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THE TRAVEL MAGAZINE OF SINGAPORE AIRLINES



fashion forward tokyo

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geneva fever

WHY YOU MUST VISIT THIS HIP CITY AT THE CROSSROADS

Singapore Airlines International Cup – and they're off!

fast forward to tokyo

Tokyo will be the Singapore Airlines A380's first Asian destination when it flies there on May 20. Award-winning author and long-time Japan-resident PICO IYER shares his experience of the city where 'yesterday meets the day after tomorrow, today'.

Like Tokyo itself, the Shinkansen, or bullet train which travels at 300kmh, is about speed and motion, yet with a kind of inner silence.

Shinjuku, a landmark shopping, entertainment and business district, bustles with life no matter what time of the day it is.

every great city has its own period, with which somehow it is always associated in the mind's eye. Paris, for example, seems still to exist in the 19th century, when Baron Haussmann first planned his wide avenues and expansive gardens, while Venice, with its maze of narrow alleyways, still belongs to Vivaldi's city of the Baroque. Singapore, in the popular imagination, is often associated with a generation ago, when sudden high-rises and super-efficient development turned a port known for its colonial languor into a go-go, super-modern metropolis. Los Angeles famously belongs to tomorrow.

Tokyo, in that scheme of things, belongs to the day after tomorrow, and a future where many of today's dreams have already been realised (and made sleeker, smoother and more streamlined). It's no surprise that the archetypal vision of the 21st century, Ridley Scott's 1984 movie Blade Runner, was set in an L.A. that looked much like the Shinjuku swarm of modern Tokyo, or, in fact, that the Park Hyatt Hotel in Tokyo has become the spiritual home of jet lag, the setting both for Sofia Coppola's woozy movie about disorientation, Lost in Translation, and for cyber-novelist William Gibson's recent exploration of trend-hunters, Pattern Recognition. You don't have to recall that Tokyo is about 16 hours ahead of >>

Los Angeles, and eight or so hours ahead of London, to register that it's a city where many of us, disembarking, feel as if we've landed on a science-fictive planet.

My own first impression of Tokyo, even after 20 years of living in Japan (three hours by bullet-train to the south, near Kyoto), is thrilled bewilderment. You get out of your train in Tokyo Station, the first stop for most of us when we arrive in the city, after taking the Narita Express train in from the airport, say, and you feel as if you've ended up in the back of one of the fastest and most sophisticated computers invented. Signs point towards the colour-coded subway systems, the private rail lines, the separate tracks for bullet-trains, the infinitely complex labyrinth of department stores, hotels and shopping arcades linked to the central building, and you feel as if you're lost inside a future whose language you don't speak. Take a couple of subway trains to the foreigners' area of Roppongi, perhaps, and step out into the light and you find yourself in front of a 53-storey building with an art museum at the top (part of the Roppongi Hills complex), a web of shops that somehow bring the words 'luxury' and 'arcade' together, signs advertising Filipina hostess clubs and Romanian cooking, and automated voices crying 'Welcome' from the video-stores, while other disembodied chirps remind you not to forget anything in the train.

Tokyo, you can easily feel, has the speed and evanescence of a laptop screen, with files being deleted and created every second, so that the whole city itself seems in perpetual motion.

Yet what I always remember in the enormous Japanese capital (more people live within 50km of its Imperial Palace than within the whole continent of Australia) is that the new here, changing by the moment and always tuned to the latest fad or fashion, can only keep going because it is held up by the old. Tokyo, as many residents observe, is a metropolis of villages, a vast sprawl of relatively constant neighbourhoods. The city was devastated by an earthquake in 1923, only 55 years after it had become the capital of Japan, and then, as it began to recover, was firebombed into ruins again during World War II. Yet even as it has gotten into the habit of remaking itself constantly, it has been able to do so only because of what it has retained throughout – like one of those dandyish old men you see on the Ginza who may be dressed in this season's Armani, but who knows how to set off the new with the elegance and wisdom of his years.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: An air of peace pervades the Meiji Shrine; geisha, an ancient profession still alive in modern Tokyo; Nijubashi Bridge at the Imperial Palace.

