



Photos by: Dr George Tucker / Jonathan Pie

A Day in TOKYO'S Coolest Suburb: SHIMOKITAZAWA

Just a few train stops from the towering high-rises and neon signs of Shibuya, there's a Tokyo suburb that radiates cool from every botanica-dappled coffee shop, cosy record store and vintage clothing emporium, discovers **Suzy Pope**.

At Shimokitazawa station, I'm met with a striking mural dedicated to agricultural workers, a reminder that it wasn't too long ago that this area was all rice fields and farmsteads where folk quietly tended the land. There's still a quiet, easy-going vibe to Shimokitazawa that feels instantly different from the rest of Tokyo as well-dressed, young Tokyoites chatter and laugh their way into the low-rise maze of pedestrianised streets.

Following the crowds, I dive into a world of 20s jazz piped from vintage clothing stores, chi-chi coffee shops and live music venues hidden in basements. Mister Donut may dominate the sweet-treat scene in central Tokyo, but the ramshackle hole-in-the-wall Captain's Donut eschews the city's obsession with mega-chains and has been serving fluffy, crispy handmade donuts from the same spot for decades. A fresh donut pairs perfectly with a foamy, hot coffee from Ballon D'Essai, whose latte art could rival the manga-style street murals that fill this neighbourhood. If you're all about substance over style, they're serious about coffee at Brooklyn Roasting Company where rich and aromatic blends are roasted and combined in-house. "Tokyo and New York worked together to make this coffee," says the barista as he hands me my takeaway cup. "Like Ikebana [the Japanese art of flower arranging], it's supposed to be a balance of flowery notes rising from a cocoa creamy taste." It's just the delicious pick-up I need before hitting the shops.

Once a sprawling black market for American clothes, the vintage scene in Shimokitazawa is a hangover from the early post-war days. New York Joe Exchange is in the bones of an old bathhouse and the uneven tiled floor and pipework on display make it feel as though I've stumbled into an illicit secret. There are racks of plaid and paisley shirts, faded band T-shirts, baseball jackets and Doc Martens wrinkled with time. Around the corner, it's impossible to miss the Flamingo shop with its namesake neon pink sign. Denim jackets emblazoned with sparkling Hard Rock Café logos adorn one wall and there's an excellent selection of trilby hats, bandanas and beanies. The clientele is dressed to impress – a woman in a tweed trench coat and brazen red beret flicks through a rack of shirts with Peter Pan collars. When I compliment her on her attire she smiles and says, "I come to Shimokitazawa every weekend to see what's new here." Holding up a fawn pea coat, she adds, "See? There are so many treasures." I leave her to contemplate a pair of candyfloss pink open-toed boots that look like they belong in a 1970s sci-fi movie.

