

# World's Greatest City: 50 reasons why Tokyo is No. 1

*This town is so magnificent that 'being from the future' didn't even make the list.*

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*Editor's Note: Matt Alt, Hiroko Yoda, Melinda Joe, Andrew Szymanski, and W. David Marx, CNNGo Tokyo City Editor all contributed to this report.*

## 1. The world's most sophisticated railways

With 13 subway lines and over 100 surface routes run by Japan Railways and other private companies, Tokyo's railway system seems like it was designed to win world records. It's rare to find a location in the metropolitan area that can't be reached with a train ride and a short walk. Now, if only the government could devise a way to keep middle-aged salarymen from groping women onboard.



Imperial Palace

## 2. The most beautiful place you'll never visit

The Imperial Residence sits on three and a half square kilometers of greenery that were once valued at more than all of the real estate in California. Although several of the outer Imperial gardens are open to the public, the inner sanctum is off limits. Rumor has it that all sorts of once common, but since displaced, animals -- such as tanuki, pheasant, fox and many rare species of birds -- make their homes within its walls.

[Map](#)

## 3. Tongue-gasmic food porn

You could spend hours drooling over the elaborate pastries and picture-perfect sushi rolls at Istein's recently refurbished, super-stylish depachika. Square watermelons and ¥50,000 matsutake mushrooms are displayed with gallery-like reverence. But one of the best things about this depachika is the small standing bar serving single-malt scotch and whiskey in the wine department.

[Isetan Depachika](#): Isetan B1, 3-14-1 Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku, tel. 03 3352 1111



Shibuya scramble crossing

## 4. Street crossings are like a battle scene from 'Braveheart'

The scramble street crossing outside of Shibuya station is easily the world's busiest, with a thousand people [running into the middle of the street](#), weaving together in a huge organic mass. The scramble perfectly summarizes the essence of Tokyo's true tourist landmarks: not old buildings, but lots and lots people coming together in celebration of culture.

*Outside the Hachiko exit of Shibuya Station*

## 5. You find rice paddies in the unlikely places

Nestled incongruously among Tokyo's skyscrapers, the tiny [Roppongi Hills Rooftop Garden](#) rice paddy is part of the Keyakizaka Complex. Perched some 45 meters above street level, it yields 60 kilograms of rice every year.



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Harajuku crossing

## 6. Youth fashion stores come by the hundreds

Even with the arrival of Forever 21 and H&M, there are countless independent fashion boutiques in the Harajuku area -- all dedicated to generally insane forms of youth fashion. If you count adjacent Shibuya, Omotesando and Aoyama into the region, you have the world's largest fashion district: featuring basically every single major designer brand in the world.

## 7. Three words: Punk bath house

Several times every year, an otherwise unassuming little public bathhouse named Benten-yu is converted into a makeshift 'live house' called [Furo Rock](#), where musicians rock out in between the bathtubs. Fully clothed, we assure you. At ¥3500 a pop, tickets can be on the expensive side (and it's more than a little echo-y in there), but hey -- it's wet and wild. Minus the wet part.

*Benten-yu: 2-27-13 Kichijoji Honcho, Musashino-shi, [map](#)*

## 8. More Michelin stars than anywhere else

When France's lauded Michelin Red Guide announced it would release a Tokyo edition -- the first one to cover an Asian city -- many scoffed at what they perceived to be a mere marketing ploy. But they awarded the city's restaurants a total of 191 stars, more than New York and Paris combined. It's only fair; Tokyo sports 160,000 known eateries, over 10 times the number in Paris. There are a few three-star standouts in the Tokyo Guide -- [Koju in Ginza](#), serving delicate traditional Japanese cuisine; [Joel Robuchon](#) in Ebisu, the Tokyo stronghold of the famed celebrity chef; and [Quintessence](#) in Shirokane-dai, whose young French-trained chef has finally achieved recognition in the Japanese culinary hierarchy, thanks to his inclusion in the Guide. More than anything, though, Michelin has proven something that most Tokyoites already know: this city is undoubtedly the gastronomic capital of the world.