Whenever I find myself in Tokyo, my instinct is to seek out those pieces of the old without which the new would make no sense at all. I go to Tsukiji fish market at first light (particularly convenient if I'm on the time-zone of some distant continent), and am reminded of the hard work and gritty traditions that have long

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As the digital numbers of this light installation in Roppongi Hills flash and change, you are reminded that this is a city in perpetual motion.

kept this shifting city afloat. I take the train out to Ueno, and recall, as I wander around its main park and old-style museums, how the Meiji Emperor, opening the doors of the long-isolated nation in the late 19th century, saw that Tokyo could draw from some of the genteel dignity of London or Paris. I even take the hour-long train trip out to Kamakura, the Buddhist capital of Japan in the 13th century, whose 70 temples and shrines take me back to the stillness and concentration that are two of Japan's great and abiding gifts, and underwrite the neon even now.

Your kids will tell you that you have to go to Akihabara, the high-tech warehouse of Japan, where you'll find micro-gizmos and cell phone trinkets that look like a boy wizard's feat of engineering whimsy. They may urge you to go to the fashion emporia of Shibuya, or nearby Harajuku, where you can see the spirit that has made anime and manga among the cutting-edge forms of youth culture across the globe. Shinjuku station is one of the busiest structures in the world, with two million bodies streaming through its passageways every 24 hours; and the western parts of Tokyo, where New York lights and European designs and pan-Asian restaurants have all come together in what feels like a dizzying amusement park, which can make the old glitter around the Ginza feel positively retro.

Yet the beauty of Japan as a whole is that it sees no problem in entertaining many things that we take to be contradictory. The public world is extremely ritualised and conformist – which means that the private is often full of wild hobbies and passions. A typical Tokyoite will think nothing of going to a Shinto shrine for a festival, a Buddhist temple for a funeral and >>











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a Christian church for a concert – sometimes all on the same day. And the great shrine at Ise, one of the central monuments of Japan, is reconstructed every 20 years so that it will always remain freshly weathered. Modern Tokyo is now the home of a slowly more international Japan that, by taking in the stuff of California and Europe and everywhere, throws them all together to become ever more distinctly Japanese.

If I find myself in the city on a Sunday morning, I will often take myself to Omotesando, the elegant boulevard of high-end boutiques and sidewalk cafes that can make you feel, walking between the trees, as if you're in a more spotless, curiously exoticised Paris. At the end of the boulevard, you can walk across a stone bridge and into a park leading to the Meiji Shrine that reminds you of everything solemn and ancestral that sits inside the heart of the Japanese system and its imperial hierarchies. Come back out again and walk down Takeshita-dori, a few hundred yards away, and you are fully in the poppy world of crazy Japanese novelties, where girls are wobbling along on huge wedges, curling a Vuitton purse around their elbows, with a Hello Kitty cell phone dangling from the purse.

On the stone bridge that was so quiet in mid-morning (and looked like something from a Hiroshige woodcut), there are >>

As evening falls, the glamorous shops in Omotesando glow with billboards and bright lights, while Harajuku kids (middle) display their famously outrageous style sense.



THIS PAGE: Akihabara Electric town hums and buzzes with life. OPPOSITE PAGE: Stunning architecture aside, National Art Center Tokyo will fascinate with its exhibits.

now suburban kids dressed as invalids, as Goths, as nurses and Alice in Wonderland, their hair jet-black or straw-yellow, making themselves part of the spectacle of the streets as few kids outside the punk world do anywhere.

I remember, when I first moved to Japan, just as its economic boom was cresting, a sign for a power-tool company greeted me every time I got off the plane and walked through the airport corridors towards the Immigration desk. "Our old older, our new newer, our kind kinder," it said, in what could almost sound like a (highly non-Japanese) boast. As the years have gone by, I've come to see that this is a perfect distillation of the contemporary Japanese experience, which finds its apogee in Tokyo. The girls in thigh-high white boots will usually be polite, sweet, even a little shy, if you ask them the way to the shrine. Amidst the hyper-frenzy of the entertainment quarters, you will find demure matrons sitting at tables with lanterns on them, offering glimpses into the future. Tokyo is a furiously new place made up of an aggregation of very old customs and structures and conventions, a day-after-tomorrow that (such is its charm and variety) opens up to reveal many of the earlier centuries that ultimately brought it here.

