

TOKYO

INSIDE & OUT

FOR THE PAST TWO YEARS TOKYO HAS BEEN RANKED AS THE WORLD'S TOP LIVEABLE CITY BY MONOCLE IN ITS ANNUAL QUALITY OF LIFE SURVEY. FOR VISITORS IT IS AN EVEN BETTER PLACE TO BE. TOKYO SHOULD BE THE TRAVELLERS NUMBER ONE DESTINATION BECAUSE OF ITS HISTORY, ITS CULTURE AND ITS CHARMING PEOPLE, WRITES FLOYD COWAN.

You don't have to live in Tokyo to love it, to love its culture, its people and its history – or the food and the shopping. Having lived in Tokyo for almost five years gives me an advantage as a visitor as I know how to get around. I know where I want to go and how to get there. However, on this trip I stayed at the Keio Plaza Hotel Shinjuku and had the added advantage of being hosted by people who live, day to day, in this worldclass city.

IN THE HEART OF TOKYO

My last evening in Tokyo I was in the Keio Plaza Hotel Shinjuku Club Lounge - on the top floor, taking in the view of the city. From this lounge one could have watched the city grow up as it was put here 45 years ago, and most of the buildings it now overlooks were not yet here. Three people at the next table had maps and guide books of Tokyo as they tried to decide on their itinerary for the next day. I



納杉苗

壹阡本以

季消防記念会十番組

座間市

森林田

黒木道子

高梁寺(参)

松村吉

奥屋美寿恵

高梁寺(参)

松原千枝

高野昌弘

高梁寺(参)

常盤

久保博文

高梁寺(参)

高橋章

鈴木典子

高梁寺(参)

大岩つぎ江

大倉千登勢

高梁寺(参)

白井脩

鈴木淳一

鈴木(参)

鈴木光江

野口博文

鈴木(参)

鈴木利男

十文字香織

川福寺

西川照幸

福田邦夫

高梁寺(参)

小暮まち子

大田聖信

高梁寺(参)

小暮榮順

大貫哲男

高梁寺(参)

木林伸介

gave them no advice. Any choice they would make would be the right one.

The great thing about this trip is that Keio Plaza Hotel Shinjuku sponsored it, putting our small group in the heart of Tokyo and partnering us with a great team from their side who shared their passion for the city, its culture and how the city and the culture are so much of their iconic hotel.

DAVE – A TO Z

When you do the red eye from Singapore to Haneda the guy you want waiting for you is Yuji 'Dave' Otsuka Executive Director of AZ. World Com Japan. Anybody could have met us and got us to the Keio Plaza, but over the three days that Dave spent with us he shared his extensive knowledge of the city with us.

We took the shuttle bus from Haneda to Shinjuku where Dave guided us to the hotel. Here we met his colleague Tomoko Yabe and Sunaho Nakatani from the PR & Marketing Section of Keio Plaza. I had met Sunaho and her colleague Ms Junko Saito, Deputy Director of Marketing PR when they visited Singapore.

GETTING AROUND

Once settled in our rooms we met in the lobby where we were handed a pass for the transportation system. It gained us access to all the Tokyo trains and buses. After three days of extensive travel I was surprised at how little of the value had been used. Tokyo wasn't quite as expensive as it had been when I lived there.

Tomoko, suffering from a brutal cold, took us to Takadanobaba for lunch at Ore no Sora (My Sky – named after a comic book series). Ore no Sora had won a contest making it very popular and waits of up to 40 minutes were common. We did have to wait, but not quite that long.

The décor was deliberately simple and it seated only about 12, all facing the cooking area. Small is common in one of the largest cities in the world. When I lived here I worked on a piece about Tokyo's small bars. At one such place the bartender had to crawl through a window to get behind the bar.

TO DYE FOR

The ramen place is a short walk from Takadanobaba station, but we went on to Kandagawa by taxi. Having lived near by I had been through Takadanobaba countless times, but I had never been to this gentle enclave that is home to Tokyo Some Komon where traditional fine patterned dyeing has been taking place for more than 80 years.





As we walked down the narrow tree lined lane that runs along the Kanda River, Tomoko said the river itself has a special place in the hearts of Japanese. Like their traditional crafts, which they honour and protect, such sensibilities are important aspects of being Japanese.

