

Tokyo, Japan: A Vibrant and Varied City

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Perhaps the most important thing to know about Tokyo is that it is huge. In fact, it's one of the most populous cities in the world, with around nine million people calling it home. If, like me, you find that sort of size hard to picture, then perhaps saying that it's bigger than either New York City or London, will help to put it in perspective for you.

It's perhaps not surprising that before our visit there, I had some preconceptions about the city. I expected it to be crowded, with traffic jams snaking through the streets, and smog everywhere making it impossible to see far. Nothing could have been further from the truth though. Certainly it was busy and full of people -- especially on the subway system, where they pack you in like sardines with no personal space at all! -- but there wasn't as much traffic or pollution as I expected.

Instead, we found large open spaces that were home to some of Tokyo's biggest tourist attractions. As we were lucky enough to visit Japan during their revered cherry blossom season, Ueno Park was one of our first stops, as this is a prime viewing location for cherry trees. This perhaps gave us one of our best insights into Japanese culture. Seeing blue tarpaulins out on the ground, ready for people to have parties underneath the blossom was quite something. Even though we weren't invited to any parties, you do feel as if you are a part of it. Day and night time are very different in the park and, by the evening, there's a distinct aroma of alcohol everywhere, but despite that, everything was exceptionally good natured and not at all rowdy, as you'd find in many other cities around the world.

One of the other main parks in Tokyo is Yoyogi Park and the main attraction here is the Meiji Shrine. One thing we found in Tokyo was that a lot of things aren't very old. Mainly due to the impact of World War Two, which saw much of the city destroyed in bombings. Originally the Meiji Shrine was built in the 1920s to honor the Emperor of the same name and it's obvious that he was well thought of, as it was rebuilt in 1958 with money paid for from private donors.

The Meiji Shrine is a beautiful place and very calm, as it's in the middle of the park, but it's nowhere near as grand as the Senso-ji temple. This is the one place to see in Tokyo and is to the north of the city in the district of Asakusa, near the Sumida river. It dates back to 628, when two fishermen fished a small golden statue of Kannon, the Buddhist goddess of mercy from the river. A shrine, then a temple was built on

the site in honor of her and today there's still a good complex left, although sadly, again, much of it is reproduction. Arriving here was when I knew we really were experiencing the real Japan, with the beautiful five story pagoda to the left of the main entrance gate. Somehow nothing says Japan like a pagoda. Of course, that could be because it's the view I'm used to from Epcot!

The city has very much grown up around another important sight, the Imperial Palace. It's very much a mystical place, hidden away and only open to the public on two days in the year. You can catch a glimpse of the palace, with the picture postcard view being the shot of it behind the Nijubashi or double bridge. We've seen many views that we thought would be stunning from the guidebook photos, but have sometimes been disappointed. Not this time. Again, this is very much a sight that reminds you that you're in Japan.

Tokyo's not all about open spaces, temples and palaces though. The vast majority of the city is as built up as you'd expect. Like any other big city, there's a main shopping district and here it's Ginza, which is home to all the major department stores and designer names. In that respect, Tokyo can rival the world's most glamorous cities and the architecture is stunning, with Cartier's building all decorated in gold. At the center of Ginza is the Yon-Chrome crossing and, anyone who's been to New York City, would instantly think of a smaller version of Times Square when they saw it.

However, if you want cheaper shopping, then it's to the west of the city you need to go, with Shibuya and Shinjuku the major shopping areas. The latter is home to the world's busiest railway station that's used by around three million people each day. Everywhere you look around here are train tracks and it literally splits Shinjuku into two, with the shops to the east and the offices to the west.

To get a good grasp of the layout of Tokyo and to see just how much this massive city sprawls in all directions, one place to head for in Shinjuku is the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Offices. I couldn't help but think of the World Trade Center when we visited this place, as it's got both a north and south floor observatory. On the day we visited, we were able to view the Meiji Shrine in nearby Yoyogi Park and Shibuya beyond, but the visibility wasn't good enough to allow us to see further afield and sadly views of Mount Fuji, one of the iconic sights in Japan, evaded us that day.

Parks, shopping and office areas come to life in daylight hours, but after night falls, other parts of Tokyo come into their own. In particular, the younger set head for Roppongi Hills, which is home to nightclubs,

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restaurants and shops and it's also the place to find the Tokyo Tower, based on the Eiffel Tower. It's a very bizarre sight to see something that looks so similar to the Parisian landmark and that experience reminded me of Las Vegas somewhat!

Tokyo certainly does its best to compete with Vegas, as it's also got its own Statue of Liberty in the district of Odaiba, on the other side of the Sumida river to the south of the city. Built on reclaimed land, it's also a mecca for shops and restaurants and again, tends to attract younger people for its nightlife. We enjoyed a superb evening's tour there, seeing the sights and enjoying some amazing views of the rest of the city across the river.

Tokyo is very much a city of different neighborhoods, with something for everyone, whatever age you are and whatever your interests. It's certainly got enough to keep you busy for days and we left knowing that we hadn't been able to see or do everything that we wanted to. Hopefully, one day a return visit will be on the cards for us and we can go back and complete our tour of this wonderfully vibrant and varied city.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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