

**ON YOUR
MARK,
GET SET,**

T O K Y O

NAVIGATING THE CULTURE,
CUISINE AND MAZE-LIKE STREETS
OF THE JAPANESE CAPITAL'S
BUSIEST NEIGHBOURHOODS
AS THEY RACE TO PREPARE FOR
THE 2020 OLYMPICS



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OUT AND ABOUT

*Clockwise from top left:
a mosaic on the side of a
Harajuku shop; the Tomato Tree
cocktail at The SG Club; dining
out in Shinjuku; kimono fabric
at the Isetan department store;
playing in Arisugawa-no-miya
Memorial Park in central Tokyo;
chef Yusuke Namai at his
French restaurant, Ode*



I'm standing in front of

what's about to become one of the most famous sights in the world: the New National Stadium, centerpiece venue of the 2020 Summer Olympic Games. Though it's hidden behind construction hoarding, the gigantic, spaceship-like structure still looms large over Shinjuku, one of Tokyo's 23 inner wards and among the densest and tallest parts of an incredibly dense and tall city. Work is in full swing even though it's a Saturday and unseasonably warm.

With the first of an estimated 7.8 million tickets selling briskly, the Games are likely to draw unprecedented numbers of visitors to Tokyo, an already-lively city that's one of the biggest in the world. What's more, the number of foreign tourists heading to Japan has increased in the past decade or so—the country welcomed more than 31 million visitors in 2018—and the Japanese government is expecting the Olympics to further accelerate that growth.

While Tokyo's sprawl might seem intimidating, I've been told it's easier to get around than you might think. Primed with a handful of Japanese phrases and a little cultural awareness, I'm ready to experience the superlative food, culture and sights that make this metropolis a must-see.

Dining without reservations

One reason Japan has become so popular with travellers: the country has the world's largest concentration of Michelin-starred restaurants. Some of them are even within reach of the average diner. I arrive at one such eatery, Konjiki Hototogisu, after a 25-minute walk from the New National Stadium construction site.

Like many of Tokyo's small restaurants, the simple ramen shop is hard to find at first. It's on an alley-like street that I locate with the help of my phone's GPS. As I get close, though, the 20-deep lineup marks the spot.

After a half-hour or so, a chef beckons me inside the dimly lit restaurant, which has just a few counter seats. Ordering is done with a vending machine, which is typical at fast-food restaurants in Japan. You insert money, push a button and then receive a voucher for your food—no speaking necessary. With the help of an English-translated menu, I make my choice: *shio*, or salt, ramen, with a delicate broth that tastes of clam and sea bream.

By the time I've slurped my last noodle, I'm a believer. The whole bowl cost just 800 yen (about 10 dollars), and I'm ecstatic. I've had an excellent, inexpensive meal—and I've done it without any trouble. ▷

GOING FORWARD

Cycling past the still-in-progress New National Stadium and its distinctive wooden roof



GAMES ON

Next summer's Tokyo Olympics by the numbers

Nearly **8 million** spectators are expected

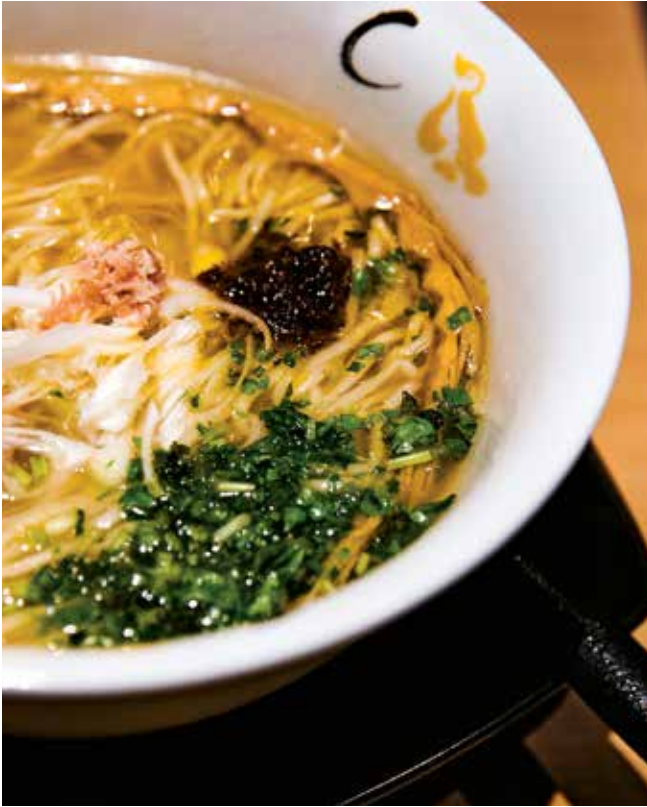
The Games will run for **17 days**, from July 24 to August 9, followed by the Paralympics from August 25 to September 6

5,000 medals will be handed out—all made using recycled metal from old electronics donated by people across Japan

42 venues in and around Tokyo will host different events

56 years will have passed since Tokyo first hosted the Olympics in 1964

6 types of robots have been introduced for the Games, designed to do everything from directing spectators to retrieving javelins during track and field events
—Kristen Koch



LIKE A LOCAL

Clockwise from top left: slurping is an acceptable way to get every last noodle at ramen spots like Konjiki Hototogisu; donated empty sake barrels lining the path at the Meiji Shrine; kimonos on display (complete with the split-toe tabi socks worn with geta, or traditional sandals) at Isetan; a bustling izakaya in Omoide Yokocho, or Memory Lane





GOT A PLANE TICKET?

