

BACKGROUND

HISTORY

IT CAME FROM THE SWAMP!

The monstrous metropolis that is Tokyo, population 12 million, has come a long way from its origins as a collection of shallows and tidal pools at the mouth of the Sumida-gawa (Sumida River). Fertility was the focus of its first permanent inhabitants and this fecund swampland edging the Kantō plain was perfect for incubating new life. They were a pottery-producing culture who settled here during the late Neolithic Jōmon period (Jōmon means 'rope marks' for the design on pottery fragments discovered from this time) around 10,000 BC. These early Tokyoites lived as fishers, hunters and food-gatherers, and likely benefited from the fauna-rich marshland that was left behind after what is now Tokyo Bay rose to cover most of the valley where Tokyo now sits.

Some 4000 years later, during the Yayoi period (400 BC–AD 250), wet-rice farming techniques were introduced from Korea. Shintō – Japan's native religion – also began to develop during this time. Shintō, similar to animism, involves the worship of gods who inhabit animals and objects in nature. By AD 300 Japan was already, more or less, a unified nation, with its cultural base in the Kansai area (around the present-day cities of Nara, Kyoto and Osaka), while the Kantō region remained a distant backwater. While the Roman Empire rose and declined, Edo (the old name for Tokyo) continued as a sleepy fishing village for another thousand years.

Meanwhile, the proto-Japanese nation came under the control of the Yamato clan (forerunners of the current imperial family), who claimed a handy direct descent from the sun goddess Amaterasu and introduced the title of *tennō* (emperor) around the 5th century. This was called the Kofun period, named for the earthen mounds in which the nobility were interred.

But the most important event in Japan's early history was the arrival of Buddhism in the 6th century, from India via China and Korea. Buddhism introduced a highly evolved system of metaphysics, codes of law and the Chinese writing system, a conduit for the principles of Confucian statecraft.

LIVE BY THE SWORD, DIE BY THE SWORD

Few would have guessed it, but Edo was to play a central role in Japan's life as a warrior state. The rise of the samurai was linked to how strong a hold the imperial court had over the nation. From the earliest days of the Yamato dynasty, it was the custom to relocate the capital following the death of an emperor (presumably to free the capital from the taint of death). However, this custom was altered in 710 with the establishment of Japan's first permanent capital at Nara.

By the end of the 8th century, the Buddhist clerical bureaucracy had become vast, threatening the authority of the imperial administration. The emperor responded by relocating the capital once again and establishing a new seat of imperial power at Heian-kyō (modern-day Kyoto). From that point on, Kyoto generally served as the capital until the Meiji Restoration in 1868, when Tokyo became the new chief city.

TIMELINE

10,000 BC	AD 710	794	1185	1457	1467
Tokyo area inhabited by pottery-making people during late Neolithic Jōmon period. The Kantō region around Tokyo is among the most densely settled in this era.	Japan's first permanent capital established at Nara, ending the practice of moving the capital following an emperor's death. The city is modelled on Chang'an, capital of Tang dynasty China.	Imperial capital moved to Heian-kyō, renamed Kyoto in the 11th century. It is laid out in a gridlike pattern and in accordance with traditional Chinese geomancy principles.	First shōgunate established at Kamakura under Minamoto no Yoritomo after defeating the ruling Taira clan; the Minamoto and Hojo clans held power until Emperor Go-Daigo wrested power from the Hojo in 1333.	<i>Waka</i> (31-syllable poem) poet Ōta Dōkan orders construction of first Edo Castle. Developed by shōgun Tokugawa Ieyasu in the 17th century, it became the largest fortress the world has ever seen.	Ōnin civil war devastates Kyoto; aristocrats flee to Ōta Dōkan's stronghold. The conflict begins the Sengoku Jidai, or Warring States period, which lasts to the early 17th century.

SAMURAI: THOSE WHO SERVE

The prime duty of a samurai, a member of the warrior class, was to give faithful service to his *daimyō* (feudal lord). In fact, the origin of the term 'samurai' is closely linked to a word meaning 'to serve'. Over the centuries, the samurai established a code of conduct that came to be known as *bushidō* (the way of the warrior), drawn from Confucianism, Shintō and Buddhism.

Confucianism required a samurai to show absolute loyalty to his lord. Towards the oppressed, a samurai was expected to show benevolence and exercise justice. Subterfuge was to be despised, as were all commercial and financial transactions. A real samurai had endless endurance and total self-control, spoke only the truth and displayed no emotion. Since his honour was his life, disgrace and shame were to be avoided above all else, and all insults were to be avenged.

From Buddhism, the samurai learnt the lesson that life is impermanent – a handy reason to face death with serenity. Shintō provided the samurai with patriotic beliefs in the divine status both of the emperor and of Japan – the abode of the gods.