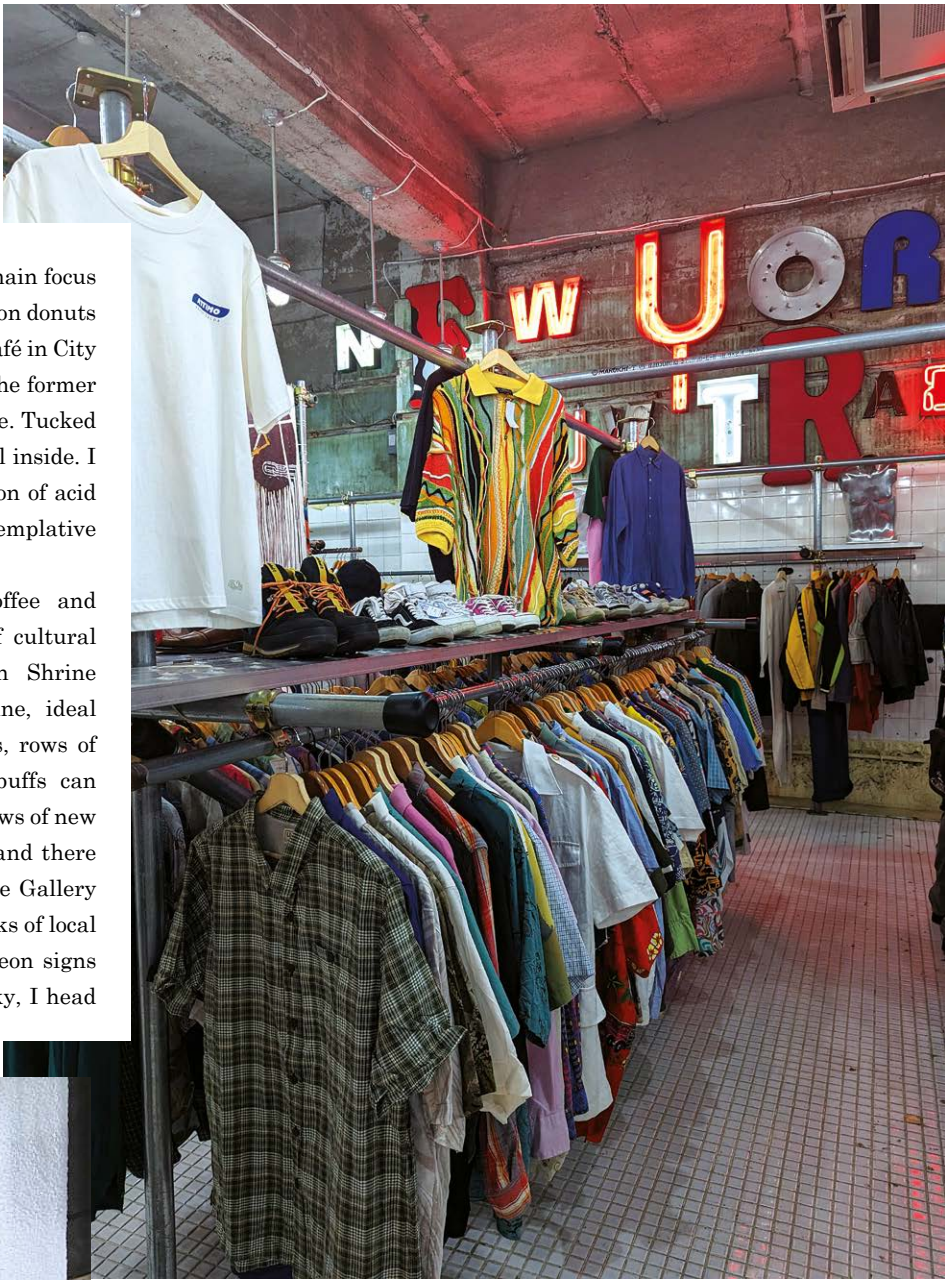
Time for another pit stop. Shirohige's Cream Puff Factory is the only official Studio Ghibli-approved dessert shop in the world and has been turning out Totoro-shaped cream puffs for years. These pastry desserts are almost too cute to eat. Almost. With a line out the door throughout the day and fierce competition for seats on the leafy outdoor terrace, it's best to reserve your order in advance.

Beyond vintage clothing, Shimokitazawa is also famous for its music scene. Flash Disc Ranch is a hold-out record shop from the 1980s and, browsing through the ¥100 bin, it seems immune to inflation too. There are



records spanning every genre, but the main focus is Americana. If I hadn't already gorged on donuts and cream puffs, I'd be tempted by the café in City Country City, a record shop owned by the former frontman of the band Sunny Day Service. Tucked away up a set of stairs, it's achingly cool inside. I settle for perusing the in-depth collection of acid folk and house alongside quietly contemplative customers wearing serious headphones.

For a break between sipping coffee and browsing shops, there are a couple of cultural attractions. The Kitazawa Hachiman Shrine is Shimokitazawa's main Shinto shrine, ideal for a calming stroll between torii gates, rows of lanterns and towering trees. Movie buffs can catch short indie films and sneak previews of new releases at Tollywood Movie Theatre, and there are a handful of galleries to peruse like Gallery Hana and Such As, showcasing the works of local artists. As the modest smattering of neon signs flicker to life against a dusky purple sky, I head



clockwise from top:
The Kitazawa Hachiman Shrine;
vintage store New York Joe Exchange;
independent donut joint Captain's Donut;
Brooklyn Roasting Company roasts its
coffee in-house

in search of a tipple. At Book and Beer (B&B) I browse shelves of inky-black kanji script while sipping a fruity craft mikan ale.

