TOP PICKS

Tokyo: three ways

Tokyo’s futuristic streetscapes also contain historical alleys, raucous traditional festivals and lantern-lit yakitori (grilled chicken) stands of yore. See the best of the old city on our guided walk of Asakusa district.

FOR FIRST-TIMERS

Mitsukoshi (mitsukoshi.co.jp; 1-4-1 Nihombashi-Muromachi)  
Mitsukoshi’s Nihombashi branch was Japan’s first department store. It’s a grand affair with an entrance guarded by bronze lions and a magnificient statue of Magokoro, the goddess of sincerity, rising up from the centre of the ground floor. For the full effect, arrive at 10am for the bells and bows that accompany each day’s opening.

Sensō-ji (senso-ji.jp; 2-3-1 Asakusa, Taito-ku)  
Tokyo’s most visited temple enshrines a golden image of Kannon (the Buddhist goddess of mercy) who, according to legend, was miraculously pulled out of the nearby Sumida-gawa by two fishermen in 628 AD. The image has remained on the spot ever since, but is never on public display.

Shibuya Crossing (Shibuya Scramble)  
Rumoured to be the busiest intersection in the world (and definitely in Japan), Shibuya Crossing is like a giant beating heart, sending people in all directions with every pulsing light change. Perhaps nowhere else says ‘Welcome to Tokyo’ better than this. Hundreds of people – and at peak times said to be over 1,000 people – cross at a time, coming from all directions at once, yet still managing to dodge each other with a practised, nonchalant agility.

Edo-Tokyo Museum (edo-tokyo-museum.or.jp; 1-4-1 Yokoami)  
This museum documents Tokyo’s transformation from tidal flatsland to feudal capital to modern metropolis. There are detailed models of townscapes, villas and tenement homes, plus artefacts such as ukiyo-e (woodblock prints) and old maps.

Maisen (mai-sen.com; 4-8-5 Jingumae, Shibuya-ku)  
You could order something else (maybe fried shrimp), but everyone else will be ordering the famous tonkatsu (breaded, deep-fried pork cutlets). There are different grades of pork on the menu, including prized kurobuta (black pig), but even the cheapest is melt-in-your-mouth divine. The restaurant is housed in an old public bathhouse. A takeaway window (10am to 7pm) serves delicious tonkatsu sando (breaded pork sandwiches).

Meiji-jingu (meijijingu.or.jp; 1-1 Yoyogi, Shibuya-ku)  
Tokyo’s grandest Shintō shrine is dedicated to the Emperor Meiji and Empress Shōken, whose reign (1868–1912) coincided with Japan’s transformation from isolationist, feudal state to modern nation. Constructed in 1920, the shrine was destroyed in WWII air raids and rebuilt in 1958; however, unlike so many of Japan’s post-war reconstructions, Meiji-jingū has atmosphere in spades. The main shrine is in a leafy wooded grove.

FOR REPEAT VISITORS

Cafe de l’Ambre (8-10-15 Ginza, Chūō-ku)  
The sign over the door here says ‘Coffee Only’ but, oh, what a selection. Seikizuki Ichiro started the business in 1948 and – remarkably at the age of 100 – still runs it himself, sourcing and roasting aged beans from all over the world. It’s dark, retro and classic Ginza.

Ghibli Museum (ghibli-museum.jp; 1-1-83 Shimo-Renjaku)  
Fuka Master animator Miyazaki Hayao, whose Studio Ghibli produced Princess Mononoke and Spirited Away, designed this museum. Fans will enjoy the original sketches; kids, even if they’re not familiar with the movies, will fall in love with the fairytale atmosphere (and the big cat bus).

Itoya (ito-ya.co.jp; 2-7-15 Ginza, Chūō-ku)  
Nine floors (plus several more in the nearby annex) of stationery-shop love await at this famed, century-old Ginza establishment. There are everyday items (such as notebooks and greeting cards)

Don’t miss  
Kōenji Awa Odori is Tokyo’s biggest awa odori (dance festival for O-Bon, the annual Buddhist commemoration of one’s ancestors). Twelve thousand participants in traditional costumes dance their way through the streets over the last weekend of August (koenji-awaodori.com).

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and luxuries (such as fountain pens and Italian leather agendas). You’ll also find washis (fine Japanese handmade paper), temugis (beautifully hand-dyed thin cotton towels) and furoshiki (wrapping cloths).

