





bowing to tradition

BY PICO IYER

from the sleek new
architecture and futuristic
finds of roppongi
to ringing bells at meiji
shrine, tokyo draws from
the past and conjures the
future. pico iyer explores
how japan keeps alive
these seemingly
contradictory elements

o shrine in the
rhood shows
t comfortably
with its future.

tokyo is the
most science-
fictive city in the
world in terms
of its dizzy futur-
ism, but it can
race into the new
only because it is
so solidly rooted
in the old.

I stepped out onto the streets in Tokyo this winter and felt like someone from the countryside who had stumbled into the world's ultimate city. Or, at least, like Rip Van Winkle, suddenly awakened and finding himself inside the 23rd century. The gleaming new complex of Roppongi Hills stretched 53 stories into the clear blue sky above me. Inside its many corridors and elegant arcades were gourmet French restaurants to rival anything in Paris, pan-Asian cafés where the fiery spices of Vietnam and Thailand were mixed together and served with a Japanese delicacy and attention to detail, a museum on the top floor whose video installations spoke of impermanence and constancy, not to mention the wraparound walkways on the 52nd floor in which Japan's largest city unfolds—appropriately—like something on a high-definition, flat-screen TV.

Around me, on Roppongi's streets, were trim men in black jackets with designer glasses, speaking Russian. Indians and Filipinas were buying phone cards to call back home. The suave, well-coiffed bankers of Sydney, New York and Milan were heading off to their next destinations. I could eat tandoori chicken, Romanian food or affordable sushi within a few yards. The spaghetti of flyovers and underground passages and color-coded subway connections was swirling all around me, but—this being Japan—in perfect order, as perfectly synchronized to make the city sing as the colored wires in the back of your brand-new iPod.



For quite a few years now, Tokyo has been seen as the last word in the future tense, the global planet's farthest outpost in Tomorrowland. The bright, cutting-edge modernism of the high-rises and rushing surfaces of Shinjuku, among the busiest areas in the world, were one of the major inspirations for the iconic futuristic movie *Blade Runner*, just before 1984; in this century, *Lost in Translation* introduced much of the world to Tokyo's latest styles in karaoke capsules, streaking-light alleyways and five-story video screens. The great architect Frank Gehry once called Tokyo his favorite city in the world; the high-tech visionaries of Silicon Valley head to the back streets of Akihabara when they want to see the latest (and the coolest) in global gizmos.

And certainly when you take the train in from Narita International Airport, or arrive on the Nozomi super-express bullet train from even, say, Osaka, Japan's second city, or Kyoto, its capital for more than a thousand years, you cannot fail to feel startled by the tall gray concrete towers of the city's major boulevards; the sheer swarm of people, mostly in impeccable (but often very strange) fashions; and the labyrinth of Tokyo Station, with its separate areas for subway lines and local lines and bullet trains and airport trains, a city-within-a-city that puts Rockefeller Center to shame.

Walk along the streets of the Harajuku area, especially on the weekend, and you see kids dressed as punks, as Goth nurses, as flowers, so it seems, or Las Vegas ladies of the night, their hair straw-yellow, their white boots thigh-high, their hip-hop accessories incongruously mixed with Prada bags and, as likely as not, cell phones with Hello Kitty on them. Wander around Shinjuku after dark and you'll feel yourself in a microcosm of the global city, with plenty of familiar signs beckoning you toward McDonald's or





This page: A torii, or gate, at Meiji Shrine, which is dedicated to the deified spirit of Emperor Meiji (1852–1912). Opposite, top: Japan's celebrated cherry blossoms in bloom. Bottom: Reminders of Japan's shogunal history are littered throughout the city, including this statue outside of the East Garden of the Imperial Palace.

Starbucks, but the whole completely unfamiliar. The Japanese cellphone, which these days doubles as game player, portable camera, TV screen and virtual friend, has long seemed to stand for how much of modern Japan functions.

Yet the great wonder—and relief—for many a visitor to Tokyo today is that, in the midst of all the very new, you can also find the very old. Those of us who fly in to the Japanese capital from Atlanta or London, after all, want to see how it has taken American and European styles and pushed them into hyperdrive; but we also want to see, often, how it still contains pockets of the old, the archetypal Japanese.

Visit—especially if you have jet lag—the Tsukiji fish market at 5:30 a.m. and you'll see the hard work and closeness to the land (and sea) that always anchor Japan underneath its shifting fashions. Travel to the Meiji Jingu Shrine at the very heart of Harajuku and note how women dressed all in white, traditionally virgins, are still selling charms for good luck in exams, safety on the road and a healthy child, often to those same young girls—done up in pink micro-skirts and black-rimmed eye makeup—who are ringing bells and praying as their great-grandmothers might have done before the war.

