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# HEAVENS ABOVE

## Experiencing Serenity in Tokyo

Steve Gillick

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12 DEC 2016: My favourite excuse for not visiting Japan, and Tokyo in particular, came from a travel insurance agent who explained that she believed “it’s so crowded you can’t even walk down the street”. It’s true that the city of 9.2 million (13.6 million in the Greater Tokyo Area) has its share of congestion. The all-direction ‘scramble’ crossing at Shibuya is often used as an example of crowded chaos and the subways at rush-hour can be

sardine-can snug. However treasured moments of serenity can be found throughout the city.



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Pilgrims, tourists and the curious stand around the Jokoro, a large incense burner, in front of Senso-ji, Tokyo's oldest temple, in the Asakusa district. The aspiration is to waft the smoke from the incense toward them, and particularly toward and around their head, in the belief that it will cleanse the body, chase away bad luck, invoke good health and even instill intelligence. It's a tiny break from reality but allows each individual a moment of escapism.

In the crowded temple grounds themselves there are small park-like areas where statues of Jizo (the Bodhisatva who protects travellers and children) and the Buddha sit in relative calm, while a nearby stream filled with Koi (Japanese Carp that symbolize love and friendship) offers colourful dashes of orange, white, yellow, gold and black to the scenery. In the autumn and early winter the reds and yellows of the leaves only enhance the feeling of visual tranquility.

Tokyo at large has a number of parks and gardens that offer respite from the crowds and city noise. A short walk from Tokyo Station, which is known as the busiest train station in the country with over 3000 trains per day, lies the East Gardens of the Imperial Palace. The Gardens occupy part of the original Edo Castle grounds and include the moat, walking paths, old castle walls, a grove of bamboo, streams, Koi-filled ponds and a Japanese Garden. Birders flock to the Palace grounds to see and photograph ducks, grebes, egrets, Grey Herons (we saw one!), cormorants and the Mute Swan.

Most of the accommodations in Tokyo consist of Western-style hotels. Some have a calm Japanese ambiance (try the Hotel Niwa), and many offer 'tatami' rooms, characterized by a straw-matted floor, low tables and chairs, sliding shoji screens or doors, and thick, blanketed futons laid out on the floor for sleeping.

For an authentic, serene, Japanese experience, nothing compares to the Hoshinoya Tokyo, a super-luxury ryokan (a traditional Japanese Inn) where every detail caters to the senses. The building, designed by architect Rie Azuma, features a traditional kimono pattern on the exterior to set the mood, and when guests enter, the intoxicating smell of fresh tatami mats fills the air. The hotel's soundtrack of dripping water, light percussion and calm, sets the mood as guests remove their shoes, walk on the tatami mats and take the elevator to the 8th floor family room (the Ochanoma) where registration takes place, along with an offering of soothing tea and sweet cake.

The rooms have simple decorations with

comfortable, elegant, wooden furniture. Guests are encouraged to wear the kimonos, specifically designed by Jotaro Saito a Kimono master, when they walk through the ryokan and visit the onsen, or hot spring on the top floor. The 'outdoor' portion of the hot spring lies beneath a tall funnel-like tower so while soaking in the 43C waters below, you can watch the blue sky and clouds overhead. At night, we watched the stars—an almost unheard of activity--amidst the bright city lights of Tokyo.

And while some hotels promote their 'heavenly' beds, at Hoshinoya the experience was one level above heaven! The bed, designed exclusively for the ryokan, was possibly the most comfortable one I have ever experienced (and as an inveterate traveller, I've slept in a lot of beds!). The next morning, a traditional Japanese breakfast (pickles, fish, salad, rice, miso soup, tofu, egg, radish, tea) was a perfect and delicious complement to the experience of sense-fulfillment that the Hoshinoya provided. This ryokan, built to soothe and regenerate, exceeds expectations.

Umami is a term that originally referred to the savoury taste of food, but over the years, has evolved to relate to a state of total satisfaction with the delicious, fulfilling, mouth-feel, taste, smell, and look of certain foods. And while Tokyo has its fill of amazing cuisine, we got our Umami-fix at two Izakayas.

In Kappabashi, a favourite lunch and dinner spot is Wasuke, an Izakaya with ultra-fresh seafood and extremely friendly service. The menu is in Japanese, however the counter, which seats seven, entices diners with most of the fish and seafood on display. We were in proverbial seventh heaven

with the huge oysters from Iwate prefecture, Ankimo (fish liver) and Shirako (cod innards) from Hokkaido, sashimi from Tokyo's Tsukiji market and Matabei, a smooth, clear, dry sake from Fukushima prefecture.

On another night we ate at Sushi no Darihan near the Yoyogi station. If I reported that the food was beyond amazing, it would be an understatement: thick, chunky pieces of Yellowtail sashimi, a ball of crispy, white shrimp tempura (lightly battered and deep-fried), cod roe with seaweed, horse mackerel, tuna belly, sole, salmon, Katsuo (skipjack tuna) with pink, Asian sea salt, and all accompanied by Rincara, a soothing sake from Niigata prefecture.

For those unfamiliar with sake, an educational outing is in order. Orihara is one of many standing sake bars (this one is near the Monzen Nakacho Metro station) and features upwards of 150 seasonal sakes. You simply grab a bottle of what looks interesting and bring it to the counter where they pour it for you. This too is a way of finding peace of mind and serenity, with the added bonus of a 15 percent-plus alcohol content.

On my 16th visit to Japan in November, I was looking for something imaginatively different to experience. On the theme of 'heavens above' I thought of return visits to the 333 meter Tokyo Tower or the 634 meter SkyTree so I could look over the city and possibly even see Mt. Fuji, but the Tokyo Visitors and Convention Bureau had a more creative suggestion. So at twilight time, I boarded a helicopter for a 15 minute flight across the city. While Mt. Fuji wasn't visible, the bright lights of nearby Tokyo Disneyland shone brightly, as did the orangey-red Christmas Tree-like image of the

Tokyo Tower, and the imposing Sky Tree. It was all pretty impressive.

Without getting too maudlin, the Bee Gees song “Nobody gets too much heaven no more” keeps popping into my mind, and my only response is that in Tokyo, if you know where to look, then your own—and your clients’-- definition of heaven is not that difficult to find.

In the New Year, the goal of many travellers is to have a better understanding of the destinations they visit and to strive for personally meaningful experiences. The city of Tokyo is a strong contender and heaven knows that travel agents, advisors and consultants are the conduit for making this happen.

## Tranquility



Small areas of tranquility in the crowded Senso-ji Temple



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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