In keeping with its laid-back vibe, Shimokitazawa is home to a great selection of low-key izakayas like Isaka Ya Ism serving a menu of upmarket pub staples. Shirubee is the quintessential izakaya experience with sunken seating, a riot of noise, and a bubbling pot of *oden* – a Japanese hodge-podge stew – at the huge bar. Mackerel is blow-torched to crisp perfection at my seat and, squeezing a wedge of lemon when my waiter gives the signal, the whole bar erupts into applause and the chefs shout “nice lemon” in unison.

The assault of neon signs in Shinjuku and the infamously busy pedestrian crossing at Shibuya have become the stereotypical image of Tokyo, but there are still pockets of quiet to be found in the city. Shimokitazawa offers a calming respite from the buzz of downtown Tokyo, where you can pick up a picture-perfect latte, start a collection of acid jazz on vinyl and peruse endless racks of vintage apparel. Nice lemon indeed. ■



clockwise from top: Shimokitazawa station mural; Shirohige's Cream Puff Factory; vinyl at Flash Disk Ranch; second-hand threads at New York Joe Exchange



Finding Peace IN DA NANG

From leading meditations on Marble Mountain to transforming guests’ eating habits, concierge and wellness manager at TIA Wellness Resort
Tran Ly Du curates transformational experiences for guests

without directly involving her. I recommended our Master Reiki Therapy and the next morning she woke up with an unexplained sense of change in her body and mind. In the subsequent days, she participated in our daily guided breathwork and creative workshops, designed to foster balance, inner connection, and authentic expression and I offered nutritional advice to brighten her mood and energy levels.

Tell us about some of your more unique experiences

The Marble Mountain Climb & Tai Chi, personally guided by me, is a distinctive experience rooted in the principle of FLOW, one of our four key wellness pillars. It harmonises the rhythmic movements of Tai Chi with the exploration of Marble Mountain, a spiritually significant site along the Central Vietnam coast.

As you ascend the 200 steps leading up Marble Mountain, we embark on an adventure together, where each step not only deepens our connection with this natural wonder but also invigorates our circulation and oxygen flow. We then explore the temples, caves, and pagoda nestled within Marble Mountain.

Another is The Lady Buddha Meditation, which invites guests to engage in transformative meditation amid the awe-inspiring presence of the tallest Buddha statue in Vietnam, which is equivalent to a 30-storey building.

What do you like doing in Da Nang when you’re not working?

I find solace in meditating amid the mountains, whether it’s the serene Son Tra or the famous Hai Van pass. My friends playfully call me ‘Mother Nature,’ reflecting my love of grounding myself and appreciating the simple joys of life.
tia wellnessresort.com — HELEN DALLEY

How long have you been working as a concierge and what aspects of the role are most enjoyable?

What I find most fulfilling is the opportunity to curate transformative experiences for our guests and myself, encompassing physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

My journey began in 2014 as a spa receptionist with little knowledge of wellness. However, my curiosity led me to embark on a 200-hour yoga teacher training course. Over time, I expanded my expertise to include meditation, tai chi, creative workshops, nutrition, and wellness tours.

What does your day look like?

My workday commences with leading our guest group yoga class in the early mornings, a serene start devoid of emails or office-related tasks. Throughout the day, I attend to retreat guests, customising programmes based on their objectives. This involves recommending suitable treatments, therapies, dietary plans, and additional activities within the resort.

Part of this personalised service includes leading private sessions, be it in yoga, breathwork, or creative workshops. Beyond that, I customise guests’ private pool villas, from pre-arrival consultations to coordinating special arrangements with our chef in alignment with their retreat meal plans.

What are some of the most challenging requests you have received from guests?

Recently, we had a mother and daughter staying with us, and the mother entrusted me with a sensitive request: she wanted to transform her daughter’s eating habits