And while Komon is a traditional craft of fine patterned dye effect created by using ink and stencil. It dates back to Japan's Muromachi Period (1337-1573). I quickly became enthralled in the building itself. Inside and out.

GENERATIONS OF CRAFTSMEN

Inside, the office was full of cloth, old hardcover books, decorated room dividers, and beautiful wooden cabinets. On stands were kimonos displaying their intricate designs. We were introduced to Tomita san who is now the fifth generation of his family who have been doing this craft since 1886. His son will take over one day and become the sixth generation to do this family business.

Tokyo Some komon is unique for its intricate geometric patterns and for creating a refined, sophisticated impression while using only a single colour. In the workshop we were shown exactly how this is done and were given the opportunity to apply the ink ourselves. In this building that had survived in Tokyo for 103 years, survived earthquakes and wars, it exuded tradition. Rows of brushes that are used to apply the ink, are kept along the building's support beams.

A DYING TRADITION

Water flows, ink is stirred, cloth is laid out and patterns are applied in layers giving the finished product a 3D affect. Traditional patterns from the Edo

Period to contemporary designs are created. Only fifty rolls a week are now made whereas they used to do 200 to 300 rolls. Kimonos are not worn as much as they once were.

Waiting for the taxi to take us back Tomoko told me more about patterns and colours and their traditional meaning as we stood in dappled sunlight along the river. "Red is life. It gets rid of bad luck. The gates at temples are red to keep out demons."

IN-HOUSE SALON

We returned to Keio Plaza Hotel for our afternoon programme that began with the 'Kimono Fitting Experience' that is available weekdays to hotel guests and limited to two couples a day. Guests get to wear kimonos that brides and grooms wear in traditional weddings and have their pictures taken. Sunaho explained: "This service, which is unique to our hotel, is designed to satisfy the interests in Japanese art and culture of the growing number of foreign guests staying at our hotel."

We were shown the traditional bridal kimonos in various colours and patterns at the in-house costume salon off the hotel lobby. Run by the Keio Department Store, the salon provides the traditional kimonos for the guests. Several



locations in the hotel have ideal backdrops for photographs to be taken of kimono clad guests such as the Japanese wedding ceremony rooms and the Imperial Suite.

When I had lived in Japan I'd learned about the kimono so when it came time to try on the traditional dress I asked to be excused. I returned to my room to check my email and then, having a few minutes, I lay down. 25 minutes later my phone was ringing. I'd overslept. They were waiting for me in the tea ceremony room.

SACROSANCT CEREMONY

I rushed over to the 10th floor of the Central Tower and apologized profusely as we moved into the tea ceremony room. Once again we were impressed with the depth of Japanese culture as we were taken through the details of preparing ourselves, and the tea. A small room with tatami mat flooring replicated tea houses where such ceremonies took place. The space, the tea and all movements and actions are sacrosanct. They are precise and each is imbued with meaning.

Keio Plaza Hotel has created this space as another way its guests may experience and gain an understanding of Japanese culture. Not all of Japanese culture goes back centuries, nor does all of it have precise ways of practicing and enjoying it as I was reminded when we were given a tour of the hotel, which included two of the Hello Kitty rooms.

HELLO PUDDY TAT

The Hello Kitty rooms were opened in 2014 to celebrate Hello Kitty's 40th birthday. The eight Hello Kitty rooms come in two themes of "KITTY TOWN," with the delightfully pop décor, and

"PRINCESS KITTY," where the furniture is dedicated to the charm of Kitty. These rooms are popular with both Japanese and overseas guests, and the excitement of some guests when they enter the room is stratospheric.

"Our Hello Kitty room guests enjoy special room service breakfasts that include omelette, sandwich, soup and others created in the concept of Hello Kitty," Sunaho explained. "Guests can enjoy a variety of special accommodation plans elaborated with originally designed cakes, cocktails and drinks." It is not just children that go wild for Kitty.

A TOKYO ICON

At 6:00pm we ascended to 41st floor where the Club Lounge offers drinks and snacks and views over the Tokyo's skyline. Junko Saito joined

us to introduce us to the history and culture of the hotel. Being the first highrise skyscraper hotel in Japan when it opened in June 1971 it has not only been a centrepiece of Shinjuku, but a demonstration of how an international hotel becomes a prestigious icon that has welcomed guests from 100 countries.

