

Journey to Tokyo: Navigating Tradition and Modernity in Japan's Capital [Episode 38]

Welcome to episode 38 of the Global Travel Planning Podcast

Tracy: Welcome to episode 38 of the Global Travel Planning Podcast. Today we're uncovering everything you need to know about planning a visit to Tokyo, a city where ancient traditions meet cutting edge modernity. Join us for expert tips to make your first visit unforgettable. Hi and welcome to the Global Travel Planning Podcast. I'm your host Tracey Collins, who with my expert guest will take you on a weekly journey to destinations around the globe, providing travel inspiration, itinerary ideas, practical tips and more to help you plan your next travel adventure. Hello and welcome to the podcast. Today I'm so thrilled to explore Tokyo, a city where tradition and modernity blend seamlessly to create a truly unique destination. Joining me is Helen Foster who has a deep connection to Tokyo and a wealth of knowledge to share. We'll be covering everything a first time visitor needs to know from the best times to visit a, must see neighbourhoods, to navigating the city like a pro and discovering hidden gems you won't find in guidebooks. Along the way we'll discuss cultural etiquette, budget, friendly tips and the one piece of advice that can transform your Tokyo experience.

Helen says she fell in love with Tokyo after first visit 20 years ago

I began by asking Helen to tell us a bit about herself and where she's based.

tanya: So I'm based in Sydney now. as you may be able to tell from my accent, I'm British originally and I moved out here about eight years ago. I am a journalist by trade but I've kind of given that up now to spend my entire days, well, basically writing about Japan, because why not?

Tracy: So that's obviously you love Japan and and when, when Doug and I went to Japan in 2023, at the end of 2023, I extensively used, was a member, I still am a member of your Facebook group and I fell in love with Tokyo. So I'm going to ask you about your connection with Tokyo and how did it become such a special place for you? Because I know you, you love Tokyo, don't you?

tanya: Yes, it's one of, one of my favourite places in Japan. But yeah, the first time I went, hated it, came back, never going back there, never couldn't live there. Oh my God, it's awful. I first went in, I don't even know what year it was. It was about 20 odd years ago and it was very different then. There wasn't so much English. It was the first place I'd ever been where I felt, really did feel like I was in a foreign country and I didn't know what on earth to do. I mean, tells you how long ago it was, I had to send facts to my office. And it's just trying to just work that out was just impossible. So at that point, and I couldn't understand. The thing I love about it now is the thing I hated about it then, which was the orderliness of it and the fact that people queue for the train. It was all just too conformist for me now. It's one of the things I love most about it. But anyway, I went back again, in 2012, and for some reason, everything about the way I thought about it changed. The thing I hated about people queuing on the trains and the silence and the fact that everybody did what they were told was the thing that made me actually love it most. Because it's safe, it's clean, you know where you're going. That was one of the reasons I loved it. But the main one was the fact that somebody decided it was a great idea to chuck a giant Godzilla on the top of a hotel in the middle of Tokyo that breathes

fire a few times a day. And it wasn't so much that that made me just think, this is my happy place. It's the fact that someone else said, yes, that's a fantastic idea. Let's do that. And that pretty much sums up Tokyo to me, that somebody just thought it was a great idea to shove a giant Godzilla in the middle of the city and make it roll. So.

Tracy: Absolutely.

First time visitors should know about Tokyo before they arrive, Helen says

So if you would describe Tokyo and to somebody who's never been. In a few words, how would you capture the essence? What words would you use to capture the essence of Tokyo?

tanya: It's bonkers. it's busy. It's buzzing. It's just. It's the Blade Runner. It's what you think when you think of Blade Runner. That's what I think of when I think of Tokyo. It's the neon lights and the fast things. There is another side to it. It's a very traditional side if you go look for it. But to me, that's what Tokyo is all about. It's, the bright lights and the. And the people and the fact that you're just standing there like, what the heck is happening right now?

Tracy: Absolutely. I have to say, Doug and I both totally fell in love with Japan, and I loved Tokyo. Absolutely love Tokyo. So totally get that. Absolutely. If somebody's planned a trip to Tokyo for the first time. And I remember when Doug and I were doing it, we kind of thought, oh, my goodness, Japan is. It was a bit of a Spur of the moment thing. And it was like my Japan, it just feels so. So exotic, so foreign, so different. How

do we do this? And luckily, your Facebook group and your excellent website Japanese really helped with that. But, so I would say if you listen to this podcast and you're planning to go to Japan, you need to look at Helen's resources. But what are the key things? First time visitors should know about Tokyo before they arrive.

tanya: I think the fundamental

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tanya: thing and the thing that people don't really sort of understand until they get there is how big it is. It is huge. And you look at it on a map and you think, oh, yeah, I can go to the Meiji Shrine now. And I can't even think of something Disneyland at the same day. And they're actually like, an hour apart. So the main thing I would say is really know the distances that you're going to be dealing with and don't try and do everything. Don't try and do it in two days, which I've seen people do. But I'm going to see all of Tokyo in two days. No, no, you're really not. If you've only got two days, find one area or two areas and enjoy them. Don't try and run around the top 10 sites in two days. You're just gonna hate every second of it. I think three to four days is the minimum you can do Tokyo. Well, in, I've been. I've probably spent, I don't know, 25, 30 days there. maybe more. I still haven't even touched the sides.