Canadians are now eligible for compensation of up to \$2,400 if they're bumped from a flight and up to \$2,100 if baggage is lost or damaged. Find out more about what air passengers are entitled to at rppa-appr.ca/eng/know-your-rights.



POINT OF VIEW

Looking out over the high-rise buildings of the city centre to the even higher rise of Mount Fuji from the free-to-visit, 202-metre-high observatory at the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building



Scene and heard

Here in central Shinjuku, an after-dinner stroll can be an adventure in itself. The Shinjuku subway and rail station has millions of daily users, all of whom contribute to the district's non-stop thrum. Landmark shopping destinations like Isetan, a seven-storey department store with everything from kitchen supplies to kimonos, cater to locals and tourists alike. Above it all loom the twin towers of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, whose observation decks offer sweeping views of the city—free of charge.

The busy main avenues give way to a maze of tiny laneways. Each one is lined with bars, and each bar is full of business-suited salarymen drinking at tables made from stacked plastic crates. I wander into the alley

known as Omoide Yokocho, or Memory Lane, a holdout from the postwar period, before Japan's mid-20th-century economic miracle

and subsequent real estate boom transformed Tokyo into a towering metropolis. The narrow street is crowded with *izakayas*, gastropubs serving small plates of food, many of which scarcely have enough room for diners to pull out their stools. When I choose a place, an elderly grill-master greets me with a smile and fishes an English menu out of a drawer. I order an assortment of flame-kissed meat and vegetable skewers. They're delicious, and I try to say so in Japanese. The cook laughs in reply and jovially shows me the door.

Past and present

Waking up in my room on the 37th floor of the Keio Plaza Hotel, I gaze out the window. Mid- and high-rise buildings completely dominate the landscape. Though Tokyo is more than four centuries old, it has been destroyed multiple times, most recently during the Second World War. As a result, the city retains few physical traces of its past.

It does, however, find surprising ways to honour its heritage. I take the train from ▷

RITE IN PASSAGE

Pausing to reflect during a visit to the Meiji Shrine, which will mark the 100th anniversary of its founding in 2020

FIND YOUR WAY

Five tips to getting around as a *gaijin* (foreigner) in Tokyo

1.

Use Google Maps.

Many city streets have no name, and street numbers aren't necessarily sequential, so Google's directions could save you hours of wandering.

2.

Take the subway.

English signage is plentiful, the network is vast (but cheap!), and Google Maps can often point you to the subway exit closest to your destination.

3.

Bring cash.

Even larger businesses sometimes don't take credit cards. If you run out of yen, there are usually ATMs in convenience stores.

4.

Look around.

Is everyone else standing on the left side of the escalator? Then you should, too.

5.

Research restaurants.

Some accept reservations online; some only take phone bookings from Japanese numbers. Ask your hotel's front desk if you need help, and if you make a reservation, show up on time. —K. K.

Shinjuku to adjacent Shibuya, another central ward that will host Olympic venues. At the edge of a shopping district, I slip through a gate into a lush forest that conceals the Meiji Shrine, a Shinto temple dedicated to the spirit of Japan's Emperor Meiji, who ruled until his death in 1912. The main building, with its long, curving eaves, looks ancient amidst the woodsy surroundings. But it's actually a replica, built in 1958 to replace the 1920 original, which was destroyed during the war. As I stroll the gravel paths, a wedding procession with Shinto priests begins to cross the complex's courtyard.

Not far from the Meiji Shrine is Harajuku, a Shibuya neighbourhood known as a hub for trendy fashion. Takeshita Street, the main retail drag, is full of stores selling new and second-hand garments, and the people-watching is second to none: teenagers flock here to show off outfits that are both outlandish and immaculately put together.

Small wonders

International media coverage of the Olympics will tease out the flashy parts of Tokyo, of which there are plenty. But more refined indulgences await visitors inclined to seek them.

The upscale Hiroo section of Shibuya has become a destination for travellers and expats. It's where I head for lunch at Ode, a two-year-old restaurant that's earned a reputation for its Japanese-inflected French cuisine. The dining room consists of a U-shaped counter with exactly 13 seats. The floor, ceiling and the countertop itself are done up in varying shades of concrete grey. Drake's "Passionfruit" plays discreetly on the sound system. Everything is quite pointedly—and a bit unnervingly—cool.

But I forget my anxieties when the food starts to arrive. There's no menu, per se; instead, an *omakase*-style meal unfolds over the next two hours, which means the chef chooses each dish for me. One offering looks inedible, seemingly a pile of stone flakes, until I realize that they're thin sheets of meringue concealing intensely flavourful beef tartare.

After, I head for a nightcap at The SG Club, a Shibuya cocktail bar made to resemble a Japanese person's idea of a 19th-century American saloon. I order a drink called the Tomato Tree, which seems like it could be akin to a Caesar. It turns out to be a clear concoction of tomato water, gumtree sap and elderflower liqueur, served in a salt-rimmed highball glass. The concentrated tomato flavour is surprising; I even taste a peppery hint of tomato stem.

It's not what I was expecting, but it's somehow exactly what I want, and I leave rejuvenated. I'm ready for whatever other surprises the city has in store—and Tokyo is ready to reveal them. **CAA**



FLAVOURS OF THE WEEK

Top to bottom: the bar at Sip, one of The SG Club's two areas (the other is the more casual Guzzle); meringue flakes covering the beef tartare dish at Ode