"Every year," Saito san informed us, "we renovate something in the hotel." With 1437 guest rooms, 16 restaurants and nine bars, there is always something to do. Renovations are now happening for 11 suite rooms and 100 club rooms. The newly remodelled 47th floor banquet room facilities are scheduled to reopen on September 12th. The banquet rooms located on the 47th floor will be significantly improved to accentuate the magnificent city views.

SAKE, SUSHI & SEAFOOD

After the introduction we adjourned to the Sake bar Amanogawa, located inside Kagari, where we indulged in a variety of the choicest brands of sake, carefully selected by sake sommelier Keiichi Sakata who had curated a range of sakes that best complemented a selection of sashimi, sushi and seafood. When I posted the pictures on Facebook they created mouth-watering envy. It was a superb evening of eating, drinking and conversation. Kagari is a highly rated restaurant in Tokyo and is known around the world due to the many international guests who have enjoyed its succulent dishes.

I enjoyed a superb breakfast in Jurin which offers a variety of a la carte dishes, course meals, snacks, and drinks. It has eye-catching views through picture windows which reveal the beauty of nature right in the heart of Sinjuku. The first





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morning I ate here I marvelled at how well-played the greenery is, but this morning fog and rain dimmed the light.

TRAIN TO TAKAO

Though we were organising umbrellas I thought we were lucky to have such ambient weather as we ventured out of Tokyo to historic Mt Takao. Dave lead us to Shinjuku station. Direct semi-limited express trains, which take about 50 minutes and cost 390 yen, (about S\$5.00 at current exchange rates) leave Keio Shinjuku station every 20 minutes. They terminate at Takaosanguchi Station, at the foot of the mountain where there are museums, spas, cafes, restaurants and souvenir shops.

For me it was a time trip. A personal nostalgic journey. As the train rolled through endless suburbs I was swarmed by memories of commuting around Tokyo when I lived here. We were venturing into one of the many historic places that exist around Tokyo. The time journey begins with the modern most recently constructed buildings at the foot of the hill to ancient temples on the sacred mountain that rises to 599m. The first temple was built in 1270 to be replaced in 1375 and then in 1901. Yakuo-in is centred around medicine – it is the King of Medicine.

MINGLED IN THE MIST

The cable car conveyed us up the 31-degree grade, the steepest in Japan. Through fog and rain. I was less enthused about the rain than the fog. Though it erased views of Tokyo and environs, it created a beautiful haunting ambience. Fewer visitors hiked up the gentle slope from the cable car to the temple complex than would have on a better day. It was silent and serene as we took in the historic statues and buildings, as we breathed in the wonderfully fresh air.

There are no less than eight hiking trails on Mount Takao with the shortest being just under 1km while the longest is over 15km. That night at dinner Saito



san told us that as a student she had climbed the mountain several times, from the bottom – eschewing the cable car. I appreciated the shorter walk.

PRAY FOR HEALTH

Considered a sacred mountain, Takaosan has been a centre of worship even before the first temple was built. Yakuo-in, at 525m is near the summit, below an older shrine. Many visitors stop here to pray to Shinto-Buddhist gods (tengu) for good health and good fortune. Statues of the gods, one with a long nose and one with a crow beak, are at the temple and other spots around the mountain.

A procession of monks under white umbrellas, announced by the blowing of a conch shell, slowly drifted through the grounds. After visiting the temples, we went to the Visitor's Centre where we had a traditional vegetarian lunch sitting on tatami mats in our own private room. Such meals are among my strongest memories of my time in Japan. The food is always excellent and the ambience cannot be beat.



IDABASHI AFTERNOON

Arriving back in Tokyo we transferred trains and drifted over to Idabashi. My memories of Idabashi are not that strong as it wasn't an area I frequented. I do remember a nearby park which we visited during Cherry Blossom season. A festival was being held here beneath trees thick with pink blossoms. A contest was held with archers on horses that would gallop along a trail and shoot at targets. A difficult thing to execute, which a number of them did impressively well.

The fog had cleared and a gentle sun pushed through the cloud to brighten the fresh afternoon. We meandered around the neighbourhood checking out the small bars and restaurants – many of them offering French cuisine and displaying the French flag outside, boutiques and shops. We stopped

for ice cream and I did most of my shopping – mostly for tea and Japanese snacks – before heading back to the hotel.

