

NEIGHBOURHOODS

top picks

- **Imperial Palace** (p50) – The Imperial Palace remains the home of the Japanese imperial family.
- **Meiji-jingū** (p109) – Easily the most beautiful and peaceful spot in Tokyo.
- **Takeshita-dōri** (p109) – The undisputed teen fashion capital of Japan. Runs through the heart of Harajuku.
- **Shibuya Crossing** (p105) – One of the largest intersections in the world, Shibuya Crossing overwhelms.
- **Sensō-ji** (p85) – The most sacred spot in Tokyo.
- **Roppongi Hills** (p94) – This complex presents the new face of stylistic Tokyo.
- **Akihabara Electric Town** (p67) – An entire neighbourhood dedicated to geek culture.
- **Tsukiji Central Fish Market** (p64) – The world's largest fish market is simply not to be missed.
- **La Qua Spa** (p58) – The perfect place to heal your body and recover from jet lag.
- **Ameyoko** (p70) – Catch a glimpse of the old Shitamachi at this bustling shopping street full of open-air markets.

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The target of relentless Allied fire bombing during WWII, old Edo burnt to the ground in a fiery maelstrom. However, as Japan transformed itself into one of the world's largest and most dynamic economies, the modern city of Tokyo quickly rose from the ashes. Today the greater Tokyo area numbers upwards of 35 million people, and is regarded by demographers as the largest metropolitan area in the world.

Lacking the geometric precision of gridded cities common to Europe and North America, the urban complexity of Tokyo can be absolutely mindblowing to the uninitiated. In fact, even Tokyoites joke among themselves that getting lost in their own city is a matter of course. However, the key to breaking down Tokyo into manageable pieces is to simply view the capital as an amalgamation of minicities.

Despite its fairly repetitious façade of stale concrete, blazing neon and jumbled electrical wires, Tokyo is actually made up of distinct neighbourhoods, each of which is distinguished by its own unique character and flair. Like Edo before it, Tokyo has long thought of itself in terms of the high city and the low city. The high city or Yamanote, home of the shōgun (and the nobles and samurai who served him), was a rarefied place, while the low city, or Shitamachi, was reserved for the commoners.

If you look at a JR (Japan Rails) transit map today, you'll notice a green ring around the city centre. This is the JR Yamanote Line, which loops around the heart of the city, connecting east and west, old and new. Transit, among a slew of other political, cultural and economic factors, has eliminated the distinctions between the high city and the low city. However, the unique heritage and idiosyncrasies of Tokyo's mini-cities are still very much alive, and a quick stroll through each of the neighbourhoods is still the best way to get acquainted with the many faces of the capital.

We begin at the centre of it all, the Imperial Palace, which is the geographical and spiritual heart of both Tokyo and Japan. Next we head east towards Ginza and the Sumida-gawa (Sumida River), which marks the eastern boundaries of Yamanote, and retains its high-stepping airs as the most prestigious shopping district in the country.

Continuing north through the electronics district and geek capital of Akihabara, we arrive at the venerable cultural centres of Ueno and Asakusa, which form the living, breathing heart of the historic Shitamachi. Crossing the river brings us to Ryōgoku, seat of sumō culture, and the southeasterly manmade island of Odaiba, which has no intention whatsoever of taking you back to old Edo.

Southwest of the Imperial Palace is the government district of Akasaka and the pleasure district turned design centre of Roppongi. In the southwesterly corner are the fashionable residential areas of Ebisu and Meguro, though class gives way to youth in the adjacent fashion hubs of Harajuku and Shibuya. Continuing north, we finish our tour at the high-rise-meets-low-rise cacophony of Shinjuku and Ikebukuro, two of the city's most important financial and commercial districts.

Indeed, the appeal of Tokyo lies in its multitude of layers, all of which must be peeled back in order to fully delve into the core of the city. Of course, penetrating the heart of the world's largest metropolitan area is no easy task, though few urban destinations can offer as much variety as Tokyo. From the highfalutin boutiques of Ginza and the trendy street fashions of Harajuku, to the cheery fishmongers of Ueno and the chanting monks of Asakusa, Tokyo will lay siege to your senses from the moment you set foot on her streets.

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