Kikunoi (kikunoi.jp; 6-18-Akasaki)
Expensively prepared seasonal dishes are as beautiful as they are delicious at this Tokyo outpost of one of Kyoto’s most renowned kaiseki (Japanese haute cuisine) restaurants. Kikunoi’s third-generation chef, Morita Yoshihiko, has written a book translated into English on kaiseki that the staff helpfully use to explain the dishes you are served if you don’t speak Japanese.

Mandarake Complex (mandarake.com; Nakano Broadway, 5-12-15 Nakano)
This is the original Mandarake, the go-to store for all things manga (Japanese comics) and anime (Japanese animation). Once a small, second-hand comic-book store, Mandarake now has some 25 shops just inside the Nakano Broadway shopping centre. Each specialises in something different, be it books, cel art or figurines. You’ll also find Mandarake branches in Shinjuku, Akihabara and Ikebukuro.

Nezu Museum (nezu-muse.or.jp; 6-5-1 Minami-Aoyama)
Nezu Museum offers a striking blend of old and new: a renowned collection of Japanese, Chinese and Korean antiquities in a gallery space designed by contemporary architect Kuma Kisho. Behind the galleries is a strolling garden laced with paths and studded with teahouses.

Kyogoku Kokugikan (sumo.or.jp; 1-3-28 Yosukai, Sumida-ku)
If you’re in town when a tournament is on – for 15 days each January, May and September – catch the big boys at action in Japan’s largest sumo stadium. The action doesn’t heat up until the senior wrestlers hit the ring around 2pm. Tickets can be bought online one month before the start of the tournament.

Skytree
Skytree (tokyo-skytree.com; 5-1-2 Oshiage, Sumida-ku)
This fantastic yet little-known tower opened in May 2012 as the world’s tallest ‘free-standing tower’ at 634m. Its silvery exterior of steel mesh morphs from a triangle at the base to a circle at 384m. There are two observation decks. You can see more of the city during daylight hours – at peak visibility you can see all the way to Mt Fuji – but it is night that Tokyo appears truly beautiful.

FOR OLD HANDS
Asakusa Umagi Sansho
JAPANESE
(03)3834-0344, 2-25-7 Hotei-Asakusa
This is a friendly and simple unagi (eel) restaurant, the grilled eel is served in three sizes – only go for large if you’re really hungry. On the walls hang embroidery done by the mum, while the dad cooks the eels to perfection.

Edo-Tokyo Open Air Architecture Museum (tatemonomori.jp/english; 3-7-1 Sakuradai)
This fantastic yet little-known museum has a collection of historic buildings rescued from Tokyo’s modernising zeal. Among them are an Edo-era farmhouse, a modernist villa and a whole strip of early-20th-century shops, all of which you can enter. It’s a short walk through Tokyo’s second-largest park to the museum.

Kado (kagazuka-kado.com; 1-3-28 Shinkansen, Shinjuku-ku)
Kado specialises in kaiseki-ryōri (home cooking). Dinner in a set course of seasonal dishes (such as grilled quail or fresh tofu). At lunch they serve an English menu, on your best bet is the kado shinsuko – the daily house special.

Musée Tomo (musee-tomo.or.jp; 1-55 Yuramimom) One of Tokyo’s most elegant and tasteful museums is named after Kikunoi Tomo, whose collection of contemporary Japanese ceramics was formed in Washington and London before finally being exhibited at home. Exhibitions change every few months but are always atmospheric.

Neighbourhood walk

Asakusa

Asakusa Shitamachi

Start Asakusa Station, Line 5, Exit 4
Length: 1.5 miles; 2.5 hours

Skytree
Skytree (tokyo-skytree.com; 5-1-2 Oshiage, Sumida-ku) Tokyo Skytree opened in May 2012 as the world’s tallest ‘free-standing tower’ at 634m. Its silvery exterior of steel mesh morphs from a triangle at the base to a circle at 384m. There are two observation decks. You can see more of the city during daylight hours – at peak visibility you can see all the way to Mt Fuji – but it is night that Tokyo appears truly beautiful.

