



Tokyo by night.

**W**here do you start with a city such as Tokyo? Officially the largest city in the world with 34 million people calling greater Tokyo home and with eight million of those living in central Tokyo, it's easy to become lost in the crowd. So, it was with some trepidation that I sat in the comfort of the Shinkansen bullet train from Nagoya with my guide book open, trying to learn as much as I could about the subway and rail system so I could get around and enjoy the next five days.

I can now say with confidence that I need not have worried as the system was easy to navigate with plenty of information at hand. Opting to stay in a hotel adjacent to Shinjuku station, Tokyo's main thoroughfare, I had the ideal launching pad for exploring the extraordinary city. However, I was soon to discover that five days was never going to be enough time.

Before I even started sightseeing, I marked off the JR Yamanote line on the subway system. This line follows a perfect loop through the city with stops at virtually all the main points of interest. Heading south from Shinjuku, Harajuku has fabulous one-off speciality shopping and the adjacent Yoyogi Park, is home to the Meiji Shrine and fashion conscious teenagers performing their own amateur dramatics.

Next stop or walking distance away is Shibuya, the centre of Tokyo's youth culture where giant screens show the latest commercials and J-pop videos and cheap stores and restaurants come alive with lights and colour. Don't miss Dogenzaka and its collection of love-themed hotels. The trendy, upmarket enclaves

of Ebisu and Daikanyama are next, where high class boutiques, smartly dressed residents and funky architecture make it the perfect stop for a breather and good coffee.

Speeding along the southern part of the subway is Shinbashi, which is the gateway to the famous Ginza area. This shouldn't need much introduction to the shopaholics out there, but those unaware, it is Tokyo's 5th Avenue equivalent. Just a stones throw from there is Yakitori Alley, an old style street built under the train tracks, offering traditional food and cheap cold beer.

Moving on from shopping, it is important to make time for the more historic and cultural side of the city. Central Tokyo station was the next point of interest on this whistle stop visit, with its beautiful building showcasing some of the best examples of early 20th century architecture. It is also located close to the Imperial Palace, formerly the Tokugawa family's residence with its surrounding gardens and famous Nijubashi Bridge in front of the main entrance. Tokyo Tower is also within view from here if a trip up the two observation towers is on your list of must dos.

Two stops of varying interest follow from here. Akihabara or better known as Electric Town, is packed with all the latest and greatest in cameras, phones, video games and DVDs. This area also boasts the stunning temples Asakusa and Ueno and Senso-Ji.

Hopping back onto the subway, around the northern loop and back to Shinjuku, the sheer scale of the city's busiest hub becomes more apparent. More than two



million people pass through this station everyday. In this area, you will find Gyoen Park. Built in 1906, it is an oasis of teahouses, lakes and gardens. Then there is Japan's largest department store in Takashimaya Times Square, the entertainment areas of Kabukicho and Nichome, plus, on the west side of the station, the stunningly symmetrical government building and skyscraper offices. It's true what they say that Shinjuku never sleeps.

There is so much to see and do in Tokyo and surprisingly it is not as expensive as people believe. No more costly than visiting a European city, if you plan your day carefully, it is possible to come out with a few spare yen in your pocket. Language is not an issue as the Japanese are extremely hospitable, offering plenty of help (in English) when it comes to directions, places to eat and things to do.

The memories, sights and wonderful people that I came across in this vibrant city was an experience to behold and I haven't even mentioned the trips to the grand sumo tournament, to the sell-out Tokyo Dome to cheer on the Yomiuri Giants baseball team or the Kabuki and Noh forms of traditional Japanese Theatre.

Sayonara.

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