

Turning Japanese

See a different side of Tokyo, says Katie McGonagle

@katie_mcgonagle

I've been in Tokyo an afternoon, and already I've seen tiny meerkats kitted out in kimono, a woman dressed like a horror movie bride and street-cleaners in the guise of samurai with litter-pickers for swords.

I've elbowed my way through the Shibuya Scramble – famously the busiest crossing in the world – and two minutes later, strolled solo down a side street, window-shopping in Japanese boutiques without another soul in sight.

Wandering through Yoyogi Park, I've spotted a wannabe popstar singing his heart out (even if his trio of fan-girls are the only ones listening), and been transfixed by a troupe of ageing 'Greasers' dressed like extras from Danny Zuko's T-Birds, dancing their (white) socks off to the strains of '50s rock 'n roll – with swing

dress-wearing groupies looking on from the sidelines, no less.

I've perched on a bar stool slurping ramen while a queue of hungry locals waits for me to eat up and move on, sampled yakitori dipped in house-blend tare sauce, passed hedgehog and owl cafes where coffee-drinkers can pet animals while getting their caffeine fix, and made my own pancake-like monjayaki on a griddle right at the table.

And the most amazing thing? This really took place in a single afternoon. There's no poetic licence required when talking about Tokyo; the Japanese capital is every bit as quirky, colourful, fast-paced, outlandish and off-the-wall as its reputation would suggest.

INNS AND OUTS

The main reason I've touched down on Tokyo soil from an Air France flight via Paris is to be among the first guests at Hoshinoya Tokyo, the first city-centre hotel for this Japanese group, which opened on July 20. The 16-floor property is a hotel version of the traditional ryokan, with 84 of the →

FAST FACT
Air France and KLM have 37 weekly flights to Tokyo and Osaka, via Paris and Amsterdam, from £499 in economy. airfrance.co.uk

→ biggest rooms you're likely to find in this space-pressed capital, plus a lounge hosting Japanese gagaku music, finished with a top-floor onsen (public baths).

Chief executive Yoshiharu Hoshino has high hopes, keen to roll the concept out in the likes of San Francisco, Paris or London. "Japanese culture is much more widely accepted across the US and Europe now," he says. "So why not Japanese-style hotels and hospitality? We would definitely like to export this to other countries. We want to recreate the atmosphere of a ryokan in the middle of a city."

The concept works well: each of its 14 guest floors comprises six rooms surrounding an ochanoma (tea lounge), staffed by impeccably attentive employees, and stocked with tea and juice or noodles and ice lollies to quell late-night cravings.

The real joy, though, lies in the exquisite Japanese touches at every turn, from the calming entrance – shoes off, please – and tatami mat-covered floors to breakfasts that are more a work of art than a meal. Served in-room and with American or Japanese

options, this array of small dishes arrives in an okamochi (stacked-up bento box), unveiled with a flourish to reveal elegant plates of omelette and bacon, or sashimi and salmon.

Little did I know this was just a taster of what the kitchen could provide: its basement restaurant offers even more innovative cuisine come dinner, putting a creative spin on Japanese flavours. Rates start at £575 including tax and service charge.

▶ **GOING LOCAL**

Hoshinoya Tokyo is at the heart of financial district Otemachi, near Tokyo station, so it's a good base for getting around. The Imperial Palace is barely five minutes away, but aside from jogging or cycling around the moat, visitors will get much more out of Tokyo if they skip the obvious sights and immerse themselves in local life.

"We have seen a lot more interest in lesser-known districts such as Daikanyama and Aoyama," says Tyler Palma, ground manager for InsideJapan Tours and my expert guide for the afternoon. "People are looking



ABOVE: Japanese noodle soup, ramen

LEFT: Hoshinoya Tokyo

BELOW: Yona Yona Beer Works, Akasaka

Escaping the city

If Tokyo gets too much, follow the locals' lead and head for summer retreat Karuizawa, an hour away by bullet train. With its 1,000-metre altitude comes cool air and lush vegetation, alongside flying squirrels (book a tour to see these nocturnal creatures around dusk) and Hoshinoya Karuizawa, the brand's flagship resort.