Tracy: So, yeah, we decided to spend. Yeah, we decided to spend six days. And honestly, it was. We just felt we scratched the surface of it because there's so much to do and see and experience. There's.

If you can avoid the summer, do. Don't go in summer if you can help it

So what about choosing the best time of year to visit Tokyo? Is there a best time of year to visit? Do things change over the seasons?

tanya: There's a worst time of year, I can tell you that. okay, go for it. Don't go in summer if you can help it. Just don't, please. I know it's school holidays in a lot of sort of the sort of northern hemisphere. but if you can avoid the summer, do. It's absolutely scorching. I mean, people come from Australia thinking they can cope with Tokyo summer, and there's a lot of people in my Facebook group who've done it. Go. No, you really can't. I live in Queensland and this is like nothing I'd ever felt. So I would say that's the only Time, I would say don't go, For the seasons, they're all very, very different. If you come, it's spring, you've got cherry blossoms, you can watch people picnicking under the trees. It's amazing. It's pretty. But it's also going to be quite busy because it's the one time everyone wants to go. Winter is crisp, it's clean, it doesn't snow that often, so. And when it does, it doesn't settle, so the weather's not too bad. And if you come just before Christmas, they have amazing illuminations and decorations and things like that. Especially if you go somewhere like Disneyland, it's just bonkers. Autumn's good. you're not going to get the autumn leaves because Tokyo doesn't have many leaves. But it's a nice sort of shoulder season. Just the only thing to be careful with September is that it can still be typhoon season, so it can get rainy. And if you are travelling that time of year, I would say allow a little bit of flexibility with your plans. Especially if you do go further into Japan and need to get back to Tokyo to go to the airport. Give yourself a couple of days grace, don't. Just in case, so. Because you never know.

Tracy: No, absolutely. We were actually surprised about how we went in, end of October, first couple weeks in November, we were absolutely gossiped how hot it was. I was wearing my summer dresses.

tanya: Yeah. I've just. I was there this year, at the same time and I was surprised. it was actually a lot warmer down south by the time I came up to Tokyo. I was a bit like, oh, I've actually had to put my tights on. But yeah, I, I thought it was going to be proper like England, October, November weather.

Tracy: Yeah.

tanya: And yeah, I just had a cardigan and I was just like, this is, this is nice. I know.

Tracy: I, I couldn't, I had not, I genuinely hadn't expected that. I did the same thing and I thought, oh, it's going to be like UK weather because it, you know, just it's. It's end of October, first few weeks of November, it's just going to be chilly but, but there's pictures of me in my summer dresses and sandals and I could, I honestly could not believe it.

One of the things that I struggled with the most was choosing where to stay

Now one of the things that I struggled with the most was choosing where to stay in Tokyo because as you say, it's huge, it's massive. So have you got specific recommendations for neighbourhoods or areas to stay for? Kind of. For the, for the, for convenience. For the atmosphere but also for first time visitors.

tanya: I mean there's. There's sort of four or five areas that are ah, the ones that everybody suggests for first time visitors. Whether that means you should stay in them, I'm not sure. I'll tell you where I stay in a minute. M. But they are. So there's. I'm going to get this pronounced pronunciation wrong. Asakusa, which is like the more traditional

area. It's it's where the sensitivity temple is. And it's nice if you sort of like that side of things. And, and that's over on the east. East of Tokyo. Ginza is a big shopping area, but it's also got. There's a lot more to it than that. I always thought. I've never stayed in Ginza because I was like, oh, it's just shops. It's like Gucci, Prada, Hermes. What do I want to do that for? But if you actually go around the back streets, there's an entire sort of salaryman culture and little restaurants and things that you need to sort of Even now I'm just still exploring that much, much, much more. Ginza's great. Cause it's kind of. It's still on the east but it's got great sort of transport links to everywhere. Shinjuku if you want your nightlife, it's fantastic. I love Kabuchiko, which is the middle of Shinjuku. But it is a red light district and some people. It's nothing like you would. It's not like any red light district you've ever been to in your life. It's not intimidating, it's not scary, it's not violent, it's not too in your face. But a lot of people do. It can put some people off. So just bear that in mind that East Shinjuku

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tanya: is, can be part of the red light district. West Shinjuku is fine. And if you want sort of shops and teen fashion and, and sort of stuff like that, it's Shibuya. Now the disadvantage of all these places is they're very, very busy. They're very, very popular and they're quite expensive. So there are some sort of, some other areas that you might want to look at. I. And I shouldn't say this because I'm never going to get my hotel now I stay in a place again, I probably might not pronounce this correctly. My Japanese teacher will have a right go at me. and Damon is fantastic. For access from Haneda Airport, it's a direct line it's one train. It's touristy enough to not be intimidating or difficult. but it's local enough that you can walk into a restaurant and you're surrounded by sort of Japanese workers or salarymen or just. It's just a nice compromise between the two. And there's quite a lot of hotels there and it's. Because it's not one of the big

name places. It is a little bit cheaper. which I like.

Tracy: I also like the sound of.

tanya: Yeah. The main thing is as long as you're near a station, you can't really go wrong. That's the fundamental thing with Tokyo. Don't try and stay in shinjuku. If you're 25 minutes walk from the station, it's not likely to happen, but you're better off staying somewhere else than being two minutes walk from the station.

