

lost in translation

The vibrant city of Tokyo is an extraordinary place to explore, but at times it can feel as though you've stepped into another world

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Clockwise from right: the Harajuku district is famed for its funky fashion; be prepared for serious crowds if travelling in the city's vast subway system; with this many people around, a simple task such as crossing the street becomes an adventure; Mount Fuji towers over the densely populated city; Tokyo is home to many temples, some with intricate carvings and embellished with gold leaf.



“Worshippers wave incense smoke from a bronze vessel over their faces and bodies to heal or to prevent illness”

The thumb of a short, grey-haired Japanese man is finding its way around the many sore muscles in my back. I moan loudly but it doesn't stop him digging deeper. It seems torturous, but having paid for a session at one of the well-known parlours in the heart of Tokyo's Roppongi district, I'm simply experiencing the real deal when it comes to the art of shiatsu massage.

While my masseuse works away, I try to digest some of the many impressions roaming around my brain as a result of a week's intense sightseeing in Japan's capital city and beyond.

Many a time during my visit I have felt like a fish out of water in this enormous city boasting around three times the population of New Zealand. Still, as lost as I may have



felt at times, it's been well worth the effort as I've found myself thrilled and overwhelmed by this incredibly different culture and its many exotic rituals and customs.

My first this-is-how-it-is-in-Japan experience happens while using a pedestrian crossing on a busy street. When the lights turn green, unbelievable crowds of people are set in motion and it feels as if you're throwing yourself into the crashing waves of a rolling human ocean.

Underground in the subway, a myriad of neon-lit signs tell me in both English and decorative but incomprehensible Japanese characters which direction to go, and to my amazement I manage to reach my final destination, the Asakusa Kannon temple. To get there, I also need to walk through the colourful Nakamise shopping

arcade. There I watch the local women dressed in traditional silk kimonos walking carefully in their wooden shoes as they shop at the stalls offering wonderfully weird-looking delicacies and knick-knacks.

At the end of the arcade, red paper lanterns lead the way to the city's oldest Buddhist temple, dedicated to Kannon, the Buddhist goddess of compassion. Hundreds of locals and a few tourists gather in front of the main entrance to the five-storey scarlet pagoda, making it a very busy place yet one that is calm and oozes serenity.

As it's the custom for Japanese Buddhists to wash away any impurities before entering a temple, the locals cleanse their hands and rinse their mouths by a fountain filled with ladles. Worshippers also wave incense smoke from

a bronze vessel over their faces and bodies to heal or to prevent illness. I am spellbound by this ritual. Once inside the temple, the sheer beauty of the pagodas and shrines overwhelms me, as does the elaborate art work and the pervading sense of spirituality.

There are many temples in Tokyo and some intriguing ones outside the city boundaries. Nikko, a small city by the entrance to the Nikko National Park, is a two-hour train ride from Tokyo.

Here the buildings are lavishly decorated in a way not seen elsewhere in Japan, boasting hundreds of incredibly detailed wood carvings and large amounts of gold leaf. The most famous is the Toshogu Shrine, the mausoleum of Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder of the Tokugawa shogunate which ruled Japan for ▶

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more than 250 years until 1868. It's an absolute must-see.

Another train ride takes me to the city of Kamakura where I enjoy the less lavish but still beautiful temples of Engakuji, Kenchoji and Hasedera, as well as the Great Buddha, Daibutsu. Completed in 1252, this giant bronze statue stands 11.4 metres tall, weighs 120 tonnes and its hollow interior allows you to climb inside should you feel so inclined.

I don't. Instead, I decide it's time for lunch and head to a restaurant where the waitress presents me with a vast, impenetrable menu. Naturally, it's in Japanese and yet again I feel totally lost.

It's not the first time that I'm having a less-than-great restaurant experience. I don't normally consider myself to be picky, but not



Clockwise from above right: Tokyo's fascinating fish markets sell all manner of delicacies; Nikko National Park was designated a world heritage site in 1999; the imposing bronze statue Buddha Daibutsu stands proud in Kamakura.



bad, as I end up being served just what I wanted – salmon sashimi (slices of raw fish).

A friend of mine lives in Tokyo and one night he and his friends take me out for dinner. I get my courage back and indulge in every single delicious bite of food that's ordered and down it with a lot of sake, a Japanese rice wine that packs quite a punch. A few shots of that would make anyone loud and keen on singing. But be warned: if you're dining with locals, there are rules to be followed.

For starters, never pour your own drink when eating with others. You pour your companion's drink and he or she pours yours. If you've had enough, simply leave your glass full. And make sure you don't point at people with your chopsticks or leave them standing up in your food because that's considered terribly rude.

In the end it's an unforgettable night at the busy Under the Tracks restaurant in Naka-Meguro, an upbeat and trendy area, but even though the meal is great, we don't leave a tip. That's not part of the etiquette (nor is filling up your pockets with napkins, sugar packets or other souvenirs).

During the final days of my stay, I explore some of Tokyo's exuberant shopping areas, and a few of its many museums, but this is a fascinating city with a lot to offer and my week-long stay is not nearly long enough. But hopefully this will be only the first of several visits. After all, the food hasn't scared me off (yet) and there's still so much to see and do. **■**

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being able to decipher the menus makes it an almost impossible task to order anything other than what meets the eye at the counter (if there is one).

The morning I visit the famous Tsukiji Market, one of the world's largest fish markets, I leave my accommodation without having breakfast. So after snooping around this gigantic market with all its weird-looking sea creatures, my stomach tells me it's time for food.

I set out to find a suitable eatery and begin to look forward to something fishy. I find a place that looks appealing and when it comes to explaining what I want to order, I fall into my strange mixture of sign language, English and some wierd kind of foreign tongue that seems to escape my lips whenever I try to communicate with the locals.

The five chefs behind the counter seem to find my efforts hilarious, but, while embarrassing, it isn't all

fitting in Knowing some basic Japanese etiquette will help make your visit easier:

don't

- * bite your fingernails, gnaw on pencils, or lick your fingers in front of others.
- * count your change after paying the bill in a shop or restaurant – it's considered very rude.
- * be late for an appointment.
- * chew gum when you're working or when you're in other formal situations.

do

- * put "-san" after another's name as a mark of respect, "-chan" after a young girl's name, or "-kun" after a young boy's name. But never use these after your own name.
- * say "arigato" (thank you) whenever appropriate. The Japanese will appreciate your courtesies.

sign language

- * When saying "Who, me?" – the Japanese point at their nose not their chest, as Westerners do.
- * When saying "no" – the Japanese fan their hand sideways a few times in front of their face.
- * To indicate "come here", put out one hand palm up, then raise and lower the fingers repeatedly.