

TOKYO, FROM THE BACKSEAT

A white-gloved, chauffeur-driven service is standard in the world’s biggest city

16,480 per sq mi/6,363 per sq km	Population density of Tokyo Metropolis
58	Average age of taxi drivers in Tokyo
50,000	Number of taxis on the streets of Tokyo
263	Michelin stars in Tokyo (the most of any city)



A gleaming black Toyota Crown glides to a stop on Omotesandō, Tokyo’s most fashionable boulevard. The door opens noiselessly, revealing a spotless interior with seats covered in white lace. Once the passengers have stepped inside, the driver checks to make sure everyone is safely seated while the door swings shut automatically.

In a city known for its convenient and reliable public transit, taxis can seem superfluous. Yet as of 2020, there were more than fifty thousand registered livery drivers on the streets of Tokyo, providing a door-to-door service that’s more flexible than the subway schedule. Perhaps their passengers have a need for speed or help with unwieldy luggage, or they may just want a respite from the hustle and bustle of the capital.

To travel by taxi is to fill in the blank patches of a mental map of Tokyo. Crisscrossing the city on the subway is efficient and sanitized, but whole districts become reduced to brightly colored lines in a sprawling spiderweb, and the city’s contours and topography are erased. The tapestry of street life, parks, skyscrapers, housing projects, temples and single-family residences, and how they all stitch together, is not visible underground.

Taxis have been around in Japan, in one form or another, for hundreds of years. Human-powered carts called jinrikisha (from which the word *rickshaw* derives) were invented in Tokyo in the 1860s, though there is evidence that similar vehicles were used as far back as the 1600s. Metered taxis have existed in Tokyo for at least a century—the first service ran from the Ueno and Shimbashi railway stations beginning in 1912, followed by Tokyo Station after its opening in 1914.

In Omotesandō, the driver glides down the wide thoroughfare, passing starchitect-designed department stores and well-heeled pedestrians, before encountering congestion. Here in Shibuya—a semiautonomous district of the city—steel, glass and concrete rule, and as in the neon-lit district of Shinjuku, the cityscape can be heady. He—and it’s usually he; more than 95 percent of taxi drivers in Japan are male, though there is a push to attract more female drivers—turns onto a side street, expertly navigating the city’s tangled warren of narrow streets and alleys, passing pint-size cafes and less-famous boutiques.

Tokyo’s apparent enthusiasm for the new and novel is not only a product of progress or caprice but a consequence of





GETTING THERE

You can hail a taxi on most major streets in Tokyo; look for 空車 (“available car”) in the windshield. In bad weather or quieter areas, head for the nearest train station or sightseeing spot—most will have a taxi rank. The base fee is ¥500 (\$3.25) and ¥100 (65 cents) for every ninety-five seconds after the first kilometer; a surcharge applies between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. Tipping is not expected.

SEE & TOUR

For art in Yanaka, visit Scai the Bathhouse (a public bath turned gallery) and the Asakura Museum of Sculpture, which showcases the work of Fumio Asakura in his former home studio. Shop for trinkets at the Yanaka Ginza shopping arcade or wander through the neighborhood’s dozens of temples before stopping for lunch at Kayaba, a classic kissaten, or diner.



STAY

Yanaka Sow is a modern inn with a handful of muted rooms decorated in traditional low-to-the-floor Japanese style (tatami mats, shoji screens, low furniture) with urban art by local artists from the surrounding neighborhood of Yanaka. Each of the thirteen rooms has a themed selection of books on local topics such as teahouses, old temples or the Tokyo food scene.



WORTH KNOWING

The rear left doors of Japanese taxis are automatic. This is both a safety and a hospitality feature that was widely adopted around the time of the 1964 Olympics to stop customers from opening doors into oncoming traffic or leaving them open after alighting. The door unlocks when the taxi pulls over, and the driver opens it after payment is completed.

its often-tragic history. Natural disasters are an ever-present threat in Japan—the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923 leveled much of Tokyo and the Kantō region—and the firebombing of Tokyo during the Second World War destroyed great swaths of the city. Renewal is built into Tokyo’s DNA.

Most cabs have GPS systems installed, along with a panoply of other gadgets: card readers, TV monitors that play ads in the back and even CO₂ meters and digital rearview mirrors. But Tokyo drivers are also required to pass a geography test, demonstrating knowledge of the city’s major streets, intersections, highways and landmarks—no easy task in a city of twenty-three wards and more than thirteen million people.

Modern architecture gives way to trees, however, as the cab crosses through Aoyama Cemetery, with its mix of Buddhist and Western gravestones. Its most famous resident is probably the dog Hachikō, who waited faithfully outside Shibuya Station for his master to return for a decade after he had died; they were later reunited in the same burial plot at the cemetery. A turn to the northeast has the taxi skirting the moat of the

Tokyo Imperial Palace grounds, where there are swans and turtles, and a field of manicured, gnarled black pines standing sentinel beyond the water.

Other parts of the old city also remain, such as in the Yanaka neighborhood northeast of the Imperial Palace. “In the city center, the building styles are different, but the clientele is different too,” says Mariko Naruse, manager of Kayaba Coffee, a café that has stood for nearly a hundred years in Yanaka. “Here there are many old houses that survived the air raids, and a lot of shops have renovated them,” she explains. “Yanaka is a place where new and old cultures and buildings are fused. . . . You come to soak up the atmosphere and discover things your own way.”