Tracy: Yeah, yeah, I totally agree. So, I mean, what's the best way to get around Tokyo?

tanya: trains. trains on the metro. There's the Tokyo train map. Makes the London Underground map look so simple. It's just a maze of colours. But once you're there, it's actually very easy because they've all got numbers and everything's in English and it's not as scary as people think it's going to be once they get there. But, yes, that's probably the easiest way to get around. My advice when you are using the trains is to try and avoid big stations like Shinjuku and View. Yeah, just because, I mean, Shinjuku station's got 200 exits. You can go down there, you may never be seen again. I'm sure there's people just wandering around just like grabbing food because they can't find their way out. so that, that was Doug and I.

Tracy: Honestly, it's like unbelievable.

tanya: I know, it's just. And you're just like, where am I going? I don't know. I'm just going to follow these 4,000 people because I must be going the right way. And then you find out you're just going, I don't know, off to Mount Foodie for the day. but no, it's, it's. I'm making it sound terrifying, but avoid it until you know what you're doing and you're a

bit like, less Tokyo shocked. There's always a smaller metro station nearby your hotel and at first, at least I would suggest using those if you can, just to get. While you get your bearings and get used to how many people there are and sort of the pace of everything.

Tracy: Yes.

tanya: Also, do not discount the buses. I have had a hip problem for quite some time, which means I was having quite a lot of pain and I was trying to limit my steps. And so I started using the buses. Because what you don't realise when you use the trains in Tokyo is that you can do like 4,000 steps getting onto the platform. By the time you've gone in the exit from your hotel and you've walked under this underground passage, which seems to go on for like three days, you've literally walked a kilometre. So sometimes the buses are a lot easier to use because they take away that initial great big lump of steps. Most of them are in English, most of them have numbers you haven't got to try and read. Kanji. Google Maps has made it so much easier to find the stops and everything along those. So don't discount the buses is my other piece of advice.

We used the buses and found them really easy, thanks to Google Maps

They're nowhere near as frightening as you think. And if you've got what they call a Suica card or an IC card, which is like the Oyster card or Opal card, depending where you live, you just tap on when you get on the bus. You don't even have to worry about finding how much it costs. You just tap it on when you get on, you tap it on when you get off and it does it all for you.

Tracy: Yeah. I must say we did use the buses and found them really easy. We did find, ah, Shinjuku Station, a bit intimidating to start off with. Thank goodness for Google Maps.

Google Maps is the easiest to use on the day to navigate Tokyo

Is there any other apps or anything that you suggest to help people navigate Tokyo?

tanya: Not much to navigate Tokyo. Google Maps is the easiest to use on the. On the. I use another app to plan. I use an app called NaviTime when I'm forward planning. just because I find it better. But that's more for long distance because it's better for trains times and what have you. Google Maps is fantastic on the day because it will find you the quickest route and there are often so many ways to get to one destination and it will just tell you which is the quickest or you can put down which is the least walking and things like that. The only tiny problem with Google Maps is it doesn't like high buildings. I have walked around in circles a few times before now. my favourite one was I was in Shibuya, opposite Google and it did not know where I was because this is literally ironic. I'm next to you, I am literally outside your office. So, yeah, so just that's the only Thing to be a bit aware of is that it can have a bit of a conniption. In Shinjukushibuya, Ginza, there's still a tiny statue of Godzilla I have never seen because I was just walking around in circles for ages, just. And it was raining. And, I just gave up in the end because I could not find the entrance to this mall to see the thing.

What about anybody planning their itinerary in Tokyo, what tips

would you offer

Tracy: What about anybody

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Tracy: planning their itinerary? What sort of tips would you, Would you say?

tanya: I only really have one tip. Well, one, one tip with an additional thing. And that is divide Tokyo into East and West. Do not attempt to cross the streams. choose the sites you want to see in the east and see those over a day or two. Choose the sites you want to see in the West. Choose those over a day or two. Otherwise you will just literally be spending your whole time attempting to navigate this train system we're talking about. People want to do everything I've seen. I mean, I plan an itinerary like this, but for different reasons. I've seen people saying, 8:00, I'll be here. 9:00, I'm going to be here. 10:00, I'm going to be there. You're not. the reason is it might tell you going to take you 20 minutes to get there on Google Maps, but it doesn't account for you to get lost, go in the wrong exit, turn around three times to get strapped by something fabulous. Which is what usually happens to me. Like a robot information office. Play with for 10 minutes. Don't, really try not to schedule it to the minute. Just pick two or three things that you really want to do in a day. Have some other things in the same area that would be nice to get to if you can and just enjoy what you see on the way. And I mean some of the best moments I've had in Tokyo have been things I just found on the way.

Tracy: That's it. there's so much, isn't it? I remember walking through a shopman centre and a robot kind of gliding past. That, fascinated me. It was kind of, I think it was helping people in the shopman centre. But I was like, wow, I'm seeing that. So, you know, that

took about 20 minutes. So I was taking some photos and following around to see what it was doing.

tanya: Exactly. Some of the stations, they've got ones you can go and ask for directions. I could be there for hours.

Tracy: Or even I. Because just stopping people and talking to them and like, because obviously you're gonna see people dressed in different ways than you've ever seen before. or the other thing as well that distracted me were, vending machines.

tanya: Oh, yeah.

