Tokyo stimulates the senses. Flashing neon lights scale skyscrapers and paper lanterns light narrow alleyways crowded with old wooden houses. The smell of grilled yakitori wafts from street vendors, while, indoors, exclusive sushi restaurants offer sublime culinary experiences that elevate dining to an art.

First-time Tokyo visitors imagine a city of fashionable young people, high-speed technology and anime costumes. Tokyo has all that, but it also has temples and shrines with ancient history, and neighborhood back streets where ageless Japanese traditions thrive, seemingly untouched by the accelerated technology the same city has exported across the world. Tokyo prides itself on both its innovation and its cultural and historical preservation, and that’s what makes it one of the most captivating travel destinations in the world.

In this guide we’ll show you the best of the city—both on and off the beaten path—so you can travel like an insider in Tokyo!

Meet the Insiders

A frequent traveler to Japan, Baidi’s favorite things to do are rising at 2am to watch the tuna auction at Tsukiji Fish Market and soaking in onsen at Hakone.

Karen is a native of Scotland who spent two years living in Tokyo, her favorite city in the world.
Insider's Guide: Tokyo

Mount Fuji, Japan’s highest mountain and a UNESCO World Heritage site, rises 12,389 feet (3,776m) above surrounding crystal clear lakes and small villages in the heart of the lush, hot-spring-filled Hakone National Park. Although it can be a challenging climb, hundreds of thousands of people make it to the summit each year; the reward is spectacular views of Lake Ashi and the Ōwakudani Valley.

The holy mountain is a place of pilgrimage, which traditionally begins at Sengen Shrine at the foot of the mountain. On Viator’s VIP tour, you can visit key viewing points with a local guide and listen to stories from a priest with an exclusive private talk at the shrine.

See all Mt Fuji tours

Insider’s Tip
If you want to dodge the biggest crowds, visit on a weekday and avoid going during the Obon national holiday in mid-August.

Best Day Trip: Visiting Mt Fuji Like a VIP
See Mt Fuji in One Day

See some of Mount Fuji’s most iconic sights on a full day tour leaving from Tokyo. Learn about the revered mountain at the bustling 5th Station, midway to the summit, then continue to Lake Ashi for a short boat cruise followed by a ride on the Mt Komagatake Ropeway. Climb by aerial tram to the top of Mt Komagatake and get fantastic views of the Ōwakudani valley, Lake Ashi and Mt Fuji. Return to Tokyo by shinkansen (Japanese bullet train) in the evening.

See Mt Fuji and More of Japan

Visit three of Japan’s most iconic sites on a three-day guided tour that includes two nights in Kyoto. Visit Mt Fuji, cruise Lake Ashi, and ride an aerial tram up Mt Komagatake. Head to Kyoto on the bullet train and take in its sights and rich culture on a morning tour that visits the Temple of the Golden Pavilion, Nijo Castle, and Imperial Palace. Finally, see Nara’s attractions, including Todaiji Temple, Kasuga Taisha Shrine and the freely roaming deer of Nara Park.

See Mt Fuji Plus a Hot Spring (Onsen) Trip

Take a full day excursion from Tokyo to the Mt Fuji area. First, travel by coach halfway up to 5th station, famous for its great views, where you will learn more about the symbolic mountain. Later, relax at the foot of the mountain near Lake Yamanakako and indulge in a rejuvenating soak in a hot spring. Finish your day with a shopping trip at Gotemba Premium Outlets where you can find brand name goods at discount prices.
Learn

Best Way to Understand Japanese Culture: Take a Class

One of the most symbolic figures of ancient Japan is the noble samurai and, with a 1.5 hour class at a dojō (training center), you, too, can learn to wield a sword like a warrior under the eyes of professional instructors including a sword-fighting expert who has choreographed fight sequences for movies such as *Kill Bill: Volume 1*. If it’s ninjas who have captured your imagination, you can train like one in a 1.5 hour class. Other cultural activities include sushi- and soba-making classes, or being fitted in a traditional kimono. For an in-depth experience, you can book a full day of culture and learn about such essentially Japanese subjects as aikido, calligraphy, manga, samurai and sake.

Later, visit a training stable for an insight into Sumo wrestling, an ancient Japanese martial art that still thrives today, then see the action at a tournament match.