Boasting spacious rooms and a

strong focus on onsen – there are two baths, one public and one for guests, though in true Japanese fashion, both require bathers to go nude – it's a pleasant spot to relax. Be sure to book dinner in Kasuke, where the tasting menu showcases the absolute best of Japanese cuisine. Rates from £510 per night with tax and service charge.

hoshinoyakaruzawa.com/en



for something different from their travel experience, and rather than seeing the usual sights, they're more interested in getting a sense of the city. We've introduced excursions with a Japanese wine sommelier, visits to video-game arcades, art and architecture tours or trips around the best izakayas in Tokyo – it's just a different way to think about the city."

We headed straight for yurakucho sanchoku inshokugai, a twisting alleyway under the railway tracks, crowded with tiny restaurants serving pork, chicken or even horse meat. It's the sort of place you'd never stumble across without a guide, proving even visitors who usually avoid tours would benefit from some direction here.

After a quick stop at ramen restaurant Hashigo – another local find, with no English sign or menus but the best bowl of noodles I've ever twirled around a set of chopsticks – I was in for a taste of Japan's quirkier side at the food hall of department store Mitsukoshi.

Why, with all the delights of Tokyo, spend precious time food-shopping, you might ask? This is no average supermarket:

“ High-end matsusaka beef is so sought after that it comes with the cow's nose print to prove it's for real

its fancy food hall features watermelons grown in the shape of pyramids and cubes (as long as you don't mind dropping £150 on strangely-shaped fruit, that is); and the highest of high-end matsusaka beef, so sought after that producers must supply a certificate attesting to three generations of the cow's parentage and – weirdest of all – it comes with the cow's nose print to prove it's for real.

It just shows shopping isn't a mere practicality here – top-end fashion houses like Hermes hold art exhibitions in their stores, and you can have a go on the latest gadgets in the huge Sony store.

And if all that leaves visitors in need of some sustenance, enjoy the funkier side of Tokyo's food and drink scene. Commune

246 is a great spot for a late lunch in Aoyama, full of pop-up food stalls, bars and a laid-back vibe; go for afternoon tea in the tranquil gardens of the Nezu Museum; then see the night off at Yona Yona Beer Works in Akasaka, one of Tokyo's pub-style izakayas, brewing an array of beers from golden lagers to heftier porters.



InsideJapan Tours offers three nights at Hoshinoya Tokyo and two at Hoshinoya Karuizawa, with breakfast, private airport transfers from Narita, and first-class Tokyo-Karuizawa train travel from £2,846 in January 2017, not including flights. insidejapantours.com

Urban Adventures offers a three-hour Tokyo After 5 tour, sampling yakitori and monjayaki in downtown Tokyo, from £88. urbanadventures.com

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO EARN AN EXTRA £500 COMMISSION PER BOOKING?

WE ARE GIVING A WHOPPING EXTRA COMMISSION OF £500 PER BOOKING ON OUR RHÔNE CRUISES AUGUST 2016 DEPARTURES AND THE OCTOBER 2016 DATES BELOW



N.B. THE EXTRA COMMISSION IS A REWARD FOR AGENTS AND NOT TO BE USED TO DISCOUNT THE PRODUCTS

BURGUNDY, RIVER RHÔNE & PROVENCE LUXURY RIVER CRUISE

FIVE-STAR AND FOUR-STAR SUPERIOR SHIPS

Full board, including flights/Eurostar

DATE	PRICE
15/08/16	only £1,599pp
18/08/16	only £1,499pp
10/10/16	only £1,499pp
17/10/16	only £1,449pp
24/10/16	only £1,299pp

For more information, call agency sales on:

01283 744307
agencysales@rivieratravel.co.uk



Bonus commission applies to new bookings only, for the above river cruises, made from 8th August 2016. Extra commission will be paid off invoice after departure date. Supplements apply to selected regional airports.