YES TO NOH

Back at Keio Plaza I checked out the special exhibition of the world's oldest dramatic acting form 'Noh' which was being held in the lobby. A number of highly precious masks and costumes used in the classical drama, along with related art items, were provided by the National Noh Theatre. The following day renowned Noh performer Yoshimasa Kanze gave a performance to a packed lobby. Noh has been performed in Japan for over 600 years.

There were over 40 art items, including six costumes and 20 masks worn in Noh performances since the Edo Period (1603 to 1868), and items documenting the art. Noh's highly refined movements and theatrics have influenced various arts and was registered as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2008.

DIVINE DINNER

Saito san again joined us for dinner, despite her very busy schedule. It was a more relaxed atmosphere this evening. My memories are of conversation over a series of small dishes that included the excellent Wagyu Beef and Katsu Sando (fried pork sandwich). Rivers of red wine accumulated in the glass in front of me requiring me to continuously dispose of it. While still enjoying its rich flavour.

After dinner we ascended to the Aurora Lounge which is now closed until December due to its first



renovation in 45 years. We were among the last of the many to enjoy a night cap in this historic romantic lounge. We gazed out over the city which offered distant views of Tokyo Tower, which when completed in 1958, at 332.9m, was the tallest freestanding tower in the world, surpassing the Eiffel Tower by 13m. It is now dwarfed by Tokyo Skytree which rises to 634m and could be seen twinkling in the distance.

BREAKFAST IN TSUKIJI

Dave suggested that we not have breakfast at the hotel as we would eat at Tsukiji. As I was up at 7:00am and hungry, I ignored his advice and indulged in a hefty breakfast. At 8:00 we boarded the train for the dash across the city to Tsukiji. More than ever I regretted not visiting the Fish Market when I lived here. In the early 90s anyone who showed up could go in and watch the fish auction which was a tradition not to be missed. I missed it. It became so popular that one had to get a ticket to get in, and now no one would get in the old site as it was being moved to a new location.

Tsukiji itself is a delightful area adorned with fish stalls and restaurants displaying, selling and

serving seafood. The usual suspects are there, but then again you may see a few denizens of the deep you've never laid eyes on. Or photographed. Even early in the morning it was abuzz with people – some like us – here to enjoy breakfast.

BEER FOR BREAKFAST

At 9:00am we climbed to the second floor of Sushi Zanmai that was not only serving sushi but miso soup and beer. Next to us was a table full of ladies who had made their way through their meal and much of their beer and were in high spirits.

to the gills. After breakfast, I waddled behind the group as we photographed the fish sellers, the fish and the imaginative signs and sights of a community dedicated to seafood.

OH, NOH AGAIN

Despite being early for Tsukiji we were late arriving at the Noh Performance at the National Noh Theatre. The theatre is a beautiful modern building exuding the traditions of Japan. As Noh is a slow moving art form not all of the many students who had the opportunity to enjoy their national culture managed to stay awake for the entire performance. And it is possible that some of the older theatre goers nodded off a few times as well.

Nobody went to sleep in the lobby of the Keio Plaza as Yoshimasa Kanze's Noh performance was brief and dramatic. And well received. And our brief but dramatic time in Japan was nearing an end.

Our flight from Haneda was at midnight and as the hotel was so busy we could not be given a late check out.

THE SHINJUKU SHUFFLE

We had lunch as a group in Shinjuku – did I really insist on going for soba? Tempura soba was one of my frequent lunch time meals when I lived here and it had been a very long time since I'd enjoyed it. Then we were all set free to do our own thing before meeting back at the hotel for transfer to the airport.

I shuffled about Shinjuku, stopping to buy a shirt and then, as the afternoon began to merge into evening and the Tokyo workers began to make their way out of the offices and into the restaurants isakaya's and lounges I found a small bar where I got a draft beer and sat outside and watched the people swirl by. As darkness descended the neon brought its own mood of energy and excitement of the awakening night.

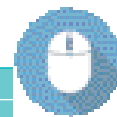
I walked alone back to the hotel wondering when I would once again return to enjoy all that this exciting city has to offer. ❖



As the restaurant is open 24 hours it was impossible to guess when they had arrived.

Dave ordered a sumptuous breakfast for us, and despite not being hungry I couldn't resist, stuffing myself

Pocket Guide



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