Tracy: Yes, it's selling everything, everything you can imagine.

tanya: And, even the drinks. Vending machines. I mean, you can just. We'll talk about some things later. But, yeah, just finding sort of like hot corn drinks and especially now we've got Google Translate. The first couple of times I went, it was like, oh, what's that? I don't know. But now I can read a little bit more Japanese. And also if you scan Google Translate over the vending machines or anything, you suddenly does this whole new world of exciting things to discover that you're like, oh, what's that? But yeah, yeah. And, sometimes you make sure you scan them over because there's. It's a sneaky trick that. Not so much in Tokyo, it's that they sell this thing called dashi in vending machines and it looks like a delicious te. Tea drink and it's not. It's the sort of soup stock. and yeah, if you try and buy that and thinking it's a nice cup of tea and then take a sweetie, you're gonna be like, what's this nasty soda's fishy, salty thing that I'm drinking? So, yeah, so it's.

Tracy: Google Translate is a. Google Translate is amazing. It was, it was a lifesaver for us because I, I have no knowledge of Japanese whatsoever. It's, it was like Google Translate out every time, especially menus. What is this? Ah, okay, right. I struggled to eat in Japan, which, which is a huge confession I'm making. I, I lost a lot of weight because the, the. I'm probably the one person in the world who doesn't like Japanese food. Should I say?

tanya: So? Yeah, you can say that. I always lose weight, but that's because I'm walking 20 kilometres a day. It's the only.

Tracy: Walking and living on egg sandwiches from the convenience stores. But anyway, we'll talk about that a bit.

Day trips from Tokyo. Should you do one or two

Day trips from Tokyo. Should you do one or two? And if so, where should you go?

tanya: Well, I find it quite hard to answer this question because once I get into Tokyo, I don't leave. I'm, actually going back, well, possibly going back in November to go and do all the day trips that I'm supposed to have done. because I haven't done any of them. Not for the day anyway. I can tell you what the big ones are, but I can't tell you whether they're any good because I haven't done them. so the big ones that are easy to get to from Tokyo is Nikko, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site with a whole load of temples. It's beautiful in autumn, but as I say, I've personally seen it. there is Hakane. Hakane. The main thing, people go to the, they do it for the day. They do a thing called the Sightseeing Loop, which is a mess of sort of a mass of trains and cable cars and

boats and things. And it's, it's interesting, but I find it rushed when you do it as a day. I would say spend a couple of days in Hakone. Ditto Fuji. I'm a bit torn about whether you should go there for a day or stay there. It's beautiful when it comes out, but it doesn't always come out. So if you do decide to go to Fuji for a day, be flexible. There's actually, and I can't remember the exact web address, but there is actually like a Fuji Visibility Index website. I wouldn't plan your trip too far in advance. Book it when you get there and use the Fuji Visibility Index to at least try and find a day when you got a decent chance of seeing it. Because otherwise you get there. I got there because I was staying overnight and I didn't have a choice. And literally I didn't even know where the mountain was supposed to be because there was no sign of it

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tanya: anywhere. I was just like, is it supposed to be there? It's supposed to be there. So again, if I'd only gone for the day on that day, I wouldn't have seen it because it popped out about half past six. At, about half past six, the clouds lifted, everybody had gone home and it was only people staying their night there that got to see it. And it is as beautiful as everybody thinks. And I woke up the next morning and it had gone again. It was chucking it down. So I, yeah, I find it a bit hard to talk about day trips from Tokyo because as I say, once I get there, I don't, I don't want to leave it.

Tracy: But we, we took, we took a day trip out to, Mount Fuji and we were very lucky. I think I did, I think I did what you suggested actually. And we were flexible because we're there for six days. So I probably booked a couple with some free cancellation and then just kept checking, the weather. So we were very lucky. We went on a Day where, we did get fantastic views of Fuji. It is a long, long day. It took us, I think, four over four hours to get back because the traffic going back into Tokyo was no joke. In fact, some

people decided to get the train back and they would have got back a lot quicker than we did because I think it was. Maybe it was four to five hours sat in that coach just to get back into Tokyo. So, yeah, to be honest, if I did that next time, I wouldn't do it on a day trip. I'd actually go and stay.

tanya: yeah, I would. I think it's because it's difficult. As you say, you can either go on the organised day trip with the coach and then you've got that problem or the train that gets you there sells out. So you have to book it in advance and then you're stuck on a day. So it's. Yeah, I would, I would also say, I suggest staying a night. Right.

Tracy: Tokyo itself.