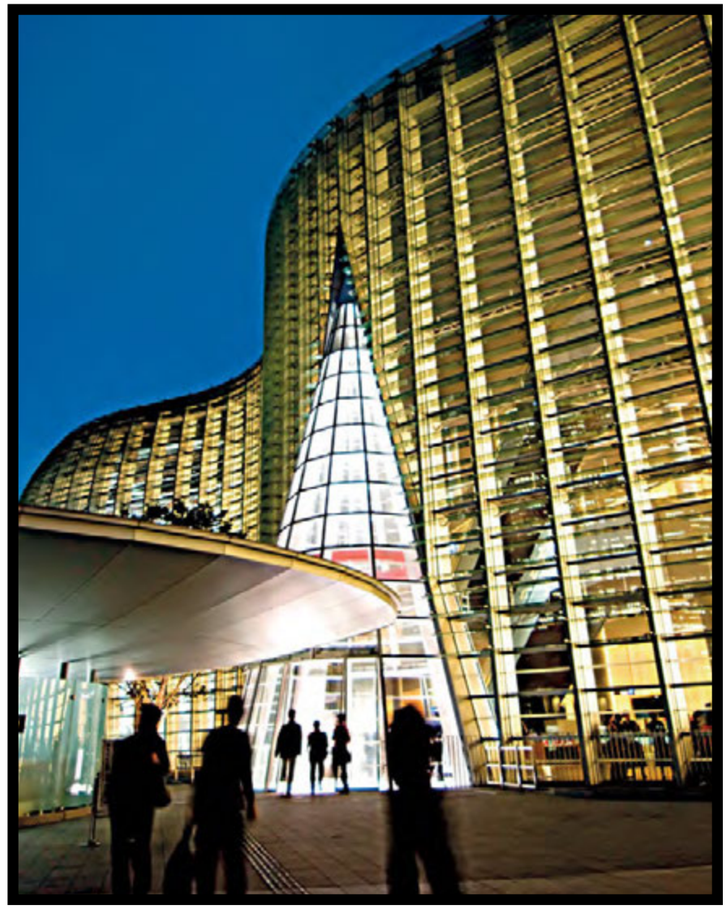
Tokyo's Newest and Best

In a complementary piece, Japan-enthusiast ANDREW BENDER picks some of Tokyo's cutting-edge experiences.

SEE & DO

'Cutting edge' only begins to describe Tokyo's scene from art to architecture, and even transportation.

A cluster of museums, all opened since the turn of the millennium, has given Tokyo a new art nexus called ART TRIANGLE ROPPONGI. Start at the SUNTORY MUSEUM OF ART (9-7-4 Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tel: 81 3 3479 8600, www.suntory.com/culture-sports/sma; closed between exhibits from May 12-23) in the Tokyo Midtown see-buy-dine complex, which opened last year and is home to the city's tallest building at 54 storeys. A current exhibition (on till May 11) highlights the influence of Japonisme on the Art Nouveau glassmaker, Emile Galle, while an upcoming one (from May 24) takes a look at different aspects of Japanese decoration — from the armour of the warlords to Noh and Kabuki theatre costumes. 21_21 DESIGN SIGHT (9-7-6 Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tel: 81 3 3475 2121, www.2121designsight.jp/index-e.html) is in Midtown's backyard; the fashion world's Issey Miyake curated the current show, XXIst Century Man. A few minutes walk will take you to the NATIONAL ART CENTER TOKYO (7-22-2 Roppongi, Minato-ku, Tel: 81 3 5777 8600, www.nact.jp/english/index.html), which will astound with its construction of massive concrete cones and exhibits both big and small, like the current one on Modigliani and primitivism. Cap your visit with a trip to the MORI ART MUSEUM (6-10-1 Roppongi, Minato-ku, Tel: 81 3 5777 8600, www.mori.art.museum/eng/index.html), atop the landmark Roppongi Hills complex. This month features a retrospective on Britain's Turner Prize for contemporary art; the observation floor offers views of Tokyo Bay and, on a clear day, Mt. Fuji. >>



Tokyo's contemporary architecture is second to none, and the buildings are worth visiting just to see what may be arriving in your hometown soon, and for the fun factor. Pritzker-prize-winning Japanese architect Tadao Ando's ritzy shopping centre, OMOTESANDO HILLS, looks low to the ground but expands inside to six storeys around a light-dappled atrium. Ando also designed the gallery 21_21 DESIGN SIGHT, hidden like a flat-topped tortoise in Tokyo Midtown's grassy lawns. Swiss firm Herzog and de Meuron's stunning PRADA AOYAMA EPICENTER beckons with diamond-shaped glass 'bubbles' that encase the trapezoid-shaped building. Located at the boundary of Marunouchi, Tokyo's central business district, and the Ginza shopping and entertainment district is THE TOKYO INTERNATIONAL FORUM by New York-based architect Rafael Vinoly, which has been likened to the hull of a ship bounding the main streets near Tokyo Station. The grand ROPPONGI HILLS COMPLEX is another must-see. Multiple architects contributed to this development, melding east and west around a former samurai garden, facades that remind us of ancient Petra and the 53-storey Mori Tower plunked into the middle as if beamed in from outer space.

