

TOKYO

A WONDERFUL PLACE TO VISIT!

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LIFT THE TENT FLAPS JUST A LITTLE AND YOU'LL GLIMPSE THE CIRCUS



Picture a black-and-white, '60s-era promotional newsreel, with a strident commentary that goes something like: "Minneapolis! City of Tomorrow!" Then cut to that same place today. Guaranteed it's anything but.

Tokyo was my city of tomorrow when I first visited at the turn of the millennium. Today? Sorry, the Expo left town long ago. But the place is all the more fascinating for that.

Like New York suspended in its Art Deco heyday, Tokyo's street circuitry is hard-wired with an endlessly appealing retro-futurism: the red-and-white Tokyo Tower (stomped on countless times by Godzilla), the monorail built for the '64 Olympics, the chrome-trimmed taxis, sushi conveyer belts, capsule hotels and cone-tipped bullet trains. It's fair to say that Japan's capital – a city of the future stuck somewhere in the recent past – is getting on a bit.

And it's all happened so quickly. Five hundred years ago Tokyo, or Edo as it was then known, was a mere flicker of a settlement on the Sumida River. Today, a tenth of Japan's 127 million people live stacked upon one another like boxed action figures in what is one of the world's biggest urban areas.

For a couple of decades Tokyo's economy has been as stagnant as the swamps from which the city mushroomed half a millennium ago, but it's a malaise too vague to diagnose in the faces of those around you. The salaryman riding the Ginza line, the cleaner mopping a spotless floor, the impeccably uniformed traffic warden bowing to cautious drivers. This is a captivating cast, each in their own way bound by a culture that values privacy and order. Shy Tokyoites, in seemingly perpetual transit, give away little more than stolen glances. Together with the language barrier and all those vending machines, it can make for a frustratingly private city. But like a Haruki Murakami novel, Tokyo has an intoxicating tendency to take a turn for the surreal at any moment. Lift the tent flaps just a little and you'll glimpse the circus.

"You will help me cast the magic spell, master?" coos the long-lashed, heavily made-up "French" maid, in a candy-coated baby rasp. I see from her pink badge she's called Nozomi. We bring our hands together in the shape of a love heart, chant "Moe moe kyun!" and then wave our arms beside our heads like deranged rabbit ears. "Now your beer is happy delicious!" Nozomi giggles, before wheeling away in a twirl of pigtails and petticoats to serve another customer. Forget cultural gaffes at the *ochikai* (traditional tea gathering) – the rituals at Akihabara's maid cafes are much more baffling.

In ten years, Akihabara, Tokyo's electronic district and *otaku* (geek) refuge, has seen dozens of these fantasy hangouts spring up, in turn spawning ever more outlandish spin-offs. "Little Sister" cafes employ irrational waitresses, who one minute might be saccharine-sweet, screaming at you the next like a petulant sibling, then weeping when you leave. At *danso* cafes the girls dress as men, and for the truly niche,

there are "chubby" cafes, a "granny" maid cafe, or even a cafe where you pay by the hour to hang out with cats. Real ones.

Should visitors read into these modern-day *geisha* some collective sickness of the spirit? It's tempting to see Tokyo's citizens as disenfranchised Clark Kents, their secret lives played out in the pages of comic books, in worlds where outlandishly proportioned women always seem to be caught with their skirts up. Or in the "beautician" booths where girls transform themselves, with a bit of touchscreen mascara and virtual eyelashes, into J-Pop starlets. Or even in the cosplay bars of Shibuya.

"Fantastic grow the evening gowns," wrote W.H. Auden in "The Fall of Rome." But the more one explores, the more it's clear there's life in this epic yet. Away from Akihabara, in the leafy streets surrounding the Senso-ji temple, you lose yourself amidst steamy, paper-screened ramen restaurants, shops hawking diamond-sharp kitchen knives, and local ladies in traditional *geta* sandals taking a stroll beneath the ginkgo trees. A picture of confident prosperity, underpinned – or over,

I should say – by the soon-to-be-completed Tokyo Sky Tree across the bay, a majestic 634-meter-tall television mast and the world's second-tallest structure.

Tokyo does understated modernity very well too, as the elegant lines of glass and steel at Roppongi Hills attests. And what other capital boasts such enduring attractions as the clamorous dawn tuna auction at the Tsukiji fish market, the annual Cherry Blossom mania that descends later this month, or bar-hopping the impossibly petite drinking dens that comprise the ramshackle Golden Gai?

But paradoxically, it's Tokyo's more insular quirks, increasingly enthralling to outsiders, which have become a boon to tourism. Akihabara is now a fully-fledged tourist destination, with the Japan Tourist Authority even including a *meido kafe* visit on their "Cool Japan" city tours. At the Visit Japan Travel Mart last year, attendees were all abuzz over Haneda Airport's new international terminal, where passengers can thumb through the latest manga, buy a packet of Hello Kitty dried squid, stroll along an ersatz Edo-era restaurant street and catch some J-Pop at the Starry Cafe planetarium, before riding the Pokemon monorail into the city.

None of this quite explains the robots. Whilst the rest of us have largely shelved the anachronistic dream of mechanoid servants, the Japanese forge ahead with zeal. Take a trip to Toyota Mega Web across the Rainbow Bridge at Odaiba to catch some 'bots tooting trumpets, others doing silly walks and even some that can pull realistic facial expressions. Combine them and you've got a slightly threatening children's entertainer. Put it in a maid outfit and you've got the new Visit Tokyo mascot. I'll suggest it next time I'm there.

FOR THE TRULY NICHE, THERE ARE "CHUBBY" CAFES

USEFUL INFORMATION

Air China operates two flights daily to the new International Terminal at Haneda Airport. Round-trip tickets start at around RMB 2,600.