What are, uh, or, what would you say are Tokyo's must do experiences

What are, or, what would you say are, the must do experiences? I'm putting you on the. I always get asked this about London and I hate this question because I know it's, it depends on what your interests are, but I'm going to ask you anyway, Helen.

tanya: but thankfully you said experiences rather than sites. because sites I'm always like, you know, there's like ten big ones experiences. The one M thing. If you want to see Japan at its most bonkers, which is what I think Tokyo is about, there's a thing called the Samurai show, which, has abs. Well, it does have something to do with samurais, but don't ask me what this is. there used to be a thing before COVID called the Robot Restaurant in, Shinjuku. It was insane. It was basically women in bikinis waving glow hoops, riding giant crabs around the stage. Unfortunately, it didn't survive Covid, but for some reason they came back as the Samurai show and it is the most

insane thing I have seen. It's not got the highest production values. It is in an over 18 establishment in Kabuchiko, which means kids can't go. But it's perfectly safe and it's perfectly clean. It's full family entertainment. It's just in this particular venue and I literally came out just mind blown and I had to go and sit in a bar because I couldn't go back to my hotel room after. It just goes. I was just going, I, I, I can't just go and sit and chill out in my room after that. I just got to sit and like decompress for a moment. It is absolutely joyous. Completely bonkers. You're given a glow stick, which you're just waving around. It's just. Yeah. So I would say that is one of the. If that's the type of thing you want to find in Tokyo, you just will not beat it. Shinjuku at night, as I say, it's Blade Runner. It's. It's what you go there for. go and see Godzilla Roar. It's funny. And then another thing that I love and not many people mention, and it actually made me clap my hands with glee because I am a small child in adult's body is a thing called Small Worlds Tokyo. And it's. It's like a model village, but on steroids. They literally have an airport. It's a model of a Saka airport. And the planes take off and it's just absolutely joyous. And the level of detail in this place is just phenomenal. And I wasn't going to go and I just thought, oh, I'll go in because it's raining. And I just. I cannot tell you how much joy this place brought me. If you've got kids with you, they'll absolutely love it. If you're a small child in an adult's body, if you love model villages, again, you'll absolutely love it. It's in an area called Aidaiba, which is full of cheesy and tacky things to do. fantastic for kids. there's a lot more shrines and things in Tokyo than people think there. There are. do I think they're the best things to do? No, I think you should do them. But I also think they're very, very busy. And the things that give me the most glee have been. Have been those things.

I love Shibuya crossing. Make sure you cross it when it's busy

Tracy: So what, what about, I guess the, the kind of top things that people think about when they go to Tokyo. So, I'm thinking the crossing here should be a crossing.

tanya: I love Shibuya crossing. A lot of people just think it's massively overrated. I. I love watching it go. Watch it from above. Make sure you cross it. Go when it's busy. Because if you go there at 10 o'clock in the morning, you wonder what Earth the hype's about. But go there at 6 o'clock in the evening and it's just fascinating to just the place called Mag's Rooftop. I'm not sure what time Mag's Clothes is, but it's not too high, so you can get a level of detail and if you stand up there and just watching people going backwards and forwards, it's

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tanya: just, I love it. I think it's fascinating. A lot of people go, it's just a crossing.

Tracy: Oh, I enjoyed it. We enjoyed it.

tanya: We walked over, well over and back.

Tracy: And over and back a few times. It's just also the orderliness of Japan and the cleanliness of Japan and I, I don't know. It's so orderly.

tanya: Yes. As I say, when I first read this one, I hated about it. Now I love it. The fact that nobody crosses it once the thing stopped. No. Everyone is just standing on the side and waiting. Yeah. I find it, I find it all quite fascinating. And there is a sneaky thing if you want to make your friends jealous. There's actually a webcam on Shinjuku, Shibuya, crossing. There's also another one in Kabuchiko where you can basically wait at your

friends and go on the live stream. I don't, I wave at my friends all the time. My friend sits on the live stream and we like wave. She's waving. She's like, I can see you, I can see you. so yeah, so you can also be really, really cheesy and get your friends to go on the live stream. That's fun.

There are some theme parks in Tokyo which are very popular

Tracy: Now I know also there's something that Doug and I didn't do. But I am going to ask you because I know you're a bit of a specialist on. There's some theme parks in Tokyo which are very popular and I know because my, my brother and sister in law took the kids there actually the Christmas before last. So they, they specifically what was one of the things they wanted to do.

tanya: So.

Tracy: And I know you're a bit of a specialist on m. On the theme parks or Disney.

tanya: I am. Tokyo. Tokyo Disney. Yes, particularly. Yeah. yeah, I, I'm a bit of a Disney nut anyway. I mean obviously now I live in Australia it's not as easy for me to get to the parks as it was. So Tokyo Disney was like this happy compromise and now I've become, yeah, a bit sad and tragic and have to go for like three days every time I go to Tokyo. a lot of people will say, why would you do that? It's an American theme park. Well, it is, but it's not run by Disney for one thing. But it was something I was going to talk about in a minute about with a. To do with another attraction in Tokyo. But you. The way the Japanese people experience Disney is like no other place. I've ever been. They are so gleeful and enthusiastic and excited and it just changes the way that you enjoy it

because you're just on a ride that normally. Oh, yeah, that's pretty. And they're all. And it just makes it so much of a magical experience. I mean, Disney's pretty magical anyway, but they just take it to, like the next level for me and everybody's wearing ears and ridiculous hats and. Or out matching outfits or. It's just brilliant. yeah, I, I sort of. If you're a Disney person, you absolutely love it. Also, the Harry Potter Warner Brothers, if you haven't been to the one in the uk, it's. It's amazing. I was there for about four hours. I could have spent at least two more there. Yeah, it's really, really good. And don't worry about the fact that it's in Japan because you've got the audio guide and there was so much going on. I had to actually sit and listen to the audio guide in the cafe because there were so many things going on in the actual exhibits. I couldn't listen to it and do all the things. So, yeah, I would say if you're a Harry Potter fan and you haven't been to the one near Watford, then yeah, add that to your list because it's also really, really good.

