



TOKYO CAN OVERWHELM the first-time visitor. ☹ It's a populous city—the largest in the world by most accounts. The language is impenetrable—to English speakers anyway. And the jet lag—entire movies have been made about the jet lag. The jet lag is legendary. ☹ And yet the traveler who braves those challenges will find quiet beauty, urban energy, glimpses of an ancient world and flashes of the future. ☹ So we asked veteran travel journalist, frequent contributor and—for a brief time—Tokyo resident Chris Welsch to delve into his first disorienting but heady experience in the city. His memories—and his very practical advice—offer a way to meet the challenges and reap the rewards of this amazing place.

---

# Lost and Found in Tokyo

FINDING ONE'S WAY IN  
TOKYO IS AN ART.

BY CHRIS WELSCH  
PHOTOS BY CHRISTINA WILTON

THE FIRST TIME I LEFT THE UNITED STATES, AT AGE 20, I LANDED IN Tokyo, the biggest city in the world. I'd never seen anything like it. It took almost two hours to drive from Narita Airport to the Roppongi district, where I would be living and working for three months during a college internship at an English-language newspaper. ☞ For the whole 40 miles, the city was relentless: Layers of highways on concrete risers, buildings wedged tightly side by side, and sidewalks flowing with rivers of people. I wondered out loud how I would ever find my way around.

The veteran reporter driving me laughed, "You don't even know the half of it." Finding one's way in Tokyo is an art, he told me—and not a simple one. Buildings get their street numbers based on the order in which they were built on the block, not any geographical system. Complicating matters, the original city plan was designed in feudal times, when Tokyo was called Edo. The streets were arranged in an interlocking maze around Edo Castle, to keep invaders from finding their way to the center.

"The only straight lines in Tokyo are under the ground and above it," he said, referring to underground trains and elevated freeways. "But don't worry. Once you get a subway map, you'll figure it out."

I can't say I ever figured out the intractable maze that is Tokyo, and I got lost more than once, but what I found, I definitely came to love.

TODAY, AS IT DID when I first visited, the Tokyo metro area contains more than 30 million people who inhabit an area of 1,200 square miles. Like New York, it's less a place than an experience. And it can be a completely different experience, every time you step out the door.

Once I learned how to say the name of the cemetery across the street from my dorm (Aoyama Bochi), I set off to explore the sights, jumping into the subway like a parachutist jumping out of a plane. I'd freefall through the city, getting off at a random stop and exploring without being

**Attending a wedding at the Meiji Shrine, this boy (below) may have recorded an "ema", or prayer board (right), for the newlywed couple. Visitors write their hopes and wishes on these wooden shingles, then leave them at a kiosk on the shrine's grounds.**

sure of where I would land. When I got so lost that I couldn't find a subway entrance (or when I stayed out past the last train), I'd hail a taxi and pull those magic words—Aoyama Bochi—like a ripcord to get back to solid ground.

There were—and still are—elements of the old Japan everywhere: deeply



ingrained rules of conduct, traditional temples and parks, a reverence for beauty in everyday transactions. And all alongside the bustle of the modern—the department stores of the Ginza shopping district, the pachinko halls of Shinjuku. Give yourself over to serendipity, and something interesting always happens.



# If you go to Tokyo

THERE'S NO QUESTION that Tokyo is intimidating; how could a city this big and foreign—to most of us—not be? But the fact is, Tokyo is one of the safest, best-run cities in the world. People are courteous, and street crime is very rare. A sense of belonging to the community is very strong in Japan; you will rarely see litter on Tokyo's streets.

Tokyo's treasures are as infinite as its population, and for those willing to be adventurous, the rewards are commensurate.

Each traveler's choices determine what kind of Tokyo they will find. For someone interested in pop culture, clubbing and karaoke in Roppongi will reveal one facet of the city. For someone interested in traditional Japanese culture, a tea ceremony and visit to a Buddhist temple will bring about an entirely different sense of place.

Here are some suggested starting points for creating your own Tokyo experience.

## Asakusa District

TAKE THE SUBWAY to Asakusa station and pass through the Kaminarimon (Thunder Gate) to Asakusa Kannon Temple—the oldest Buddhist temple in the city, and one of its best-loved.

On any day, you'll find Japanese people paying their respects at Sensoji (the Japanese name for the temple), which venerates a particularly sacred statue of the Buddhist goddess of mercy, Kannon.

A short stroll down to the Sumida River will bring you a diametrically opposed vision of Tokyo: the surreal Flamme d'Or building, designed by Philippe Starck. The shining, stout, upside-down pyramid with portholes and a giant golden flame on the roof has become an ultra-modern landmark. The sleek interior includes restaurants and an Asahi beer hall. It's a head-spinning contrast to the Asakusa temple and other parts of old Asakusa.

Much of the district retains the traditional flavor of old Tokyo, however. Its narrow alleys are excellent spots to find traditional, small sushi bars, yakitori stands and noodle shops. Don't be shy. And don't forget: If you're on a budget, lunch is the time to eat. Prices at restaurants sometimes quadruple in the evening.