Yodobashi Akihabara

## 9. The electronics stores are like theme parks

The Japanese have taken their love of the latest electronic gadgets and modern appliances to a new level with [Yodobashi Akiba](#), the largest electronics store in a section of Tokyo known for being the center of gadget, video game, and anime culture in the city. Going into any electronics store in Akihabara is like stepping into a digital wonderland of flashing lights and monstrous screens, but Yodobashi ups the ante by offering six massive floors of televisions, stereos, appliances, and game consoles alone, with three more floors dedicated to restaurants, juice bars, bookstores, and music shops.

*[Yodobashi Akiba](#): 1-1 Kanda-hanaoka-cho, Chiyoda-ku. tel. 03 5209 1010*

## 10. You can commute to the mountains

When the concrete Tokyo gets to be too much, just head out to the wonderful Mt. Takao in West Tokyo. Accessible by a single train from Shinjuku, the mountain is particularly famous for its easy hike to the top, stunning autumn foliage and special soba-noodle culture.

*To access Takao: Take the Keio line to Takao-san-guchi (高尾山口) station. Takes a little less than one hour.*

## 11. Earth's biggest fish market is in its best sushi neighborhood

Given Japan's penchant for seafood, it's not surprising that the world's largest fish market (and one of the largest wholesale markets, period) is located in Tokyo. Handling over 2,000 metric tons of seafood each day, Tsukiji-shijo ('market') is a haven for fisherman, auctioneers and buyers for Tokyo's best restaurants. As an added bonus, here the freshest sushi and most delectable grilled fish lunches can be had at reasonable prices -- assuming one can stand the mad rush of patrons.



Edo-Tokyo Museum

## 12. Even the serious museums are weird

[Edo-Tokyo Museum](#) is the best place to relive the old traditional style of life in Tokyo, when it was called Edo in the 15th to 19th centuries. The building exterior, however, looks like a giant space cruiser on a "Buck Rogers" backlot, propped up on stilts. This is perhaps an attempt to fuse past, present and future Tokyo into one space.

*[Edo-Tokyo Museum](#): 1-4-1 Yokoami, Sumida-ku, tel. 03 3626 9974*

## 13. No one boasts a broader meat spectrum

The classy little bistro Matagi specializes in 'exotic' meats including wild boar, venison and even bear. (The name itself is the Japanese word for 'bear hunter'.) How is it? Eh, a bit gamey.

*Matagi: Kamimeguro 1-5-10, Meguro-ku, tel. 03 3792 3395, closed Mondays*

## 14. You'll never want for expensive antique robot toys

Eight floors of heaven for anime fans, Mandarake Complex represents the flagship of the Mandarake chain of vintage anime ephemera. The seventh and eighth floors are like a museum of Japanese toy history -- only everything is for sale. Although their prices are higher than you'll find in other shops and bargaining is out of the question, you would be hard pressed to beat the selection.

[Mandarake Complex](#): Sotokanda 3-11-12, Chiyoda-ku, tel. 03 3252 7007, 12-8pm, [map](#)

## 15. The public parks are as pretentious as it gets

Meticulously constructed according to the good Doctor Enryo Inoue's arcane personal tastes, Tetsugakudo's numerous small buildings are all dedicated to world-famous philosophers. Outdoor features include a supposedly haunted tree and a 'Time-Space Clearing' that is -- and we quote -- "intended to represent the philosophical dimension." It's a big patch of dirt.

[Tetsugakudo](#): Matsugaoka 1-34-28, Nakano-ku, tel. 03 3951 2515, 9am-9pm, closed first Thursday of every month



Sugamo

## 16. It's the best place to shop if you're over 60

Variously referred to as the 'Granny Ginza' and 'Harajuku for Little Old Ladies,' the Sugamo Jizo Dori Shotengai shopping street has aged along with the local residents. Looking for the latest fashions circa 1962? You've found the right place. Black and white stills of long-forgotten movie stars? Check. It's also filled with stores that sell traditional sweets and sundry trinkets, most of them on the cheap side.