Tracy: Perfect.

There's a massive festival in Japan called the Sanjay Metsuri

So I know we've kind of mentioned some unique experiences and kind of. I hate the term, the cliché, hidden gems, but are there any other things that maybe, people won't necessarily find in a guidebook that you would say, this is something that I think you should experience?

tanya: There was something that I experienced. You've got to be there at a certain time. But if you are there, then again, it's another memory that I'll never forget. So there's a massive festival in Japan called the Sanjay Metsuri and it happens between. This year. It's the 6th. Yeah, this year, 16th to 18th of May. It takes place in Asakusa. And basically

groups of people from like the. I'm going to use a phrase that somebody Japanese probably really tell me off enough. So, like the local council, each person's got their own float. So all the local councils have got. And when I say their own float, they are massive, they are ridiculously heavy. And it's like 50 men carrying these things on their shoulders, walking down the street, just all going, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. And they all converge and they have like a float off. For want of a better phrase. The Sunday is a bit intense and I wouldn't necessarily suggest people go to that the Saturday they have slightly smaller floats and they all walk around the streets of Sakura. But the thing that made it incredible for me, it's. It's one of the few festivals where the yakuza, who are like the, the Japanese gangsters come out and they show their tattoos and this is not something that happens every single day. And I was standing outside my hotel watching the float and then I saw these guys arrived with sunglasses and pork pie hats on. And I just thought they not. They don't look like the Japanese that I see everywhere else. And all of a sudden I was like caught up in this float and I realised I was right in the middle of the Yakuza float and they're literally jumping yakuza, Yakuza yakos. And I was just like, this is something that I am never

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tanya: ever going to experience. And their taps are on show and it was just mind blowing. Again, it's just one of those moments you couldn't, you couldn't make that happen. But the funniest thing was that someone lost their warp like coin purse from another float. And there's like the head like guy, it's like on the float who says this, he's in Japanese, whatever the equivalent is. I should really know that. But, and then this little guy scurries down and gives it to him and everybody's bowing and I was just like, okay. That was just. It was, yeah. So the experience of shando Matsuri itself is fantastic. But that bit, if you can, the chance to see, to see that is something you wouldn't see

every single day. A thing that people don't know about Tokyo, and I still haven't done this because it's very expensive, is Tokyo has a geisha culture and a geisha area and you can actually meet geisha, dine with geisha, dance with geisha, in a couple of different areas. So I say I haven't done it yet, so I can't tell you. But I know that the Tokyo geisha are very much trying to open themselves up more to international visitors. So if that's something you're interested in and you're not going to Kyoto, then definitely have a look at that.

Tracy: perfect.

What local foods or drinks would you recommend a first time visitor try in Tokyo

Well, I'm going to kind of pivot to food and drink now because I kind of touched on it earlier because I, I struggled a bit. but what, what, what local foods or drinks would you recommend a first time visitor try in Tokyo?

tanya: it pissed out adventurous your first time visitor is. But I mean the Thing is, Tokyo is, despite being a massive city, is by the sea and it does have one of the best fish markets in the world. and you are never going to get fish much fresher than you are in this place. But everybody goes to Tsukiji which is the big market that everybody knows about. It used to be one of my favourite places. It no longer is. It's now incredibly busy and it's kind of lost the local feel that it used to have. It's now very much aiming at tourists. The actual fish market itself now has moved to Toyusu, which is a bit further east. The market itself is terrible. Don't, don't go and see it. They've got rid of all the viewing areas. You won't see anything. But there is a couple of different restaurant

areas in the market. They're less crowded than sustainable Fiji. Especially if you go before about 11 o'clock in the morning and the food is fantastic. yeah and the prices aren't too bad. Just sort of shop around to sort of. The place I go to is now the one with the biggest queue which is annoying. But this is also the cheapest. So yeah, just I would say to go there and try that because you're not going to find much better fresh sashimi and sort of other types of the way they serve raw fish than there. the meal I'm still dreaming about is a place called, from a place called thank Ramen in Diamond Daymon. It's a chicken based broth which is good for people who don't want to eat pork. it's halal friendly and I don't even, I can't even tell you why I'm still thinking about it. It was just amazing. And they also do like a little side dish of rice and they give you parmesan and you mix it up into like a risotto. And I'm still thinking about that about like nine months later. so yeah, so I would definitely say to go there but I mean I, I love all Japanese food so I find it hard to sort of pick one thing for people to try.

Tracy: I'll tell you what, I, I know, I know this is a bit of a cliché because I remember but the egg sandwiches in the convenience stores were my best friend.

tanya: Yeah, I'm a big fan of those. But when I first get there I buy an egg sandwich and if you have any American readers, they're going to shudder in horror when I say this. A drink called Zima, which you can't buy in America anymore. And you can buy it Japan. The only. I can't describe it. It's like a citrus alcohol. It's described as a clear malt beverage. I can't tell you what it tastes like. I can't describe it. But any Americans are just going, oh my Lord. Because it's, it's very uncool in America and they discontinued it. but yeah, you get into France, that's my ritual when I get an egg sandwich in Ezima and the.

