

**Tokyo in the raw: From the steaming bathhouses to the pulsing fish markets, the city throbs with life**

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As I recline naked in a steaming bath, I finally feel redeemed for the awkward half hour I just spent struggling with a bucket and hose in front of Japanese women politely trying not to stare.

Because everyone shares the same water in the sento, or public bathhouses, of Japan, etiquette dictates you must clean yourself vigorously before you slip in - or in my case, before you get to enjoy the bubble jets now pumping furiously away at the kinks in my back.

But the momentary embarrassment was worth it. Here at the wonderful Spa La Qua, located in the middle of an amusement park in Tokyo, natural hot spring (onsen) water is pumped from more than 1,700 metres underneath the ground. Sprawling across a five-floor complex, this is perhaps the most sophisticated of Tokyo's bathhouses and encompasses many sets of healing saunas, baths and open-air pools, all segregated by gender.

The bathing is done au naturel, with only a tiny towel for modesty's sake, but you do get a pair of loose-fitting cotton pajamas for wandering around the complex, whether to have a drink, a massage, or to fall asleep in the lounge in front of your own television set.

It's been a life-saving refuge from the past few days we spent in Tokyo, battling the throngs of partiers, businessmen, and schoolchildren who crowd the streets day and night.

It's difficult to pinpoint when rush hour is as the subways seem as full at six in the morning as they do at 10 at night, and the only time the city settles down for a breather is on its calmer Sunday mornings.

With five-storey plasma television screens blasting Much Music videos at the street corner, blinking neon animation, and the roar of karaoke bars competing for your attention, it's not hard to imagine the kind of toll a city like this can have on the senses.

But because we're still struggling with jet lag, we choose to invigorate our senses right at the crack of dawn at the Tsukiji Fish market, the largest wholesale market of its kind in the world.

Like entering another world, it's a challenge not to stumble on the slippery wet paths while dodging madly speeding forklifts and apron-clad merchants barking at disoriented tourists like ourselves to get out of their way.

Not for the faint of heart or slow of impulse, the market is where 2,300 tons of fish from all over the world are delivered daily and auctioned off starting at 5 a.m. -- some of it still flapping wildly in their crates, and most of it to be consumed within days, if not hours, of arrival.

For these reasons, the most logical place to have sushi in Tokyo is right by the market, where many of the joints form lines that snake out the door and around the corner. At Sushi Zanmai, we settle in for breakfast, where you can point at the fish swimming in tanks right in front of you, and the sashimi we would never dream of touching back home feels oddly right this hour of the day.

Bellies satiated, we slip away from the hubbub to the serenity of the nearby Hama-rikyu Gardens, where we sip on bowls of frothy green tea in the tatami rooms of a wooden teahouse built back in 1707.

In this welcome oasis, we buy tickets for the Sumida-gawa river ferry, which takes us on a long ride to Asakusa, a part of Tokyo once called Edo that is home to the city's oldest temple.

Visited by an estimated 20 million worshippers annually, Sensoji Temple was built in the seventh century and is marked by a red lacquer gate with an enormous paper lantern. Along the way to the main temple complex, we stop along the vendor stalls of Nakamise-dori where we peruse rows of Japanese sweets, intricate fans, and other souvenirs.

Then, as our growling bellies nudge us towards the thought of lunch, we hop on the subway and head over to Nobu Tokyo.

Co-owned by Robert De Niro and world-famous chef Nobu Matsuhisa (who coincidentally got his start in the trade working at the Tsukiji market), the restaurant boasts month-long waiting lists and exorbitant prices at its other locations around the world.

In Tokyo, it is relatively easy to get into -- and if you go at lunchtime, you'll get a fabulous bargain to boot. One of many lunch sets, including the signature dish and De Niro's favourite of black cod in miso sauce, soup, salad and dessert, can be had for the equivalent of \$30 Cdn.

In keeping with the theme, we opt for a similarly luxurious destination for after-dinner drinks later in the evening. Made famous by the 2003 movie *Lost in Translation*, the New York Park Hyatt hotel houses the best view of Tokyo you can get on a clear day on its 52nd floor.

For these floor-to-ceiling wraparound windows and sweeping views of the city, and a fabulous live jazz band performing against its backdrop, a couple will pay at least \$80 Cdn just for cover charge and two drinks.

Make no mistake, Japan is not the sort of country where you can barter for a fake Omega watch and walk away with your wallet only a few dollars lighter. In the markets of Tokyo, under the tarp-covered booths protecting them from the outdoor elements, we saw rows of Rolexes in display cases, to be had at a "bargain" for the equivalent of only \$2,000 or \$3,000.

On more than one occasion, girls were seen carrying purses which we later saw in stores had a price tag of several thousand dollars.

At the same time, next to the steady stream of Louis Vuitton handbags and \$15 lattes, are hundreds of stalls next to subway stations where you can buy a \$5 plate of noodles.

The intensity of the city makes being able to sit down for a sanity break absolutely imperative.

While the high prices make it harder to travel on a budget, you can still find bargains - and have a wonderful time doing so.

### Where to go

The most happening districts for nightlife, shopping and people-watching in Tokyo are Shinjuku, Harajuku (go to Omotesando Street, considered the Champs-Elysees of Tokyo), Shibuya, Ginza and Roppongi.

### Side trips from Tokyo

Take a day trip to see Mount Fuji by purchasing a round-trip discount ticket to Hakone from any Odakyu Line subway station.

For the equivalent of \$55 Cdn, you get various discounts, admission to a cruise, gondola and cable car, as well as local transportation. Make sure to visit Owakudani, a steaming valley formed by a volcanic eruption where eggs are boiled in its bubbling pools until they turn black and are ready to eat.

If you'd like to see Kyoto, a good deal is a travel package called the Shinkansen tour, where you can get a bargain on the combined cost of taking a bullet train with excellent, centralized accommodation. Call toll-free 0800-888-5454 or check [www.jtbmt.com/sunrisetour/](http://www.jtbmt.com/sunrisetour/) for more details.

### Helpful hints

- Tipping is neither expected nor necessary; it may even cause offence. A service charge of 10 per cent may be added at some restaurants.
- Don't eat appetizers that arrive unordered. This is a sneaky way of adding a hefty charge to your bill.
- Learn some Japanese phrases as English is not widely spoken.
- It is not unheard of for reserved-looking men to accost foreigners in the red light district, use suggestive body language, or grope them on the train. The best way to assert yourself in this situation is to call attention to them and shame them as much as possible. They will disappear very quickly.

### Getting around

- A cab ride from Narita airport to downtown could cost up to \$200. Look for private train lines that offer cheaper transportation.

In the city, the subway is the cheapest, safest and most efficient. There are English-speaking staff at every station who can help you.