



Tokyo Taster

FROM THE QUIRKY TO THE QUIET AND THE SIMPLY MUST-DO, THIS IS OUR TASTER GUIDE TO THE CURIOUS CULTURE SHOCK THAT IS TOKYO.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS JANE HODGES

Tokyo can be an overwhelming city. Home to almost 40 million people, it's a metropolis that sprawls over a staggering 2188 square kilometres!

Neon-lit skyscrapers, anime and capsule hotels contrast with centuries old tea ceremonies, tranquil temples and Zen gardens – it's a place where tradition and technology collide very happily.

There's just so much in this city – to eat, see, buy and understand – that you can't possibly do it all; and if you don't speak Japanese it can seem like a very challenging place.

Fear not, Tokyo is actually a city where setting forth with a healthy curiosity and a buoyant sense of fun will reward you with a set of experiences that you simply won't find elsewhere. Choose your own adventure, beginning with five of our favourites.

Throw yourself in!

Experiencing Nippon Bunka, (Japanese culture) is best done in the thick of everyday life. Ride the train – it's easier than you think, but avoid peak hour, unless you want to make like a sardine in a tin! Buy a touch on touch off Suica

travel card at any station – the larger stations have information centres where English speaking staff will help you load it with a few thousand yen and you're off. Train it to Shibuya Station – try crossing the famous Shibuya intersection – said to be the world's busiest. You can photograph it from the station's glassed walkway or the Starbucks opposite. Explore different neighbourhoods by train – hit Harajuku for outlandish young fashion culture; in Akihabara you'll find all things electronic and anime and in Kappabashi's Kitchen Town there's store after store of professional



Japanese tea ceremony.

cooking accoutrements as well as outlets specialising in the plastic Japanese food models you see in the front windows of restaurants. Buy knives and traditional ceramic bowls here.

Animal Cafes

A Tokyo phenomenon, hanging out with cats, guinea pigs, rabbits and owls is a sought-after novelty. In a non-descript building in the heart of bustling Chiyoda, you'll find Akiba Owls – perhaps the best 'only in Tokyo' experience. There's no food here, so it's not a cafe as you know it. Here you can chill with 25 owls in a space reminiscent of a French salon – replica period furniture, white interior, low lighting, classical music wafting. Owner Shusaku Yabe softly briefs a small group on the healing qualities of owls and the rules of engagement – petting techniques and which owls to admire without touching. During the hour-long



Japanese Tea Ceremony, Ginza.



Akiba Owls – Here's looking at you!



Kappabashi Kitchen Town Tokyo, exquisite ceramics.

session we're each given 20-minutes one-on-one time with the owl of our choice and a photo session. It's very popular, especially with locals, so reserve a session online (up to three days in advance).

[@] <http://akiba2960.com/>

Temple Time and the Art of Tea

Buddhist and Shinto shrines are places of tranquility and even though you may not understand the religious symbolism or custom, they offer time out from the throngs to stroll and relax. The famous Meiji Shrine becomes a crush of locals and tourists after mid-morning, so go early or choose a quieter option like Nezu Shrine, which offers a peaceful temple garden, a lake teeming with koi and the opportunity to observe devotees. You'll notice ema – wooden plaques containing hand-written wishes – hung in the main hall or under a sacred tree in the grounds.

You can buy one of these or an omikujii envelope containing a sliver of paper with your fortune on it. Read it and tie to a tree – which is said to seal a good fortune or neutralise a bad one.

A ritual derived from the discipline of Zen Buddhism, the Japanese tea ceremony is culture in a cup – or bowl, to be precise. Booking is recommended at Happoen Garden's Muan Teahouse, which serves the macha green tea and traditional red bean mochi sweets from around ¥2000 (\$22.50) <http://www.happo-en.com/english/garden/> To herald each new season, free tea ceremonies are held on select Sundays in the streets leading off Ginza's main shopping strip. Autumn and spring are most popular – you can watch from the sidelines, but you must queue up for a ticket (alongside Mizuho Bank on Ginza Street) to sit and be served by kimono-clad hostesses.

Food Hall Crawl

For their sheer beauty and variety of food, both traditional Japanese and western, spend a morning doing a basement food hall crawl of the department stores in Ginza, the city's upscale fashion district.

Harrods' food hall has nothing on these vast, exquisitely stocked emporiums, known as depachika. You can sample anything from the finest Japanese green tea to cheese from the French Alps and buy gourmet ingredients, beautifully boxed Japanese sweets (perfect gifts) and ready-made meals. You can eat-in or pick-up a bento box lunch while you're there. Matsuya, Mitsukoshi and Matsuzakaya stores are all located on the main drag, Ginza Street, a short stroll from Ginza Train Station.

Memory-making

Week-nights it's the haunt of salary men playing hard after a long day in the office, on weekends the yakitori joints and cramped bars of the lantern-lit Omoide Yokoch or Memory Lane on the western side of Shinjuku Train Station, are heaving with all sorts. Make for the top floor outdoor deck of the tiny Albatross Bar to sip Suntory Whisky and people watch.

The best plan is always to go forth with confidence in this fascinating and friendly city and you're sure to come back with your own must-do list. Shiawase no tabi – happy travels! •



Memory Lane in Shinjuku is packed with tiny bars.

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