Insider’s Tip
Time your trip carefully to see a sumo match. Tournaments are held in Tokyo in January, May and September only.
**After Hours**

The neon-bright Shinjuku district is one of Tokyo’s best-known nightlife destinations and is home to the infamous Kabukichō red light district. Among the hundreds of bars and clubs, you’ll find the **Robot Restaurant**. The spectacular (and somewhat campy) one-hour cabaret show features hugely entertaining performances full of flashing lights, taiko drums, and loud techno music. Bikini-clad dancers riding neon tanks and glittering horses stage mock battles alongside a giant panda, dinosaurs, ninjas, and enormous robots in what is a truly one-of-a-kind performance.

See more of Tokyo by night on a photo tour or check out the scene in Tokyo’s other nightlife hotspots by hitting a nightclub in Shibuya or a late-night bar or restaurant in Roppongi.

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**Best Nightlife Experience: Robot Cabaret**

“This was the highlight of our time in Tokyo - it has to be seen to be believed!”

-Emily B.
Indulge

From fresh sushi to hearty bowls of ramen; from piping hot yakitori or takoyaki served by a street vendor to the elevated rituals of a traditional kaiseki dinner, *sampling the excellent and varied cuisine* makes for some of the most memorable experiences in Tokyo.

Try shabu-shabu — a popular hot pot dish prepared with thin slices of beef. Savor delicious Japanese dishes with a *taste of the local nightlife* in Yakitori Alley, named for the grilled skewers of chicken or other ingredients served at bar-style restaurants. Visit Monja Street for monjayaki (Japanese-style pancakes), then finish with a sweet treat of taiyaki, a popular crispy fish-shaped cake stuffed with sweetened red beans.

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*Best Culinary Experience: Eat Like a Local*

Not only did we get to try some simply amazing food, we also learned so much about Japan and Japanese culture from our tour guide.

— Branden S.
Japan has thousands of hot springs scattered around the volcanically active country. The ritual of communal nude bathing, considered conducive to breaking down barriers between people, plays an important role in Japanese society and culture.

Options for a rejuvenating soak close to Tokyo include the hot spring resorts in Yamanakako village, in Hakone, or at Fujiyama Onsen Hot Springs, all of which lie at the base of Mt Fuji. Farther afield, you can relax in a hot spring while being entertained by snow monkeys (as they do the same) at Jigokudani Monkey Park in Nagano.

Before heading into the healing waters, arm yourself with the essential rules on onsen etiquette: most importantly, wash before you enter the water, and no bathing suits or tattoos allowed.

“Get over your shyness and do the onsen experience. Yes, it’s awkward at first. Then you realize how amazing your skin feels from the mineralized water, and you don’t want to leave.”

-Karin M.
Best Way to Appreciate Japan’s Ancient Traditions: Visit the Asakusa Shrine

In the atmospheric and old-world evocative Asakusa district, Senso-ji (also known as Asakusa Kannon) is Tokyo’s oldest and most important Buddhist temple. Enter the temple through the Kaminarimon ("Thunder Gate"), which features a massive red and black lantern flanked by large statues of the Shinto gods of wind and thunder. Through the second gate, Hōzōmon ("Treasure House Gate"), you come to the main hall and a five-story pagoda. The Asakusa Shrine, built in 1649, lies to the left.

Between the gates is the shopping street of Nakamise-dori, a great place to stock up on traditional Japanese crafts and snacks sold by vendors lining the small street—from fans and yukata to rice crackers and agemanju, deep-fried cakes filled with red beans.

Insider’s Tip
Held at Senso-ji on the third weekend of every May, the Sanja Matsuri is Tokyo’s biggest and best festival, full of music and dancing.
Play

Best Way to See Modern-Day Culture: Only-in-Tokyo Experiences

Tokyo is at the cutting edge of modern culture. Head to Akihabara (aka “Electric Town”) and be dazzled by brightly lit stores selling almost any kind of electrical good you could possibly imagine. While there, don’t miss visiting a maid café, dressing up as a comic book hero for photos or learning all about otaku culture.