*Walking distance from JR Sugamo station.*

## 17. You can blow an entire year's salary on a round of drinks

Gone are the Bubble-era days of gold-leaf-wrapped sushi, but that profligate spirit lives on in the 'Diamonds are Forever martini' at the Ritz Carlton: chilled Grey Goose vodka with a lime twist, poured over a one-carat diamond. A good martini is hard to improve upon, but everything's better with a little bling. Cost: ¥1,800,000

[Ritz Carlton](#): Ritz-Carlton 45F, 9-7-1 Akasaka, Minato-ku, tel. 03 3423 8000

## 18. You can act as bait in the world's most truly bizarre beauty treatment

A toe-curling, heel-buffing experience. This spa treatment, sinisterly named 'Doctor Fish,' at Odaiba's Oedo Onsen no Monogatari involves sticking your feet in a tub for half an hour, while tiny fish nibble away at your corns and calluses. Your heels will be smooth, but you may never look at sushi the same way again.

[Oedo Onsen no Monogatari](#): 2-57 Omi, Koto-ku, tel. 03 5500 1126

## 19. Personal service is borderline stalky

From humble grocery stores to fancy boutiques, Tokyo's standard of service is remarkably high. Unsurprisingly, the city's top-class restaurants strive for excellence, and [Aronia de Takazawa](#) delivers service with a personal touch. Prior to your visit, you'll receive a number of charming, chatty emails from Akiko Takazawa, the chef's wife. During dinner, Mrs. Takazawa will take you step-by-step through the chef's high-tech creations and make you feel as smart and sophisticated as the food.

[Aronia de Takazawa](#): Sanyo Akasaka Bldg 2F, 3-5-2 Akasaka, Minato-ku, tel. 03 3505 5052



Umi-Hotaru

## 20. Highway rest stops are destinations

Rest areas like [Umi-hotaru](#) almost make up for the ridiculous tolls and endless traffic jams of Japan's highways. Umi-hotaru (the 'sea firefly') is a giant, island-like concrete construct floating smack in the middle of Tokyo Bay at the crossover point between the Aqua-Line bridge and tunnel. It offers a number of restaurants and shops for those who need to relax before braving the remaining drive.

## 21. There are oodles of noodles

There are more noodle shops in Tokyo than any other city in the world. If we had to pick a current favorite, it would be Menya Goto, a tiny counter stall that serves incredibly flavorful bowls of ramen to the slurping masses lined up out the door.

[Menya Goto](#): 3-33-7 Nishi-Ikebukuro, Toshima-ku, tel. 03 3986 9115

## 22. You can spend every waking hour surrounded by comics

At a manga-kissa, or 'comics cafe,' a few hundred yen per hour nets you a tiny booth with a reclining chair, internet-enabled PC, an endless supply of all-you-can-read comic books, and bottomless soft drink refills. Ostensibly created for manga freaks, these miniscule rent-a-chairs are fast becoming popular for another reason: they offer young couples and salarymen alike a super-cheap place to kill time and catch some z's. The extensive Manboo! franchise (despite a name and logo that border on copyright infringement) is arguably the most recognizable manga-kissa, and their flagship storefront in Kabuki-cho is perfect for hostess-club Lotharios who've missed the last train home.

[Manboo! Comic Cafe Shinjuku](#): 1-17-7 Kabuki-cho, Shinjuku-ku, tel. 03 5287 4688

## 23. Bats what's up



Manaboo manga cafe

Tokyo calls forth an image of the glimmering city of the future, yet along the Kanda River -- flowing from Inokashira Park in Kichijoji to the Sumida River -- we humans have to share Tokyo with another busy inhabitant: bats. Lots of 'em. Every evening, you can see them storming the skies on any pleasant stroll along the river, but since they don't attack people, they're considered part of the ambiance.

## 24. You can ride the world's shortest escalator 8,000 times a day

Kawasaki is not officially 'Tokyo,' but we'd like to claim the world's shortest escalator -- in Kawasaki More -- as part of our urban experience. We can't explain why this tiny escalator this exists, but you don't hear us, nor Guinness, complaining. [Video](#)

[Kawasaki More's](#): Motomachi 7, Kawasaki-ekimae, Kawasaki-shi, Kanagawa-ken, tel. 044 211 1131



Chanel in Ginza

## 25. The most absurdly-priced retail establishments on one block

Chanel, Louis Vitton, Gucci, Coach, Harry Winston -- and many more -- as far as the eye can see, each a dedicated storefront encased in a building of impeccable modern architectural design. Ginza is where to go to see and be seen and to spend more money than most salarymen ever dream of on fashion, handbags, and jewelry. Ginza used to be pithily described as Tokyo's 5th Avenue, but nowadays it's more accurate to call 5th Avenue New York's Ginza.