In the northern suburb of Omiya, the child in all of us can fulfil our fantasies among locomotives and life-like simulators and dioramas at the RAILWAY MUSEUM. The museum has smashed all expectations for visitor numbers (over one million vs. a projected 600,000) since relocating from central Tokyo last October. Get there by local train (or Japan's famous Shinkansen bullet train), plus a people mover shuttle. (3-47 Onari-cho, Omiya-ku, Saitama-shi, Tel: 81 48 651 0088).

STAY

THE PARK HYATT TOKYO (3-7-1-2 Nishi Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku, Tel: 81 3 5322 1234, www.tokyo.park.hyatt.com) started a trend of sleek and chic Tokyo hotels. Not to be outdone, some of the world's leading hoteliers have since opened here.

The exclusive PENINSULA chain chose Tokyo – by the Imperial Palace and Ginza, no less – for its newest hotel (1-8-1 Yurakucho, Chiyoda-ku, Tel: 81 3 6270 2888, tokyo.peninsula.com), which opened last September. Rooms balance hyper-tech with woodwork like a teahouse in the Japan Alps. Borrow an iPod pre-programmed with walking tours of the neighbourhood or enjoy the hotel's in-house art collection.

You can see clear across the city from the lobby in the sky on the 45th floor of the RITZ-CARLTON, TOKYO (9-7-1 Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tel: 81 3 3423 8000, www.ritzcarlton.com), which also opened in 2007 in Tokyo Midtown. Head to the bar for drinks as the city shimmers below, treat yourself to a jet lag massage and recover in cushy slippers. Upstairs, oversized rooms boast huge marble baths.

And looking to the future (as always), Japan's first SHANGRI-LA HOTEL opens next March in the Marunouchi district, with easy access to Tokyo station.

DINE

The world may have been shocked last year when the Michelin Guide awarded Tokyo 191 stars, more than any other city on the planet, and almost three times as many as Paris, but those familiar with the city just took it as confirmation of what they already knew: Tokyo's combination of top-notch ingredients + fastidious chefs = great restaurants.

You could spend weeks sampling the food of starred restaurants, so here is a short list of award winners. Reserve well ahead and expect to pay top yen.

Tempura is the choice in the glossy confines of ROPPONGI YOTARO (4-11-4 Roppongi, Minato-ku, Tel: 81 3 3405 5866). Sushi in the tiny SUKIYABASHI JIRO (4-2-15 Ginza, Chuo-ku, Tel: 81 3 3535 3600) is a classic, with books about sushi in its name. Twisting paths through rustic gardens around a reconstructed sake brewery match perfectly the refined tofu dishes of TOFUYA UKAI (4-4-13 Shiba Koen, Minato-ku, Tel: 81 3 3436 1028); even non-lovers of bean curd may be converted. For French cooking, chef BRUNO MENARD'S L'OSIER (7-5-5 Ginza, Chuo-ku, Tel: 81 3 3571 6050, www.shiseido.co.jp/e/losier/top.htm) is clubby and posh, while the palatial JOEL ROBUCHON (1-13-1 Mita, Meguro-ku, Tel: 81 3 5424 1347) is so upper-crusty that jackets are required for men and young children are not permitted.

None of this whets your appetite? You have over 190,000 other restaurants to choose from, at virtually any price point.



THIS PAGE: Luxury hotel, luxury location. The latest hotel in the Peninsula chain sits close to the Imperial palace and Ginza. OPPOSITE PAGE: Enjoy top-class dining at restaurants like Joel Robuchon.

PHOTOGRAPHY: PHOTOLIBRARY / CORBIS / PANOS PICTURES / JOEL ROBUCHON / PENINSULA TOKYO



FAST FACTS

CURRENCY
YEN (JPY)
US$1 = 97 JPY

VISA
Requirements vary. Log on to www.mofa.go.jp for details.

BEST TIME TO VISIT
All-year-round but the weather is at its best in spring (late March to May) and autumn (late September to early November).

GETTING THERE
Singapore Airlines flies up to 3 times daily from Singapore to Tokyo. From May 20, 2008, customers on flights SQ638 and SQ637 will fly on the Singapore Airlines A380.

MORE INFORMATION
www.jnto.go.jp/eng