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# Tokyo in Transition

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 **History & Culture**

### Tokyo in Transition

Tokyo feels like the future, but the past is the adhesive that holds the city together as it races toward the 21st century. Like all great cities of the world, Tokyo has a character all its own.

Despite its sprawling expanse, the city's overall scale remains small, much of the land still held in tiny parcels. This dichotomy of scale, combined with a melange of cultural influences and an utter disregard for consistency in design and architecture accounts for jolting juxtapositions – Shinto shrines and MacDonald's restaurants, two-story wooden houses and high-tech apartment complexes.

The city changes at a dizzying pace, defying every attempt at control and planning. This internal, seemingly willful force of change defines Tokyo. Complex and contradictory, the city confounds and challenges any attempt to make sense of it.

### The People and the Lifestyle

Nearly 12 million people call Tokyo home. Few were born there; most come from other parts of Japan, and increasing numbers now come from overseas. In the Edo period (1600-1868) a strict division of classes kept merchants and other commoners in the damp lowlands of the *shitamachi* district to the east, while the hilly areas in the west were reserved for the estates of the *samurai* elite. But at the end of the Edo period, the samurai returned to their homes in the provinces, and the wealthy merchants moved west to replace them. Nowadays, land prices and estate taxes are proving far more effective than Edo-period class divisions in determining residential patterns, although a surprising number of small two-story houses remain in neighborhoods throughout the city. Stubbornly resisting increasing offers for their properties, many Tokyoites remain admirably firm in their attachment to the land.

Neat, often tiny houses line winding back streets. Flower beds are lovingly tended, and early in the morning litter is swept clean in front of each home. Young children walk to school unescorted. Crime, though rising, is rare. Every neighborhood has its *koban* (police box), and complaints are handled with a friendly, if not always satisfying, efficiency.

Tokyo offers little to those seeking the old Japan, the Japan untouched and untainted by the West. The city only begrudgingly offers the quaint photo opportunities that confirm one's meeting with an exotic culture. *Kimono* have long been replaced as everyday attire by designer fashions, business suits, jeans, and sweatshirts emblazoned with nonsensical English phrases. Traditional corner groceries have given way to 7-Elevens, and Shinto shrines are not infrequently relocated to the roofs of office buildings. At times it seems that the worst of the West has invaded this city where *kabuki* and *ukiyo-e* once flourished, this former capital of the Tokugawa shoguns.

## **A City of Districts**

Tokyo has no real center. The city unfolds as a series of densely built village-like districts, each centered around a subway or train station. The history of Tokyo — political, economic, and cultural — can be traced in these districts. Many retain a flavor of their original character and purpose; others sprang up or evolved into commuter service centers.

The city's focus has moved from east to west, with the Imperial Palace remaining an awkward, if symbolic, central axis. This shift of focus became "official" in 1991 when the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Offices moved from what had been the historical center of the inner city to the western edges in Shinjuku Ward. And yet, at the same time, there have been signs of a countertrend: ambitious plans abound for the redevelopment of the long-neglected waterfront and the city's still "developable" bay. As these plans are realized through the 1990s, it is tempting to imagine a Tokyo centered around the *shitamachi* area again.

One can easily forget that Tokyo is a waterfront city. It turned its back on what was once its lifeblood. The city used to be laced with rivers and canals, most of which were eventually filled in or covered by the roads and elevated freeways built in preparation for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. In parts of the city, however, the waterways remain. Crossing a bridge one may suddenly notice a small canal crowded with old wooden boats — remains of a former fishing village.

The future of Japan, of Tokyo, is tested daily. New ideas are tried, old ones discarded or brought back into style. Tokyo builds and rebuilds, becoming, to most observers, increasingly and disappointingly Westernized. But not even the most high-tech or avant-gard of its buildings goes up without a Shinto ceremony to placate the spirits of the place. The past lives on in the forms of the present. Behind the Western facade, Tokyo is a city that could only be Japanese.

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