## 26. Cyberpunk infrastructure

Who but the Japanese would think to connect the major wards and neighborhoods of their capital with an 'expressway' that is perched several stories above ground and weaves in between office buildings and national landmarks? The Shuto-ko -- or 'Metropolitan Area Expressway' -- is not only an engineering marvel but also a logistical nightmare, with countless routes that are all interconnected, above- and below-ground entrances and exits, and high-speed curves that would make the Nürburgring blush.

## 27. It's mod tailoring's last stand

London boasts the high-end suiting of Savile Row, while Hong Kong and Bangkok are famous for their ultra-cheap bespoke factories. Tokyo's Yofuku no Namiki tailor may be the world's last great mod tailor -- making slim suits for cool youngsters. A favorite of rock bands, punks and rebels, Namiki makes suits in every possible historical style (zoot suits, seventies wide lapels, you name it) starting at the low price of ¥39,900.

[Yofuku no Namiki](#): Umegaoka Aiwa Mansion 105, Matsubara 6-4-5, Setagaya-ku, tel. 03 3325 9494



Reversible Destiny Lofts interior

## 28. Apartments are like MC Escher drawings

No city on earth is as novel in its approach to housing. Exhibit A: the rainbow-colored, multi-shaped Reversible Destiny Lofts apartment complex. Located in an otherwise boring part of the Mitaka suburbs, the complex looks like a LSD vision of a giant McDonald's jungle gym. Architects Arakawa & Gins intentionally built the lofts with uneven floors and other unorthodoxy to constantly challenge the minds of Japan's elderly. Guests can stay there a week for ¥95,000, but it's your lucky day: two apartments are open for long-term leases.

[Reversible Destiny Lofts](#): 2-2-8 Osawa, Mitaka-Shi, tel. 0422 26

4966

## 29. Religious experiences for cat lovers

This beautiful Buddhist temple is believed to be the birthplace of Japan's ubiquitous beckoning cat statues. As you might expect, its display of the lucky ceramic felines, tucked tastefully behind a side building, is second to none.

[Gotokuji Temple](#): Gotokuji 2-24-7, Setagaya-ku

## 30. The sommeliers don't take ... well, anything but "OK" for an answer

In choosing wine, some guests are happy to give the sommelier full reign, and that's exactly the way the head sommelier at Aquavit prefers it. If you're the kind of diner who likes to have it your way, get ready to rumble. The good news is that he's never wrong.

[Aquavit](#): Aoyama OM Square 1F, 2-5-8 Kita-Aoyama, Minato-ku, tel. 03 5413 3300



Rainbow Bridge

## 31. Water is just an excuse for the bridges

Connecting the Shibaura area with the futuristic Odaiba island, the [Rainbow Bridge](#) is one of the most recognizable landmarks in the city. With its pale shining towers and multicolored night lighting, the bridge provides a knockout frame through which to view the city's skyline from a restaurant terrace in Odaiba.

## 32. Porn shops are like video games with increasing levels of freakiness



Like entering the 36 Chambers of Shaolin, every flight up the Ali Baba mini-skyscraper of pornography is another level of weirdness. As with many Japanese porn shops, the first floor sells a halfhearted selection of mainstream Hollywood and Japanese films for a thin veneer of respectability. Take the stairs one flight up and the real adventure begins, with fetishes organized by floor.

### 33. Taste the teeniest, tiniest haute cuisine

In a city known for its diminutive dining spots, with only seven seats Tapas Molecular Bar is one of the smallest. But its menu of fanciful concoctions, like cucumber 'caviar,' lime salt 'foam' and chocolate 'pumice' makes it worth the squeeze. Reservations can be made for either 6 or 8:30 (no exceptions). Tardiness is severely frowned upon.