Youth culture rules on the streets of Harajuku, where Japanese teenagers flaunt outlandish fashion and cosplay while browsing boutiques and 100 Yen shops (great for finding cheap souvenirs). Slightly farther afield, you can visit the famed Ghibli Museum on an afternoon tour from Tokyo. It’s home to works from the Studio Ghibli film animation studio, known for feature-length anime films like the Oscar-winning Spirited Away.

Insider’s Tip

For a full sensory overload, visit Harajuku on a Sunday. That’s when the highest number of local teens come out dressed up in their finest costumes.
Japan’s Rail System Makes it Easy to Explore

While you are unlikely to ever run out of things to do in Tokyo, it would be a shame to travel all the way to Japan and only see one city. Fortunately, Japan has one of the most efficient (and clean and comfortable) transportation systems in the world, which makes exploring the length and breadth of the country easy.

The extensive rail network connects Tokyo with most of the country’s major cities, with the high-speed shinkansen whisking travelers between Tokyo and Kyoto in less than three hours. Make an extended trip out of it on a two- or three-day bullet train excursion to Kyoto, including the nearby shrine- temple- and wild deer-filled city of Nara.

Japan’s rail network is also useful for shorter trips to places such as nearby Mount Fuji or the pristine countryside of Nikko National Park, home to UNESCO World Heritage-listed ancient Buddhist shrines and temples.

Rail can be the most cost-effective means of travel, thanks to the Japan Rail Pass, which allows unlimited travel on most shinkansen trains for a set period. The pass is only offered to foreigners and must be purchased abroad.
**Best Views: Tokyo Skytree and Tokyo Tower**

One of the world’s tallest buildings, the 634-meter (2,080ft) Tokyo Skytree has the highest observation decks in Japan and offer unsurpassed views of the city below. The Eiffel-inspired Tokyo Tower is another impressive Japanese landmark that offers 360-degree views of the city, as well as an aquarium, a Shinto shrine, and a wax museum.

**Best Reason to Wake up Early: Tsukiji Fish Market**

The Tsukiji Fish Market is the largest wholesale fish market in the world, handling over 2,000 tons of fish per day. Get up bright and early to see the bustling tuna auction and watch buyers and sellers shout and compete for better prices; the auction is only open to visitors from 5:00am to 6:15am to keep the number of people at bay and to conduct business properly. Afterward enjoy fresh sushi from one of the market’s own restaurants.

**Best Active Sightseeing: By Bike**

Tokyo is a cyclist-friendly city and you can join the locals by hopping on a bicycle and pedaling around the Shitamachi area, from Fukagawa-fudo Temple and Tomioka Hachimangū Shrine, to Tokyo Skytree and past the Sumo Stadium and traditional Kiyosumi Japanese Garden. Other great Tokyo neighborhoods for sightseeing on two wheels include the man-made Odaiba island or around the Tokyo Bay-facing Edogawa district, stopping at Gyosen Park, Kasai Rinkai Park and Tokyo Sea Life Park.
Best Seasonal Event: Spring Cherry Blossoms

Visitors to Tokyo between March and April are in for a treat: blooming cherry trees decorate nearly every green space, creating a beautiful, pink foreground to an impressive skyline and framing temples and palaces. The lawns of public parks such as Ueno and Shinjuku Gyoen are the site of picnics and impromptu parties as locals celebrate the arrival of spring. Within a week the trees have reached full bloom and pink petals dot sidewalks as they fall.

Best National Park: Nikko

Set in breathtaking countryside around 80 miles (125 km) from Tokyo, Nikko National Park is known for its UNESCO World Heritage-listed temples and shrines. One of its best-known shrines is Nikko Tōshō-gū, which features ornate decorations including a famed carving of three monkeys who hear, see and speak no evil. Other sites in the park include Lake Chūzenji, which is surrounded by forests and has wonderful hot springs, Kegon and Ryūzu waterfalls and Nikko Botanical Garden, which has over 1,500 different plant species.

Best Shopping Experience: Harajuku and Ginza District

The Harajuku neighborhood is known throughout the world for its wild street style. This is where you’ll see local teens dressed-up in colorful and outlandish punk, goth and anime costumes while they stroll by the hundreds of boutiques, vintage stores and cafes that line tiny Takeshita-dori shopping street. On the other end of the spectrum is glitzy Ginza: home to designer brands – Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Prada – and high-end department stores.
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