Take the train out to Ueno, less than half an hour from the Ginza, and walk among its parks and museums, reminding yourself of a gracious refuge from many decades ago that might once have been a cousin to London or Paris.

The particular blessing of Tokyo—arguably, what saves and protects it—is that it remains a capital of neighborhoods within an ever expanding whole: Look at it from the air or on a map, and it resembles a great stain spreading across the country. Start wandering its streets, however, and you find that there's an order, a very precise and encircling order, within the chaos.

The rule of the modern street in Japan is that the whole looks like visual gibberish, but each one of the parts—that elegant beauty salon (with café attached), that “Bali-style café” with miniature tropical garden, that white-on-white coffee shop with exquisite *mille-feuilles*—is impeccable. So, too, with the city as a whole: The overall impression is one of anarchy, but each of the parts is shapely and consoling.

If I were going to Tokyo tomorrow—and I've been living in Japan now for just about 20 years—I would dedicate one long day and evening to taking in the modern, from Roppongi Hills by day to Shinjuku by night, but I would also spend at least another day coaxing out old unchangeable Japan from amidst the flashing lights. I might walk around Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden, the stately park where most of the other visitors are elderly, patiently taking a picnic on the lawn or savoring a silent morning as the elderly do in Japan better than anywhere. I might devote an afternoon to wandering around the Asakusa Kannon Temple, in the heart of the old “Low City” area, and coming upon the great gates that feature in many of Japan's classic 19th-century woodcuts. I would even, if I had the time, take the one-hour trip on the local train to Kamakura, a mini-Kyoto of temples and narrow, leafy lanes where many foreigners have found a way to get closer to traditional Japan while living within 30 miles of the hot center.

explore

This page, top: Senso-ji Buddhist
pagoda at night. Bottom: The
of the Imperial Palace. Opposi
silk kimono and obi.



the rule of the
modern street in japan
is that the whole looks
like visual gibberish, but
each one of the parts—
that elegant beauty salon
(with café attached), that
“bali-style café” with
miniature tropical garden,
that white-on-white
coffee shop with
exquisite *mille-feuilles*—
is impeccable. so, too,
with the city as a whole:
the overall impression is
one of anarchy, but each
of the parts is shapely
and consoling.

The particular beauty of Japan as a whole, travelers often note, is that it does not believe in either/or, as we in the West generally do. It is happier to entertain an open-ended both/and. Its four alphabets combine classic Chinese characters (*kanji*), a homemade Japanese script (*hiragana*), a special script (*katakana*) for translating foreign terms and even a script (*romaji*) that consists only of English letters. More and more Japanese sentences offer the same mix, as people put words like *chanson* (for French song) and *arubeito* (similar to the German word for “work,” which here means “part-time work”), as well as *pasocon* and *abunoramaru* (which mean almost the same thing as “personal computer” and “abnormal”) into Japanese sentences.

That is why Tokyo on the surface is an anthology of the world's greatest styles, each softened and made more perfect here. Though I am of Indian origin, I have seldom had Indian food lighter or more delicately seasoned (by Indian cooks in Japanese-run restaurants) than in Tokyo. Though I was born and grew up in England, I would rather enjoy afternoon tea in a Tokyo hotel than in any other anywhere. And though I have spent much of my life in New York and California, I would much rather eat burgers—or watch baseball—in Japan than in any of the places where it is a “local product.”

As The Ritz-Carlton opens its new property in Tokyo, to join the trend-setting Ritz-Carlton in Osaka, I have a feeling that, with its mix of elegant old customs and cutting-edge new technologies, it will find its perfect home here. Tokyo is the most science-fiction city in the world in terms of its dizzy futurism; but it can race into the new only because it is so solidly rooted in the old, the ancient customs of bowing and deferring to the boss, of treating the customer truly as a god (the word for customer, *okyakusama*, has an honorific at the beginning and another one at the end), and of trying not to intrude or impose yourself on others, which is why those jam-packed subway cars at rush hour sometimes don't seem nearly so crowded as they look.

We associate Tokyo with movement, I think, but in the midst of that, you will find a lot of stillness. It's worth going out early in the morning, getting lost in the alleyways, even taking a brief trip into the countryside nearby, to remind yourself of those features that, though not as dazzling as Roppongi Hills, may finally be much closer to the heart and particular meaning of modern Tokyo. ●