TOP PICKS

Tokyo cooking courses
A Taste of Culture Market tours and classes with culinary expert (tastefoculture.com)
Buddha Bellies Chef-led courses focusing on sushi and bentō making (budhhabellieskoyo.jimdo.com)
Tokyo Cook Learn to make shōjín ryōri, vegetarian temple food (tokyo-cook.com)
Tokyo Kitchen Crash-courses in the basics of Japanese cookery, can do vegetarian and gluten-free (asakusa-tok yokitchen.com)

TOP PICKS

Asakusa

Asakusa Engei Hall

Hoppy-dōri you can have a meal at Yonoya Kushiho, an old-school tempura restaurant, along Dembō-in-dōri, a strip with crafty stores. Don’t miss the centuries-old comb store Yonaya Kudō.

Tokyo

Tokyo

First head over to Azumabashi (2 Kaminarimon, Tsukishima). Originally built in 1774, it was once the point of departure for boat trips to the Yushima pleasure district, north of Asakusa. From here you can get a good look at the golden flame of Super Dry Hall and the even more incongruent Tokyo Sky Tree, both across the river. Retrace your steps to Kaminarimon, the entrance to the grand temple complex Senso-ji. Spend some time exploring the temple’s highlights. Afterwards, walk past the nostalgic amusement park Hanayashiki, an Asakusa fixture since 1853. Next take a detour up the covered arcade to the Edo Shitamachi Traditional Crafts Museum, where you can see the work of local artisans. Then head down the lane called Happy-dōri, lined with yakitori stalls. Go on, have a few skewers and a beer. Pop over to look at Sensoji Temple in Asakusa

TOP PICKS

Rokusai district of Asakusa, a famous (and famously bawdy) entertainment district during the century before WWII. Pay a visit to vintage store Tokyo Hatarado, where the goods pay homage to this era, when Asakusa was thought of as the Montmartre of Tokyo.

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If you resisted the charms of Happy-dōri you can have a meal at Odaiba, an old-school tempura restaurant, along Dembō-in-dōri, a strip with crafty stores. Don’t miss the centuries-old comb store Yonaya Kudō.

TOP PICKS

Take one of the roads parallel to Nakamise – a world away from the tourist hordes – and finish up at Ef, a café in a 19th-century wooden warehouse.
TOP PICKS

TOKYO: THREE WAYS

FURTHER READING
Pick up Lonely Planet’s Tokyo city guide (£14.99) or Pocket Tokyo (£8.50). Tokyo is listed on our Guides app, free to download from app stores.

Sleeping

Claska  £££
Best for unusual décor (claska.com/en/hotel)
No two rooms are alike: some have tatami and floor cushions; others have spacious terraces and glass-walled bathrooms.

Hotel Niwa Tokyo  ££
Best for traditional ambience (hotelniwatokyo.com)
There’s a rock garden and bamboo grove, and shōji (traditional paper screens) across the windows in the rooms.

Hotel S  ££
Best for a boutique stay (hr-roppongi.jp)
This place captures the arty design spirit of Roppongi. Some rooms have design elements like tatami (in charcoal).

Park Hotel Tokyo  £££
Best for artistic interest (parkhoteltokyo.com)
Thirty-one artists have decorated the 31st-floor rooms. There are all-Japanese themes, from sumo and Zen to yokai and geisha.

Tokyo Ryokan  £
Best for simple living (tokyoryokan.com)
This tidy little inn has tons of charm. There are touches of calligraphy, attractive woodwork and sliding screens.

Wise Owl Hostel Tokyo  £
Best for sleeping centrally (wiseowlhostels.com)
This place is centrally located, above a subway, and a clever configuration of wooden bunks comprise the dorms.

MAP KEY

SIGHTS
1. Edo-Tokyo Museum
2. Edo-Tokyo Open Air Architecture Museum
3. Hōsō-ji
4. Shibuya Crossing
5. Tokyo National Museum
6. Tokyo Sky Tree

EATING
11. Asakusa Unagi Sansho
12. Kado
13. Kikunoi
14. Maisen

DRINKING
16. Café de l’Ambre

ENTERTAINMENT
17. Ryōgoku Kokugikan

SHOPPING
18. Itōya
19. Mandarake Complex
20. Mitsukoshi

SLEEPING
21. Claska
22. Hotel Niwa Tokyo
23. Hotel S
24. Park Hotel Tokyo
25. Tokyo Ryokan
26. Wise Owl Hostel Tokyo