsule Inn Akihabara (www.capsuleinn.com) accepts both men and women. It's plastic and only slightly roomier than a coffin, but it's only ¥4,000/night (US\$40 or €29)
- The Ritz-Carlton (www.ritzcarlton.com/en/Properties/Tokyo) is Tokyo's dream hotel, with sublime views from the topmost floors of Roppongi's 53-story Midtown Tower

IN THE MOVIES

- *The Godzilla* flicks (1954–2004)
- *You Only Live Twice* (1967)
- *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003)
- *Lost in Translation* (2003)
- *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006)



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