## Ueno

IF IT'S SPRING, consider a stop in Ueno, the district that is home to one of Tokyo's biggest and most beautiful parks and is also a favorite place for cherry-blossom viewing. The Tokyo National Museum is in Ueno, and is a must for lovers of fine art, archaeology and history. It's all here, from woodblock prints to fine brush calligraphy to samurai swords to modern art.

## Ginza

THE GINZA IS RENOWNED as Tokyo's most expensive shopping and business

In my own neighborhood I stumbled on an exact replica of the Cavern Club, and saw the Beatles performing circa 1962, but with thick Japanese accents. (It's still there, if you want to see the Japanese Lennon and McCartney wrestle with the Rs and Ls in "I Wanna Hold Your Hand.")

In the Ginza, I raised a giant stein of excellent suds at the Ginza Lion, a traditional German beer hall that was built in 1934, when Japan and Germany were warm allies. Only here, the waitresses wore red cowboy boots with their lederhosen and braids.



In Harajuku district on Sundays, tree-lined Omotesando boulevard closes to traffic. I'd watch girls in poodle skirts and guys in leather jackets and ducktails doing the

twist while they listened to Bill Haley and His Comets on their boom boxes. Even after all these years, Harajuku is still the place to see and be seen on Sundays—and

**Tokyo's beauty is often in details. Clockwise from upper left: a woman who posed for just one photograph at the Meiji Shrine; shock-hued octopus in Tsukiji Fish Market; paper blossoms along the way to Asakusa Kannon Temple; break dancing in Harajuku.**

there are still wannabe greasers in evidence—but now it's a more eclectic mix of outrageous Tokyo youth fashion (spiked hair, fur-covered mukluks, neon orange miniskirts) and chaotic musical styles.

The Japanese flair for style is also evident in its varied cuisine. In Tokyo, how food looks is as important as how it tastes, even in the humblest ramen shops, where a fresh bowl of noodles might be artfully adorned with brightly colored fish cake, perfectly sliced boiled egg and luminous

squares of steamed spinach. Presentation is elegant, consumption is not: Ramen, *soba* and *udon* noodles are to be eaten with gusto and lots of loud slurping. I learned to pick up the bowl, shovel in the noodles and not be afraid to make joyful noise.

What's true for ramen is also true for sushi. The aesthetic sense and skill required to properly create delicately sliced confections of raw fish on sticky rice mean years of training. But don't try to use your chopsticks to pick up these works of art.



You'll notice the Japanese people around you are using their hands.

Tokyo is an international city, and restaurateurs are used to having foreign clientele. I grew adept at using the convenient menu of plastic models in display cases to make my order. Sometimes, I simply went into a restaurant and took what they gave me. Inevitably, it was good.

That's how I discovered *okonomiyaki*—a kind of grilled pancake with vegetables and, usually, fish in it. I wandered into a tiny shop with an inviting wooden doorway. Inside was a tiny room, filled with a broad, U-shaped grill. Ten stools were arranged around it. In the middle, an elderly woman in a gray kimono sliced, diced and fried the pancakes in front of her clientele. Even though I could only say “good day” (*konnichiwa*), “this is deli-

district: a great place to people-watch and wander. Mitsukoshi is Tokyo's premier department store, and it's worth passing through its doors just to hear the rousing chorus of the army of professional welcomers who greet you just inside.

If you're in Ginza around dinnertime, head to the Yurakucho area and Yakitori Alley, near the massive stone walls and moat of the Imperial Palace. It's a street lined with small outdoor stands selling *yakitori* (small kebabs of chicken) and other tasty delicacies.

## Tsukiji

IF YOU ARE AN EARLY RISER (or if jet lag wakes you up at 3 a.m. anyway), head to Tsukiji Fish Market, one of the largest in the world. The spectacle of hundreds of fishing boats unloading their catches and thousands of chefs and shoppers haggling over the best, freshest cuts of tuna, mackerel, squid and other unidentifiable wonders of the deep is not to be missed.

## Shinjuku

SHINJUKU IS WHERE the tallest skyscrapers in Tokyo are congregated, and it's a hub of activity for electronic entertainments (video games and pachinko halls) as well as nightclubs and theaters. Shinjuku subway station is reputedly the busiest in the world, with more than 2 million passengers passing through its portals each day.

If you are adventurous, arrive or depart during rush hour in the morning or evening. You're likely to at least see (if not experience firsthand) attendants with big, foam-wrapped bars helping jam the passengers into the tuna-can train cars.

## Underground

SPEAKING OF THE SUBWAY, it's one of the easiest-to-use, best-marked systems in the world. All signs are in English as well as in Japanese. Buy an SF Metro Card (again, the automated machines have English instructions) for a larger denomination (1,000 yen for example). Every time you enter a subway, the toll will be deducted from the card. One passage is 160 yen. Want an advance peek at the subway map? Print it out at [www.tokyometro.go.jp](http://www.tokyometro.go.jp).