The pace of the city and the whiplash-inducing transitions between newness and centuries-old ruins can be dizzying. To step into a Tokyo taxi, with its uniformed chauffeur, is more than just a way to get from point A to B. It allows you to place yourself in the capable hands of an expert and buy a moment of respite from the constant ebb and flow of people, offering a more expansive perspective on an ever-changing city.



OPPOSITE

Tokyo is served by a network of toll expressways that carry traffic above the city. Route C1, known as the Inner Circular Route, here pictured close to Takebashi Junction, provides a complete loop around the central wards of Chiyoda, Chūō and Minato, with a total length of 9 miles (15 km).



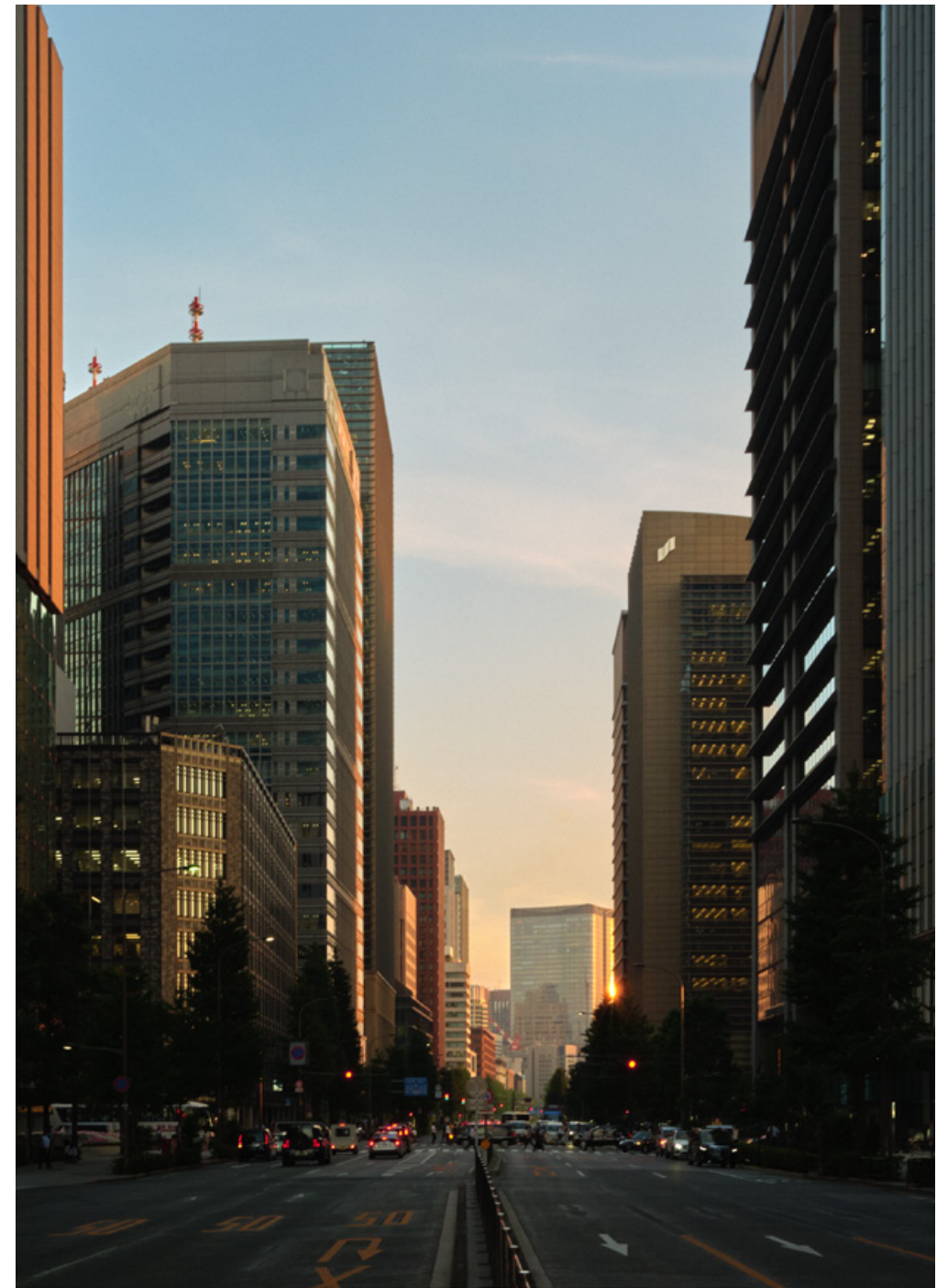


ABOVE

Taxi drivers in Tokyo take pride in their cars—they are typically immaculately clean, and more often than not, the seats have lace covers. The drivers, who wear white gloves, use a button to open and close the rear doors for passengers.

OPPOSITE

With its narrow, winding streets, Yanaka—a low-rise neighborhood of wooden buildings and Buddhist temples east of the Imperial Palace—is a pocket of tranquility, offering visitors a glimpse of an earlier, pre-neon-and-skyscraper version of Tokyo.



OPPOSITE

Taxis in Tokyo have a wide range of symbols on their occupancy signs, including cartoon cats, stars and cherry blossoms, which are illuminated when the taxis are available. Many are disappearing, however, as independent taxi companies become consolidated into larger operations.