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Keeping Pace with the new Tokyo

Steve Gillick

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04 APR 2016: There's nothing like breaking the ice socially by having someone offer you a piece of yellowtail sashimi and then reciprocating with a

chunk of your boiled octopus. But this is exactly what happened when we visited Uosan, a popular Izakaya in the Monzen Nakacho area of Tokyo, where the lineup for the incredibly fresh and inexpensive seafood dishes starts at 4:00 pm.



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Uosan is a lively place where chairs around the two u-shaped counters are crammed together, the hot and cold sake along with beer and shochu flow freely, and the noise level can be a tad high as people grab the attention of one of the two servers with “See ma sen” (Excuse me), and then call out their next food order.

The bill for our meal for two, including several dishes of succulent deep-fried oyster and a forgotten quantity of sake, was the equivalent of about \$54.00. So much for the myth of expensive dining in Tokyo. But the experience was part of the joy of returning to Tokyo (my 15th trip), sometimes visiting old haunts and sometimes challenging my need to see and do something different. And in a very real larger sense, what I seek to do on my travels is becoming the norm

with travellers who question the value of watching, as opposed to experiencing a destination.

Takeshi Hashimoto is on a mission. As the manager of Orihara, a standing sake bar in Monzen Nakacho, around the corner from Uosan, Takeshi has a small storefront set-up where plastic milk crates are stacked waist high and topped with a pieces of wood laminate to create tables. While it may not look too elegant to passers-by, those who venture in will find upwards of 150 Sakes to sample or quaff with friends.

But in a city where sake bars are ubiquitous, Takeshi decided to provide something different by focusing on small sake breweries throughout the country, and thereby offering a unique, trendy, and attractive draw for both locals and tourists (mostly Australian but also at least two Canadians). In a sense, he latched on to the growing interest in craft beers and re-interpreted it for sake lovers.

And craft beer itself is on a wild growth projectory. We visited Shinshu Osake Mura, a standing sake bar in Shimbashi where in the past we tried different 'dry' sakes from Nagano Prefecture. But this time, clients and travellers were dropping by, not only to drink in-house but also to bring Japanese beer home as a souvenir. And we quickly got into the spirit (so to speak) as we leafed through a copy of The Japan Beer Times while drinking Minami Shinshu Amber, Shiga Kogen Porter and Kokage Stout.

As culinary tourism (which includes beer, sake and other refreshments) continues to evolve and capture new fans in Tokyo, so does the visual and emotional adventure.

One of the coolest newest attractions is the Samurai Museum in Shinjuku. Tetsuro Koyano, the owner and president noted that his interest in Samurai armour was instilled in his genes, as his great grandfather was a Sword Master. Five years ago, Koyano-san decided to start collecting and he managed to locate and purchase enough authentic armour, swords and guns to open the Museum. In his role as tour guide, he was a wealth of knowledge on the history and evolution of Samurai armour.

It's really a fascinating museum with great niche market appeal not only for history buffs (The Last Shogun) but also movie goers (Seven Samurai and other Kurosawa movies), military personnel and martial arts clubs.

The Museum is not far from the Gracery Hotel where visitors can purchase tickets to get up close and personal with Godzilla (or at least, Godzilla's head). In his movie heyday, Godzilla destroyed Tokyo no less than 28 times, trampling on the boxy architecture of the 1950's and 60's but seemingly making way for the architectural revival that is still going on today.

With this in mind, the City of Tokyo arranged for us to explore the architecture in one of the trendiest districts of the city, Omote Sando; an area usually associated with (very) upscale shopping. Taking to the side streets with Akiko Enoki, our guide, we were soon admiring the Prada Store, designed by Herzog and de Meuron, the architects responsible for Beijing's "Bird Nest"-the National Stadium.

Nearby, the Nezu Museum designed by renowned local architect Kengo Kuma (designer of the Tokyo

2020 Olympic Stadium) emphasizes through the curtain of bamboo trees surrounding the structure, the melding of modern design with nature. A few streets over, Kuma's Pineapple Cake Shop, features a wooden design in the midst of a crowded neighbourhood. Free samples of the in-demand Taiwanese cake (with tea, of course) are offered as you explore the wooden interior of the building. And on the district's main street, you can find the Omote Sando Hills Shopping Mall, designed by the celebrated Japanese architect Tadao Ando.

Architecture is an inspiring niche interest that gets special attention in Tokyo. This includes the Cocoon Building in Shinjuku, the Audi Forum 'Blue Iceberg' in Shibuya, Tokyo Skytree in Sumida, and Tod's Building in Omote Sando where Ito Toyo's building mimics the zelkova trees that line the main street.

And the name "Omote Sando" literally means "the main street leading to the shrine". The shrine in this case is the Meiji Shrine just up the street that is dedicated to the Meiji Emperor and his wife who were instrumental in the restoration of society in the late 19th century from the era of Shoguns and Samurai to that of a modern Japan, ruled by the Emperor.

And it's fitting that in a modern city, shrines and temples still have great emotional, historical and spiritual appeal for people of all generations. After the devastation of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in the Tohoku region, artist Takashi Murakami noted "in order to recover from despair, we needed a narrative that would restore our hope...Throughout history, religions and legends have offered such narratives and now those stories

are needed again”.

The resulting masterpiece was Murakami’s “500 Arhats”, which was featured in the Mori Art Museum in Roppongi Hills. “Arhat” is a Sanskrit word denoting ‘one who is worthy’, and in Buddhism it refers to a person who is far advanced on the path to Enlightenment. Murakami’s 100 metre long painting, divided into four panels, portrays the 500 Arhats and emphasizes 500 ways of healing human suffering through stories, legends, mythology, spiritual beliefs and even humour.

Keeping pace with Tokyo is a pleasurable pursuit that constantly reveals serendipity: on a subway ride from the hotel, a walk down the street, a glance up to the sky, a silent moment at a shrine or art gallery, an imaginative journey to the past in a museum, a culinary epiphany in a bar or izakaya and the opportunity to engage with the destination. This is, after all, what travelers seek in making their own journeys relevant, meaningful and profound.





Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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