

# ALPHABET

## TOKYO

Japan's capital has managed to retain a village atmosphere, with specialist areas that indulge people's **shopping, eating and drinking** needs. Part-time resident Felix Claus writes about its best aspects

*Felix Claus is co-founder of Dutch architect practice, Claus en Kaan. Claus lives and works in Tokyo for part of the year*

At the end of June, the rainy season in Tokyo ceases and the long, warm, humid summer begins. The weather in the city is unbearable from this point until mid-September, with a temperature of 30-35°C and a relative humidity that often rises above 80 per cent. The humidity and temperature only relent in mid-October.

My favourite times of the year to visit the city are at the end of December and April; the weather is fantastic and as Christmas public holidays are not held in Japan, the shops are open. Shopping is definitely one of the main attractions in Tokyo. Other major plus points are the city itself, the food, the people, the nightlife, the hotels, and if you really need an excuse, the architecture.

Tokyo is a huge metropolis, yet retains the atmosphere of a village. Radial streets emanate from around the site of the Imperial Palace in the centre of the city, intersecting the circular Yamanote train line. Alternative city centres have sprung up around these junctions between road and train line, each of which have their own character: Roppongi for Americans; Shinjuku for shopping and socialising; Shibuya for young people, and so on. These areas and the main roads are extremely well lit and pavement cafes are also growing in popularity.

The areas in between the main locations consist of small-scale, high-density construction: free standing buildings on minimalist plots of land which are no more than 300mm from each other, in accordance with fire safety regulations.

The Japanese are always on the go and travel mainly by train; they mostly see the city as a series of hot spots with no particular spatial connection.

However, as a tourist, you have the time to look around and drink in the topography of Tokyo and the huge contrasts in population, atmosphere and people. I continue to amaze my Japanese friends with the announcement that 'I came on foot.'

Omotosando Boulevard or the Ginza district offer the opportunity to wander and amble, along with scores of young Japanese ladies who have found their life fulfilment in shopping. The process of serious purchasing, however, is catered for across the city in specialist areas.

For fish, the impressive Tsukiji market; for something to read, the book district of Kanda has architecture books at Nanyodo, and magazines from Kinokuniya, while Tokyo's electronic centre is Akihabara. People with a keen eye for fashion should pay a visit to Isetan Men's in Shinjuku or Hankyu in Yurakucho; seek out design in Daikanyama and Meguro, and for model builders/collectors there is Tokyu Hands department store. Japanese knives at Nihonbashi; 'dolls' in Shinjuku, and Harajuku is a paradise for goths, skaters and punks.

Added bonuses to the Japanese shopping experience include the high quality of service, the record-breaking low exchange rate of the yen, and the low levels of VAT. The only disadvantage is the lengthy process of buying due to the many complicated rituals involving payment and packing that typify shopping in Japan.

The global sushi craze has made Japanese food a little less exotic, and with the bursting of the economic bubble less legendarily expensive as well. It is not difficult to eat for 15 per day in Japan, although much more expensive tastes are also

very well catered for. The Michelin Guide has even made it possible to make reservations at some of Tokyo's most exclusive restaurants where previously, guests were allowed to dine on invitation only.

Japanese restaurants tend to specialise in one particular method of preparation: tempura, yakitori, tofu, eel, tonkatsu, udon, horse meat and many more. A good way to compare the different delicacies is in one of the many the restaurant courts in the department stores (usually situated on the top floor) or in the entertainment districts around the stations.

The food at Tokyo's French, Italian and Spanish restaurants is at least as tasty, if not tastier than their counterparts in Europe. The molecular hype, which has transformed European haute cuisine into a battlefield, has completely bypassed Japan. Here, the chefs are more interested in achieving perfect copies of classic cuisine. Notable examples include Les Amis du Vin in Ginza, L'Artemis Petillante in Jingumae, and Kinoshita in Yoyogi.

Tokyo is a paradise for party animals, and there is ample opportunity to drink and be merry every night of the week. Begin in Ebisu or Meguro with a table on the promenade alongside the river.

You can then grab a bite to eat in Kagurazaka, before visiting a wine bar in Shibuya or drinking Yamazaki whisky at the bar of the Akasaka Prince Hotel (designed by Kenzo Tange) or the Okura Hotel (designed by Yoshio Taniguchi). The bar at the Hilltop Hotel at Ochanomizu is very intimate, serving only six people.

You may then wish to head for Roppongi for some less than prudish entertainment, or visit the gay scene of Ni-Chome in Shinjuku. At sunrise, move on to the Golden Gai area to Deep Purple Bar or the Nurses' Bar. The traditional Homeikan Inn in Ueno is cheap, while the Tokyu Excel Hotel in Shibuya is modern and centrally located and is great value for money.

The truly monumental Park Hyatt still rules, and at times of heavy jet lag, you can study the work of Claus en Kaan in the hotel's library in the middle of the night.

For those architecture junkies among you, one week is a very short time to admire some stunning buildings. There are many good guides for Tokyo modern architecture, such as Casa Brutus, and recent projects have been published so often that they are already old news. For something a little different, open your mind to the almost forgotten work of Togo Murano, Taniguchi Senior, Seike or Yoshida.

*Right: A Japanese paper balloon globe bought at Narita Airport*