*Tapas Molecular Bar: Mandarin Oriental Tokyo 38F, 2-1-1 Nihonbashi Muromachi, Chuo-ku, tel. 03 3270 8188*



Godzilla statue in Hibiya Park

### 34. Behold the least impressive statue of a giant monster

Standing in the shadow of the film company that unleashed Godzilla on the world, this bronze effigy of the giant creature in Hibiya park towers a whopping... half-meter high. We suppose a life-sized 70-meter version would have been prohibitive, but half a meter? At least the pedestal raises it above eye level.

*Hibiya Park: [map](#)*

### 35. The cuddliest cafés

At cat café Nekorobi in Takadanobaba, you can relax after work with a cup of cocoa and a sleepy-faced Siamese, or let off some steam by tossing a toy around with a frisky tabby. Then be heartbroken when you leave.

*Nekorobi: Tact T-O Bldg 3, 1-28-1 Higashi-Ikebukuro, Toshima-ku, 03 6228 0646*



Golden Gai in Shinjuku

### 36. The most bars per square-meter

Bar hopping takes on a whole new meaning in Golden Gai: One only needs to step outside to stumble into another bar. Golden Gai packs over 200 tiny watering holes -- some so small they seat a scant five -- in half the size of a Costco. Less dense, but equally tight, are the bars in Omoide Yokocho near Shinjuku station and Nonbei Yokocho, the colorfully named "Drunkard's Alley," in Shibuya.

*Near Kabukicho, [official website](#)*

### 37. You have to work for high-end tempura

It might take a while to find Motoyoshi among the backstreets of Minami-Aoyama, but its GPS-confounding location is part of the fun. The prize for actually arriving is perfectly crisp tempura. The chef is as picky about his ingredients -- succulent scallops and tender asparagus in summer, hearty red carrots from Kyoto in winter -- as he is about his technique.

*Motoyoshi: 3-2-4 Minami-Aoyama, Minato-ku, 03 3401 0722*

### 38. It's home to the world's best fashion chains

Japanese select shops -- such as [Beams](#), [United Arrows](#), [Ships](#) and [Tomorrowland](#) -- grew to fame and prominence thanks to the expert curating of the world's best indie fashion brands. These days, however, their real offering is exquisitely high-quality Japanese-made clothing in the latest styles -- at extremely reasonable prices. Each company now also has a wide range of stores catering toward each age bracket and gender, so Beams F is for the suited corporate man while nearby Beams Boy is for dainty preps and stylish 'mountain girls.'

### 39. Its red-light district is the least dangerous

Kabukicho is full of sketchy hostess clubs, airplane-themed 'showtime cabarets' and 'pink salons' (don't ask), but also ... college students hanging out with acoustic guitars? Yes, the Shinjuku red-light district is not 'classy,' but it's still Tokyo. So feel free to wander through it any time of the day, maybe picking up a cone of Häagen-Dazs on the way.

*Walking distance from the East exit of Shinjuku station.*



Kabukicho

### 40. The most prolific festivals

While festivals of all shapes and sizes are staged throughout the year, any Japanese will tell you that there is no festival like a summer festival. Most well known are the 'Three Great Edo Festivals' of Kanda-matsuri in Kanda, Sanno-matsuri in Nagata-cho, and Fukagawa-matsuri in Tomioka, Koto-ku. These get-togethers

provide a way for neighbors to bond, celebrate, and wish for continued prosperity. Helping to lubricate the process is -- surprise! -- a large quantity of alcoholic beverages.

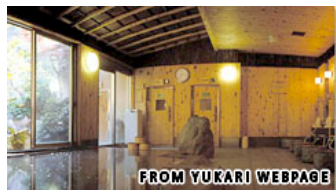
## 41. The world's best service

Sure, at some stores around the world, the staff are experts in their field, hoping to wait on your every wish and command. Japanese department stores such as [Mitsukoshi](#) and [Isetan](#) have that, of course, but they add in a few other perks: an army of uniformed women running automated elevators and bowing greeters at the door. The time-consuming, multi-stage gift wrapping is also unparalleled, perhaps justifying the premium prices.

## 42. You will never see a more expansive sake list

In terms of sheer variety, Tokyo is the best place in the world to try sake, and it's likely that you'll be able to find most of it at Kuri in Ginza. The sake menu is a tome that lists over 100 varieties. After the third cup, you might be brave enough to try the hoyo no shiokara (fermented sea pineapple guts), which isn't half as bad as it sounds.

