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DESTINATION

The Japanese capital fizzles with fast-paced, futuristic attractions, along with serene historic spots and vintage shops

Time out in Tokyo

Getting lost in foreign cities has always been a thrilling part of exploring new destinations, but my visit to Tokyo provided me with a new level of disorientation: my first experience of getting lost underground. The sprawling subterranean world of Tokyo Station proved to be a maze that I could not master.

Passageways through the 182,000 sqm complex connect some 28 platforms to different metro lines and train lines (run by multiple operators), as well as hundreds of shops and restaurants – including a dedicated area of noodle spots aptly known as Ramen Street – while walkways also link the station to shopping centres and office buildings.

Despite the bewildering layout, the underground behaviours are far more familiar and reminiscent of those in London, with up to 450,000 travellers a day walking through you at speed to get from A to B. It's the one space in Tokyo where polite society is seemingly forgotten, particularly during rush hour when *oshiya*, professional “pushers”, squeeze passengers on to carriages.

Above ground, the Marunouchi business district is equally fast

paced, with gleaming skyscrapers, government headquarters, high-end shops and cultural attractions. But beyond the hustle-and-bustle, the busy commercial centre is also home to beautiful, serene parks and remnants of the country's historic past.

Past meets present

Exit on the west side of Tokyo Station and you'll find a royal oasis offering a welcome respite from the crowded city streets. The Imperial Palace, the official residence of the Japanese emperor, lies in expansive grounds that sit on the site of the former Edo Castle, which was ruled by the Tokugawa shoguns during the Edo period (1603-1867). It's a striking sight, with the original moats, imposing entrance gates, lush greenery and guardhouses juxtaposed with neighbouring glass towers ruled by financial firms.

While the palace is closed to the public, the East Gardens of the Imperial Palace are free to visit and open year-round. I spent hours navigating the 210,000 sqm plot, which features bamboos of Japanese and Chinese origin, seasonal plants and flowers (including more than 30 species of cherry blossom) a sprawling



lawn decorated with shadows of contorted trees, and the remnants of the main tower of the Edo Castle.

Just south of here is the equally historic 16-hectare Hibiya Park, which served as feudal grounds during the Edo period and was converted into a public park at the start of the 20th century – complete with an approximately 500-year-old ginkgo tree. While soaking up the history, I joined fellow visitors in *momijigari* – admiring the autumn leaves – with both parks in their *koyo* (red leaves) prime.

Antiques galore

Antiquity and modernity also intersect in the retail sector. For many, the shopping scene in Tokyo will conjure images of the glossy

Ginza district, where glass-clad flagship stores of high-end designers sparkle in the day and continue to beam as night falls. Far more suited to my taste (and budget) however is the Oedo Antique Market, the largest outdoor market of its kind in Japan. Twice a month, locals and visitors alike flock to the open-air plaza beside the Tokyo International Forum in Marunouchi to peruse stalls filled with trinkets, Japanese pottery, tableware and one-off treasures.

The market takes place every first and third Sunday of the month (October 15 and 21), but should your trip not align with these dates, relics of the past can be sourced from the bohemian

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Rush hour in Tokyo; Shimokita Garage Department and other indie shopping options in Shimokitazawa; the East Gardens of the Imperial Palace

Held twice a month, people flock to Oedo Antique Market, the largest of its kind in Japan



Shimokitazawa district in Tokyo's Setagaya Ward.

Formerly a farming community, this hip neighbourhood is distinctly calmer than the city centre and packed with colourful alleyways dotted with vintage shops, vinyl stores and independent coffee shops. It's impossible to define the architectural style here, with retro 1960s signage bordering gothic typography and industrial facades. Abandoned sites have also been revitalised, with the New York Joe Exchange store occupying a former public bathhouse, while railings of bomber jackets have set up shop in the brick-arched Shimokita Garage Department.