Tracy: Fruit sandwiches as well. All these fruit sandwiches, Kiwi and sandwiches and

oranges and sandwiches and all sorts of things that I had never seen before, which I took a lot of glee and taking lots of photographs off and actually trying on camera. We did it for Instagram. We did a. Let's try some of these sandwiches. We actually were a lot tastier than I thought they were going to be.

tanya: Yeah, I've had a few. I never need to eat them again. but yeah, they are good. But no, my convenience store gives me pleasure is vanilla pudding. They do like, they call it pudding. You get pudding all over Japan. It's like cross, kind of cross between creme caramel and creme brulee and it comes in tiny little pots. And yeah, that's my worrying addiction from the convenience store is vanilla pudding.

What are some budget friendly tips for saving money when exploring Tokyo

Tracy: Now, we've kind of talked about the convenience stores which I'm assuming you're probably going to mention in this next question, but maybe not. but what about budget friendly tips for saving money when you explore in Tokyo?

tanya: the, there's a couple I wasn't going to mention, convenience stores. But yeah, convenience stores are a good way to especially breakfast. they're a great way to buy a very cheap breakfast. Especially if there's

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tanya: a fridge in your room. You can buy it night before and then that saves you money. The big one that we found a couple of trips ago, so basically a lot of restaurants in or

bars and restaurants in Tokyo will charge what they call a seat fee. So you can't just sit down, have a beer and then walk off and like what have you. They'll either charge you sort of 2,300yen per person for the Seatbee or they'll let you chat like say, oh, you've got two pieces of like food per person or whatever. And we like to bar hop. So it kind of mounts up and it gets very, very expensive. So we discovered these things called standing bars. And basically as the name suggests, they don't have seats and so they don't charge you a seat fee. And not only is it a fantastic way to save money, it's also a really good way to meet Japanese people because Japanese people don't tend to be too shabby. But for some reason in a standing bar, especially if you can even just master a little bit of Japanese, like hello, thank you, that type of thing, they tend to open up a little bit more. I think it's the beer. And you will always find someone to have a quick chat with my boyfriend, at one bar that had been a little bit unfriendly when we walked in. And I speak a very basic bit of Japanese but didn't understand what they were saying that someone said, look, they want to know that you know that basically it's cash and you pay. Like when you, when you get your drinks, there's no tap. I was like, yeah, yeah, that's fine, that's fine. And and so we got talking to this guy and he said, oh, yes, the speciality of the house is this beef stew, blah, blah, blah. So anyway, my boyfriend goes up to the bar and he's like, you don't know, knock on me because I've been teaching him how to ask for this and it basically massacred it even worse than I just did. The whole bar went absolutely silent and he just looked and all of a sudden they burst into applause and the whole bar gave him a round of applause. And again, it's just one of those moments that you're not necessarily going to get somewhere else. So A, saves money, but B, we met so many lovely people in standing bell on our trip. So, saving money again, Ramen, one of the cheapest things you can eat and be full. A lot of machine places will have a ticket machine. It will often only be in Japanese. If you can't stand there with Google Translate, the sneaky trip is pushed top left button. The top left button on a Japanese ticket machine is the most popular item in the shop. You won't

know what you're getting, but it's the thing that most people order and therefore is their best dish. So if all else fails, just push that button. you're, in a ramen shop. You're not, it's not, it's gonna, you're gonna come out with sushi or sashimi or the steak and chips. So that's a sort of a good way of confronting the terrifying machine without sort of standing there holding up the queue for an hour. And if there's only One of you or two of you. business hotels. Business hotels are like chain hotels and they are some of the cheapest places to stay in Japan. The reason I say it's only really good if it's a couple or a solo person is the rooms and more importantly the beds are really small. So, not suitable for a family of four or anything like that. But it can be a really good way of staying in sort of good areas for less money. some of the chains are, apa little bit, very, very budget. smile. so Tetso is the one I choose, Daiwa Roynet. And I can't remember any of the others off the top of my head. But yeah, just look for some of the chains. And there's a post on the blog about business hotels, which has a.

Tracy: Big list of them.

tanya: But yeah, that's how I keep my accommodation costs right down.

Tracy: Yeah, because it is pricey. Good, we'll actually, we'll link to that, Helen. So that's really useful.

There's a survey of people in Japan saying the most annoying things tourists do

Now one of the things that people ask me or always concerned about when they're travelling and something that we, we wanted to know as well before we went is that, you

know, you don't want to commit a faux pas when you're in Japan. you don't want to do something that is going to offend Japanese people. so, so what about cultural norms and etiquette tips, things that people kind of need to know before they go so that they don't step on anybody's toes?

tanya: I mean, I think there's a lot of things that are said that the Japanese don't worry about quite as much as people think they do. But there, and there are some things that the moment that are really annoying them. There's just been a survey that's just come out of people in Japan saying the most annoying things tourists do. And it's mostly on trains. the trains in Tokyo. the one big tip, don't travel on the rush hour on the Yamanoto line. Whatever you do. In fact, try and avoid rush hour, full stop. Anyway, the trains are packed, so tourists get on with 16 suitcases and five backpacks and carrying, a coffee. This is going to drive the Japanese mad. The Japanese ethos is very much that the group is more important than the individual and they very much live by it. It's one of the things that makes the place so fantastic and so things like blocking the doors with your bags and not putting your backpack on your front. It sounds like a very Very silly thing, but if you think about it, you've got a backpack on your back. Every time you turn, you smack someone in the face. so, so put your backpack on the front. Don't talk too loudly on trains. You've never realised silence until you've