*Kuri: Tony Bldg 2F, 6-4-15 Ginza, Chuo-ku, tel. 03 3573 8033*



Yukari Onsen

## 43. Onsen with the best Feng Shui

Strictly built according to the principles of Feng Shui, Yukari is a beautifully appointed hot spring in Tokyo's western suburbs. The baths are marked with the cardinal directions for proper orientation during soaking.

*[Jindaiji Onsen Yukari](#): tel. 042 499 7777, 10am-10pm, closed first Wednesday of every month*

## 44. Monumongous supercute mascot characters

Talk about hiding in plain sight. When Tokyo's Bureau of Waterworks decided to paint its official P.R. mascot character 'Mr. Earth' atop the roof of their Shibaura facility, they didn't mess around. Although you can't see it from street level, it's actually visible from several kilometers above the Earth's surface.

*Roof of Shibaura Water Recycling Center: [Google Earth view](#)*

## 45. You can eat like a sumo wrestler

Sumo wrestlers are always going head-to-head in a fast and furious slapping match against 300-pound opponents, which is why they require a steady diet of chanko nabe stew to keep their stamina up and their butts padded. Yoshiba is located in a former sumo stable, and you can chow down like a champion at a table right beside the clay ring.

*Yoshiba: 2-14-5 Yokoami, Sumida-ku, 03 3623 4480, cash only*



Matcha cocktail at Bar Rage

## 46. Cocktails are maniacally fresh

In cocktail-crazy Tokyo, bartenders approach their subject with the artistry and focus of Michelin-starred chefs. The mixologists at Aoyama's swanky Bar Rage source top-quality, fresh ingredients from around the country for their seasonal drinks. They hunt down the tastiest passion fruits from Okinawa, or the sweetest kumquats from Miyazaki to give classic cocktails a Japanese twist.

*[Bar Rage](#): 3F Aoyama Jin & IT Bldg, 7-13-13 Minami-Aoyama, Minato-ku, 03-5467 3977*

## 47. The most fiscally reckless, visually spectacular fireworks displays

Tokyo has a huge number of major hanabi-taikai, or fireworks festivals, every summer, but the gathering at Asakusa and Mukojima along the Sumida-gawa river has got to be the most spectacular. Over 20,000 individual fireworks are launched every year on average, and in 2009 alone, a whopping 948,000 residents flocked to the area to view the show.

## 48. Vegan restaurants that make even carnivores' mouths water

When it comes to excellent vegan cuisine, look no further than ... a Buddhist temple. The monks of Takao Yakuo-in monastery prepare elaborate vegan courses for visitors on a reservation-only basis. The multi-course, multi-plate spreads are a special treat for carnivore and non-carnivore alike. ¥2,500 to ¥3,500 per person.

*[Takao Yakuo-in Temple](#): Takao-cho 2177, Hachioji-shi, Tokyo, tel. 042 661 1118, [map](#)*

## 49. The finest art cafés

Tucked on the fifth floor of a nondescript building in the back streets of Aoyama, the A to Z Cafe brings Yoshitomo Nara's works to life in an imagined recreation of the artist's atelier.

*[A to Z cafe](#): equo Building 5F, Minami Aoyama 5-8-3, Minato-ku, tel. 03 5464 0281, 12-11:30pm*



A to Z cafe illustration (Flickr user 阿恬子)

## 50. The best riverboat entertainment

Sumida river is the most beloved river of the shitamachi Tokyo downtown and also home to the yakata-bune -- a traditional Japanese boat whose internals look like a typical Japanese pub. Package deals offer a boat and all-you-can-eat-and-drink food and alcohol for large groups, who

gorge on beer and okonomiyaki as their vessel plies the current.

Amisei: Kaminarimon 2-1-16, Taito-ku, tel. 03 3844 1869, [www.amisei.com](http://www.amisei.com)

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Godzilla69



5 February, 2010

You know, as a ten-year-plus resident of Tokyo, I can say with certainty that there's a lot to like about this city. But "most attractive city in the world"? No, sorry, not by a long shot. Not even the most attractive city in Japan (that would be Kyoto, in my opinion). This article should have been called "50 Things that are Pretty Cool about Tokyo" and left at that.

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