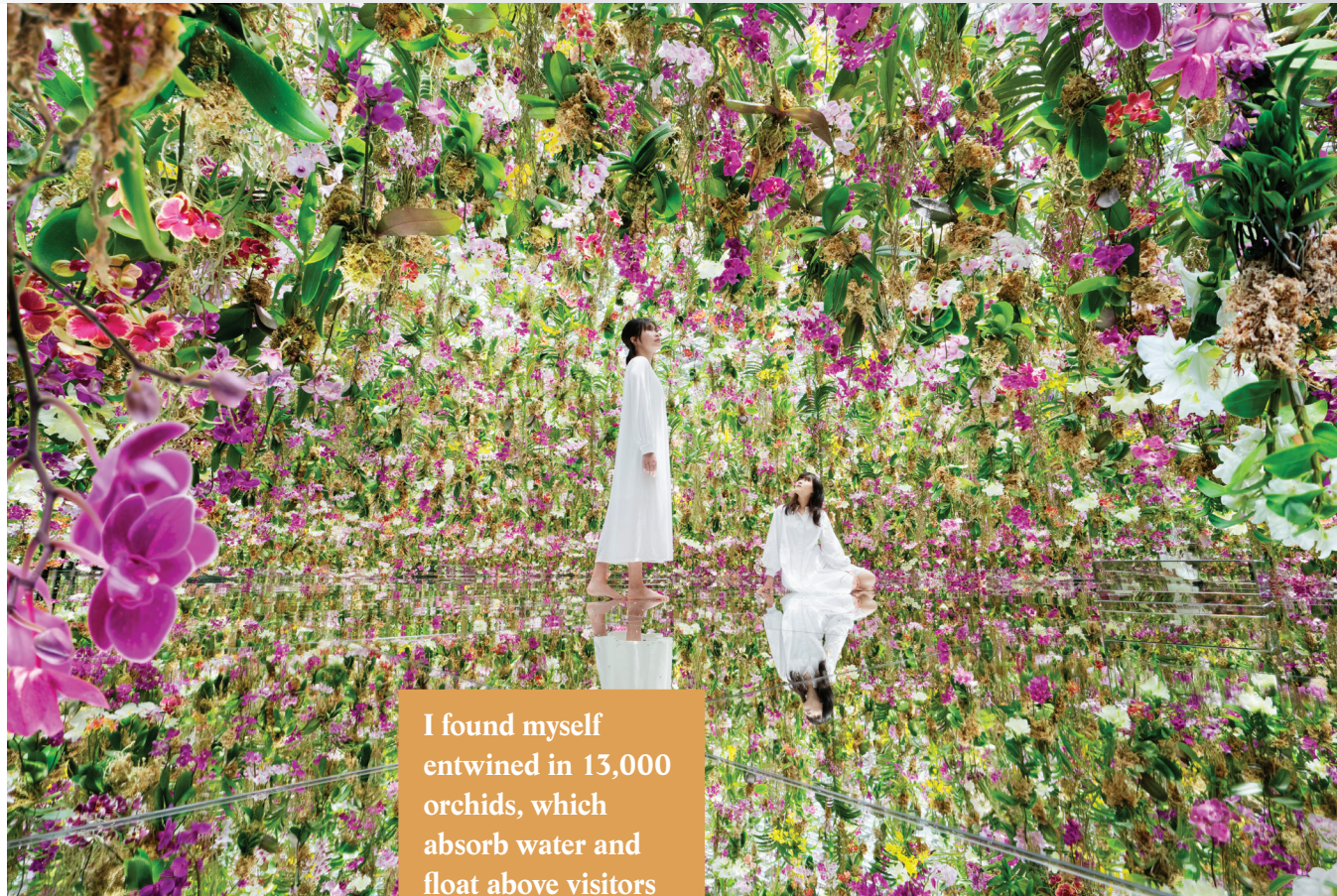
The former Odakyu railroad has also been transformed into an open-air shopping development, titled Reload, with more than 20 shops and restaurants launched in 2021. Development of this neighbourhood is ongoing, with construction sites during my visit a sign of the pipeline ahead and a source of controversy for some locals, who are fighting to maintain its independent feel.

Digital discovery

Following my foray into Tokyo's retro era, with a haul of 80s threads in tow, it was time for a volte-face. International art collective teamLab offers an immersion in Tokyo's high-tech scene. You might have witnessed its multi-sensory digital art installations that tour around the world, but Tokyo is home to two of its large-scale permanent exhibition sites – teamLab Borderless, which reopens in Azabudai Hills in central Tokyo in January 2024, and teamLab Planets in eastern Tokyo's Toyosu.

The latter is a 10,000 sqm museum with four ‘body immersive’ exhibition spaces and two gardens, each designed to tickle your senses. The focus here is on interaction, with many of the computer-designed works rendered in real time and changing depending on the visitor's movements – they are neither pre-recorded nor on a loop.

I began my adventure by wading through knee-deep water, encircled →



I found myself entwined in 13,000 orchids, which absorb water and float above visitors

by projections of koi fish that morphed into flowers when they collided with fellow visitors. Later I found myself entwined in 13,000 orchids, which absorb water from the air and float above visitors as they approach thanks to high-tech sensors. The experience is a spectacular visual feast, fitting for today's age of Instagram, and the exhibition has been extended until the end of 2027 due to popular demand and a growing interest in digital art.