## Nightlife

THE POSSIBILITIES, AGAIN, are limitless. But whether you want to watch sumo wrestling, Kabuki theater (Japanese opera), or find a cool place to karaoke, you should do a little research to find the best venue and event when you are in town.

One of the best resources is Tokyo Journal ([tokyo.to](http://tokyo.to)), an English-language publication that specializes in arts coverage. It's a great one-stop resource for listings of events and shows, fun bars and tasty restaurants. In Tokyo, the magazine is available in most major hotels.

## Courtesy

JAPANESE PEOPLE KNOW that most outsiders are clueless when it comes to the intricacies of their customs, and they are forgiving.

A couple of simple pointers: If you are fortunate enough to be invited to someone's house, take off your shoes immediately upon entering. All Japanese homes have a vestibule for shoes.

cious" (*oishi-desu*) and "thank you" (*domo arigato*), I got an incredible meal and became a regular.

On weekend nights, I joined my Japanese coworkers in exploring Tokyo's electrifying nightlife. I had never sung publicly before, but within a week of moving to Tokyo, I was sitting in a bar the size of a large broom closet belting out my versions of Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley (at that time, there were only two English-language songs available on the Japanese machines: "My Way" and "Love Me Tender") to the great amusement of my new friends.

In karaoke I lost all sense of shame,



yodeling like a beagle, performing cheesy eyebrow gymnastics and broad sweeps of whichever arm wasn't holding the microphone. Having grown up in the Midwest, I understood instinctively what karaoke was all about: In a society with many restrictions, it's necessary to find ways to release inner passions. In Nebraska, we scream at football games. In Japan, people sing in bars.

Karaoke is still an integral part of the city's social fabric. Mercifully, the song selection has expanded. Today, I still sing Elvis—but now I choose Costello over Presley, as Bill Murray did when he took his turn at the mike in *Lost in Translation*.



The Tokyo of the movie is warmly familiar to me. I've gazed in wonder, as Scarlett Johansson's character Charlotte did, at the giant TV screens and neon displays at the Hachiko subway exit in Shibuya, which makes Times Square look like a dozen candles in a church niche.

And like Charlotte, when I was over-



The rush of pedestrians headed to work (below) and walking the upscale shopping district of Omotesando Street (above) contrasts sharply with the tranquility found in one of Tokyo's many gardens, such as Hama-Rikyu (left). At center is a popular street dish, *yakitori*, made from grilled chicken.



whelmed by the frenzy of the city, I would seek out one of Tokyo's ancient temples, where fragile wooden walls hold out the flood of technology and busy-ness. My favorite was Meiji Jingu, a large temple and garden complex built to honor Emperor Meiji in the 1920s. It's a Shinto shrine, with giant cypress Torii gates, serene pathways and broad plantings of flowers. In June, the fields of iris blaze like purple flame.

The last time I visited Meiji Jingu, it was a weekday, and a light rain was falling, making the green of the towering Japanese maples all the deeper. The gardens are designed to be perfect compositions—a way to align the mind with the harmony of nature in balance. A few people wandered along the garden paths with umbrellas.

In the quiet of the park, it was easy to forget that the thrumming I could just barely hear in the distance was the heart of the world's largest city, beating all around me. 🌧



People sit on cushions on the floor in Japanese homes, generally speaking. You can kneel, sitting on your feet, or cross your legs, but don't point your feet at your hosts when the inevitable cramping sets in. Just shift your position keeping the soles of your feet down.

Business cards are a big deal in Japan: If you don't have one, get one made. When meeting someone, you should present it with both hands, and accept one in return with both hands.

## Guides

The *Lonely Planet Tokyo* guide (248 pages, Lonely Planet, \$15.99) is easy to use, practical and complete, and it does have a subway map. I also like *What's What in Japanese Restaurants: A Guide to Ordering, Eating and Enjoying* by Robb Satterwhite (178 pages, Kodansha International, \$11.95).

—CW

## Reading the Signs

Increasingly, signs in Tokyo are in English as well as Japanese. Still, carrying a list of common words in Kanji—as well as the name of your hotel and its address—is wise. Here are few useful phrases.

トイレ

Restrooms

電話

Telephone

地下鉄

Subway

ポスト

Mailbox

タクシー乗り場

Taxi Stand

案内所

Information Center

病院

Hospital

交番

Police Box

食べ物

Food

入口

Entrance

レストラン

Restaurant

出口

Exit

現金自動支払機

Automated Teller Machine

("ATM" is also common)

開店

Open

閉店

Closed

Your AAA Travel Agency can help you make plans to visit Japan and Tokyo. Details on tour offerings can be found in Your AAA. Or, for more information, visit any AAA office, [aaa.com](http://aaa.com) or call 877/763-6600.

E-mail your comments about this article to [letters@aaaworld.com](mailto:letters@aaaworld.com). For other travel-related questions, e-mail [travel@aaaworld.com](mailto:travel@aaaworld.com).