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tanya: sat on a Japanese train. And nobody, I mean, London's very similar but for a different reason. yeah, so things like that apparently were the things that annoyed people the most. It's difficult when you're coming from the airport. I appreciate the airport trains. You are going to have luggage. But there are also at least, two different services now at Haneda Airport, which will ship your luggage to your hotel in the same

day. So if that's something you want to sort of explore, then you could travel completely hands free on the trains and just get on with your sightseeing. The other thing goes back to the seat fee thing that I'm talking about with standing bars. quite often when you go to a bar or restaurant in Japan, not just Tokyo, you'll get served a little sort of starter. It'll be some strange unknown food. Quite often it's like, often lotus root and things like that. And you'll be like, okay, what's that? That's nice, thank you. It's not free. nor can you say no, it doesn't matter if you don't eat, you're gonna pay for it. It's not much. It's like 200, 300 yen. It's basically, as I say, your seat fee. It's just because a lot of places are so small, they, they just need to make a little bit more money than they may do by you just buying one drink or what have you. So it's just a way to add up a little bit money. And you don't tip in Japan. So a lot of people get really upset by this seat fee thing. But then if you were eating out in the US or the UK, you'd add 10, 15% anyway. So if you get served this thing, just expect your bill to be a little bit more than the number. you see that you may have calculated it should only be about 300 yen per person. So they were the two things. I just thought they're the things I think that most people now are sort of getting upset with tourists for not understanding. Rather than. When I first went, it was like, don't blow your nose on the train. I still didn't. But I don't think that's worrying as many Japanese people as bashing them in the Head with a backpack.

Tracy: Well, yeah, that would annoy me as well. What about walking and eating? Because that was something that we were told not to, walk and eat.

tanya: Yeah, it kind of depends where you are normally. on the street. No. so if you buy something from a vending machine, you drink it by the vending machine. Also, there's no bins, so you're going to want it because otherwise you're carrying bottles around with you all day. no, it's not really done in Tsukiji now. It's a little bit more allowable just

because, As I say, 90% of people there now are tourists. But generally you buy. If you eat in a market, you buy something, you stand by the stall, you give them your rubbish when you leave. And, you don't really wander around with it.

Tracy: And.

tanya: Yeah, no, people don't walk around with big coffee cups or. Or anything like that. It's because it's so busy and they just. It's. You could easily bump into someone and splash and ah. And then they got coffee all down their front and that's that again, it's the. It's. The whole group is more important than the individual.

Tracy: Yeah. And. And make sure you take your. Your rubbish with you because you will not see any rubbish anywhere or bins.

tanya: No, you don't see any rubbish anywhere, but you don't see any bins either? No. So you do carry it around all day?

Tracy: yeah.

tanya: Yeah. So if normally I buy a drink in a convenience store, drink it there, throw it in their bin or vending machine, stand by the vending machine, drink it, throw it in there, bin. Otherwise, yeah, you are just carrying bottles around all day. Brilliant.

Helen: Don't be scared of Tokyo, just go and enjoy it

Tracy: So what would be the one tip that you would share with anybody planning a trip

to Tokyo for the first time?

tanya: Just go, Don't be scared. No matter what people get in my Facebook, it's really frightening. You're really scaring us. I'm like, no, I'm just telling you about some of the things you may come across so that when it happens, you're not freaked out and what have you. There's a lot more English than you think there's going to be. The trains are really easy to use once you get there. It looks terrifying on that squiggly little map. But as soon as you realise that all the stages have numbers and everything in English, it's all going to be fine. The people are lovely. I've had people walk me to places when they've realised I'm lost and take me there and like buy, buy me drinks and it's like no other place on earth. And that's possibly why I back so many times. so, yeah, so I think the biggest thing I would say don't be overwhelmed, don't be stressed, don't be frightened and just go and enjoy it. And it's not going to be as terrifying as you think it is.

Tracy: No, it isn't. And it's so, it's so much fun. We loved it. We we absolutely fell in love with Japan. So we, we are, hoping to go back at some point in the next year or two. Absolutely. Because it was amazing and the trains, were just fabulous. Absolutely fabulous. Such a great system they have for get around. The bullet trains were something else. I have to say. Doug fell in love with those. So I'm hoping, Helen, you can come on and talk about some other places in Japan next time as well. But it's been great to chat with you today. So where can our listeners find you?

tanya: Okay. It's called Japan Trip Planning for Beginners.

Tracy: Ah, perfect. So that's your Facebook group.

tanya: So Japan Trip Planning for Beginners. That's my Facebook group. yeah. And the

Facebook page. The Facebook page is a bit easier because that has by Japanese at the end.

Tracy: So yes, I'll put links into those in the show notes. Helen. But thanks so

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Tracy: much for joining us and talking about all things Tokyo today.

tanya: Thank you.

Tracy: Thank you for joining us on this episode of the Global Travel Planning podcast. For more details and links to everything we discussed today, cheque out the show notes, @globaltravelplanning.com Remember, if you enjoyed the show, please consider leaving us a review on your favourite podcast app because your feedback helps us reach more travel enthusiasts just like you. Anyway, that leaves me to say, as always, happy Global Travel Planning sa.

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