My return to the city centre, however, reminded me that nature still gives digital art a run for its money. As my taxi passed over the Kachidoki Bridge, Tokyo's skyscrapers formed shadowy silhouettes against a jaw-dropping pink-hued sky – a vista that will be hard to forget.

Dynamic dining

Back in the city centre, it was time to explore the world-class dining scene, where venues range from hidden haunts in residential blocks to hole-in-the-wall eateries tucked under railway arches and Michelin-starred

institutions in five-star hotels. My trip featured all three, and yet I still feel like I've only scratched Tokyo's surface.

My gustatory adventure began in the back alleyways of Ginza, searching for Rock Fish, a bar made famous by word-of-mouth. Located in a nondescript building, the discreet dive bar has just a handful of tables and specialises in iceless Japanese whiskey highballs, served alongside sweet and savoury snacks.

Suitably refreshed, I headed to the brash and busy Andy's Shin Hinomoto, located under the tracks in Yurakucho. This cramped, vaulted *izakaya*-style venue is run by English expat Andy, who sources produce daily from Toyosu Market. The menu is a guide only, though you can count on

plates of fresh sashimi, fried chicken and tempura. While popular with tourists, this spot is also a hit with the after-work crowd, with fellow diners avoiding soy sauce dripping down their suits as they partook in sushi and *shochu* sours.

Those with a taste for finer things are also in the right place, with Tokyo boasting the most Michelin stars in the world – a total of 263 in 2023. Among these is Sezanne at the Four Seasons Hotel Tokyo at Marunouchi, which opened in 2021 and received

its second Michelin last year. Overseen by British chef Daniel Calvert, tasting menus marry Japanese ingredients with French techniques – say, Matsutake mushrooms *en papillote* – while an open kitchen enables you to watch the expertly choreographed performance.



FROM TOP: Immersive art experience teamLab Planets features vivid orchids; whiskey highballs at one of Tokyo's bars, Rock Fish

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Up to 3,000 people
at a time flood
Tokyo's Shibuya
Crossing, the world's
busiest intersection



And then there are the dazzling sky-high destinations. While I started my trip underground, it ended in the clouds with a glass of fizz at Shibuya Sky, a 360-degree observation deck on the 47th floor of the Shibuya Scramble Square skyscraper. Tokyo Tower glowed in orange straight ahead, and I'm told that you can see Mount Fuji on a clear day.

Despite such eye-catching landmarks, my gaze was instead a bird's eye one, focused on the ant-like figures scurrying across Shibuya Crossing – the world's busiest pedestrian crossing.

At any one time you can see 3,000 people flooding the intersection, each on their own journey through the multifaceted city. Perhaps you too will join the scramble on your next visit – provided you can find your way out of Tokyo Station. **BT**

FROM TOP:
Izakaya Andy's
Shin Hinomoto in
Yurakucho delivers
fresh plates of sushi
from Toyosu Market

NEW HOTELS

There's been an exciting array of luxury accommodation openings in the Japanese capital. See businessstraveller.com/features for the full pipeline ahead.



Four Seasons Hotel Tokyo at Otemachi

Four Seasons opened its second hotel in Tokyo in September 2020, which occupies the top six floors of the 39-storey Otemachi One Tower in business district Otemachi.

The 190-room hotel has four F&B venues, including the Michelin-starred Est, a spa and ample meeting and events space. For a full review, see businessstraveller.com/tried-and-tested. fourseasons.com

Tokyo EDITION Toranomon

The Marriott brand debuted in Tokyo in October 2020 with this 206-room hotel, complete with three restaurants, three lounge bars, a spa, gym and events space. Designed by Kengo Kuma, the hotel has views of the Tokyo skyline. A second EDITION hotel will open in the commercial district of Ginza before the end of the year. marriott.com



Bulgari Hotel Tokyo

Japan's first Bulgari hotel opened in April, and occupies the top six floors of a skyscraper in the Yaesu 2-Chome North District. The hotel features design by Antonio Citterio Patricia Viel and offers 98 rooms and suites, as well as dining venues including Il Ristorante – Niko Romito, and sushi restaurant Hoseki. The 40th floor is home to a 1,000 sqm spa, fitness centre and indoor pool. bulgarihotels.com



Pan Pacific Hotels Group

In May, the group opened Bellustar Tokyo, a Pan Pacific Hotel, and Hotel Groove Shinjuku, a Parkroyal Hotel, within the 48-storey Tokyu Kabukicho Tower in Shinjuku. Bellustar Tokyo features 97 rooms and five penthouse suites on the upper floors, along with three restaurants, plus a spa. Hotel Groove Shinjuku offers 538 rooms on floors 18-38, and 17th floor dining and bar space JAM17. panpacific.com



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