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 magnificent 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.

- **Senso-ji**
  (senso-ji.jp; 2-3-1 Asakusa, Taitō-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 practiced, nonchalant agility.

- **Tokyo National Museum**
  (tnm.jp; 13-9 Ueno-kōen, Taitō-ku) - If you visit only one museum in Tokyo, make it the Tokyo National Museum. Here you’ll find the world’s largest collection of Japanese art, including ancient pottery, Buddhist sculptures, samurai swords, colourful woodblock prints, gorgeous kimonos and much more. Focus the Honkan (Japanese Gallery) and the enchanting Gallery of Hōryū-ji Treasures, which displays masks, scrolls and gilt Buddhas from Hōryū-ji. Also explore the three-storied Tōyōkan (Gallery of Asian Art), which houses Buddhist sculpture from around Asia.

**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. Sekiuzaki 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) produced by two fishermen in 628 AD. The image has remained on the spot ever since, but is never on public display.

**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-awaoedori.com).

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**TOP PICKS**

*Image of the Tokyo Skytree above the side streets of Asakusa.*
and luxuries (such as fountain pens and Italian leather agendas). You’ll also find washis (fine Japanese handmade paper), temugui (beautiful hand-dyed thin cotton towels) and furusashiki (wrapping cloths).

**Kikunoi**
(kikunoi.jp; 6-13-Akasaka)
Exquisitely 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, Murata Yoshishin, 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, 5-12-5 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 center. Each specialises in something different, be it books, cel art or figures. You’ll also find Mandarake branches in Shibuya, Akihabara and Ikebukuro.

**Nezu Museum**
(nezu-muse.or.jp; 6-5-1 Minami-Aoyama)
The museum has a collection of early-20th-century shops, all of which you can enter. It’s a short walk through Tokyo’s second-largest pork to the museum.

**Kado**
(kado.tokyo; 6-7-1 Tennoz-ei)
Kado specialises in katei-ryōri (home cooking). Dinner is a set course of seasonal dishes (such as grilled squid or fresh tofu). At lunch there’s no English menu, so your best bet is the kaiseki teishoku – the daily house special.

**Museo Tono**
(museo-sono.or.jp; 4-1-35 Tarumonomi)
One of Tokyo’s most elegant and tasteful museums is named after Kikunoi Tono, whose collection of contemporary Japanese ceramics wowed them in Washington and London before finally being exhibited at home. Exhibitions change every few months but are

**Tokyo Sky Tree**
(tokyoskytree.jp; 5-1-2 Oidabashi)
The Tokyo Sky Tree 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.

**OLD HANDS**

- **Asakusa Unagi Sanso**
  (03-3843-0344; 2-25-7 Nishi-Asakusa)
  At this 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 detailed traditional embroidery done by the staff helpfully use to explain the dishes you are served if you don’t speak Japanese.

- **Edo Tokyo Open Air Architecture Museum**
  (tatemonjo.jp/english; 2-7-16 Sakurabashi)
  This fantastical 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 pork to the museum.

**Tokyo cooking courses**
A Taste of Culture
Market tours and classes with culinary expert (tasteforculre.com)

- **Buddha Bellies**
  Chef-led courses focusing on sushi and bentō making (buddhabelliesakaya.jimdo.com)
  Learn to make shōjin ryōri, vegetarian temple food (tokyo-cook.com)
  Tokyo Kitchen
  Crash courses in the basics of Japanese cookery, do vegetarian and gluten-free (asakusa-tokyokitchen.com)

**Shitamachi**

- **Asakusa Shitamachi**
  - **Start: Azuma-bashi**
  - **End: Asakusa**
  - **Length: 2 miles, 2 hours**

Shitamachi is the word used to describe parts of Tokyo that come closest to approximating the spirit of old Edo. Asakusa is one of those places. Not only does it have important temples and shrines dating to the Edo era (1603–1868) or earlier, but it also has the narrow lanes and wooden shop fronts that characterise Shitamachi today. This walk will take you past the main sights and down the narrow lanes of old Tokyo.

1. **Original buildings from 1774**
   - **Asakusa-bashi** was once the departure point for boat trips to the Yashu-ware pleasure district, just north of Asakusa. Today, tourist boats leave from a nearby pier to Hanamata-kyo, on the Sumida River, and Odaiba (in Tokyo Bay).

2. **End up at the lane called Hoppy-dori**
   - Line with yakitori (grilled skewers) stalls. At the end you’ll pass Hanayashiki, Japan’s oldest amusement park.

3. **Senso-ji Temple in Asakusa**
   - The grand gate Kaminarimon marks the entrance to Senso-ji, which has been downgraded to temple food since the beginning of the 19th century.

4. **Buddha Bellies**
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Neighbourhood walk: Asakusa Shitamachi

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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  
(tokyorikyan.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.

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**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.