Seppuku (ritual suicide), also known as *hara-kiri*, was a practice to which Japanese Buddhism conveniently turned a blind eye and was an accepted means of avoiding dishonour. Seppuku required the samurai to ritually disembowel himself, watched by an aide, who then drew his own sword and lopped off the samurai's head. One reason for this ritual was the requirement that a samurai should never surrender but always go down fighting. Since surrender was considered a disgrace, prisoners received scant mercy. During WWII this attitude was reflected in the Japanese treatment of prisoners of war – still a source of bitter memories.

In quiet moments, a samurai dressed simply but was easily recognisable by his triangular *eboshi*, a hat made from rigid black cloth.

The samurai's standard battle dress or armour (*yoroi* in Japanese, usually made of leather or maybe lacquered steel) consisted of a breastplate, a similar covering for his back, a steel helmet with a visor, and more body armour for his shoulders and lower body. Samurai weaponry – his pride and joy – included a bow and arrows (in a quiver), swords and a dagger; and he wasn't complete without his trusty steed.

Before entering the fray, a samurai was expected to be freshly washed and groomed. The classic samurai battle took the form of duelling between individuals rather than the clashing of massed armies.

Not all samurai were capable of adhering to their code of conduct – samurai indulging in double-crossing or subterfuge, or displaying outright cowardice, were popular themes in Japanese theatre.

Though the samurai are long gone, there are echoes of *bushidō* in the salaryman corporate warriors of today's Japan. Under the once-prevalent lifetime employment system, employees were expected to show complete obedience to their company, and could not question its decisions if, for example, they were transferred to New York.

The salaryman system has greatly changed in the past two decades with growth in part-time employees and corporate restructuring, but you can still see hordes of blue-suited warriors rushing to their duties every morning in train stations. Instead of swords, they wield business cards. Corporate honour is paramount, and suicide is still a common method of atoning for social disgrace (methods include jumping off a train platform, not seppuku).

Next time you see a salaryman in his cups, spare a thought for these overworked drivers of the Japanese economy. Like the samurai of old, they are the bedrock of the social order.

From Kyoto's early days, a samurai class in the employ of the *daimyō* (feudal lords) emerged. The relationship was one of absolute service; samurai were sworn to do anything for the sake of their clan and lord, and were always prepared to die (see above). Much of Japan's subsequent history revolved around bloody struggles for power among the *daimyō* while the emperor mostly watched impotently from the sidelines in Kyoto.

The one interruption came when the warlord Minamoto no Yoritomo defeated the ruling Taira clan and established the first shōgunate in Kamakura (southwest of Tokyo) in 1185. Although the emperor remained the nominal ruler in Kyoto, the Minamoto clan ran a *bakufu* (military government) from Kamakura until 1333, when it was toppled by a rebellion and official power reverted to Kyoto.

Near the mid-15th century, a *waka* (31-syllable poem) poet named Ōta Dōkan constructed the first castle at Edo on the site of an old fortress above Hibiya Cove. By 1467, when the disastrous Ōnin civil war was devastating the capital in Kyoto, many aristocrats and monks had fled the capital to become supplicants in Dōkan's secure eastern hold. This was a foretaste of Edo's explosive growth, but despite Dōkan's contribution to establishing the city, his overlord ordered his assassination.

BATTLE FOR SUPREMACY

By the time Portuguese traders and missionaries arrived in 1543, feudal lords had carved Japan into a patchwork of fiefdoms. One of the most powerful *daimyō*, Oda Nobunaga of the Chūbu region, near present-day Nagoya, was quick to see how the Portuguese could support his ambitious plans. He viewed their Christianity as a potential weapon against the power of the Buddhist clergy and made ample use of the firearms they introduced. By the time he was assassinated in 1581, Oda had united much of central Japan. Toyotomi Hideyoshi took over the job of consolidating power, but looked less favourably on the growing Christian movement, subjecting it to systematic persecution.

Toyotomi's power was briefly contested by Tokugawa Ieyasu, son of a minor lord allied to Oda. After a brief struggle for power, Tokugawa agreed to a truce with Toyotomi; in return, Toyotomi granted him eight provinces in eastern Japan, including all of the Kantō region and Edo. While Toyotomi intended this to weaken Tokugawa by separating him from his ancestral homeland Chūbu, the upstart looked upon the gift as an opportunity to strengthen his power. He set about turning Edo into a real city.

When Toyotomi Hideyoshi died in 1598, power passed to his son, Toyotomi Hideyori. However, Tokugawa Ieyasu had been busily scheming to secure the shōgunate for himself and soon went to war against those loyal to Hideyori. Tokugawa's forces finally defeated Hideyori and his supporters at the legendary battle of Sekigahara in 1600, moving him into a position of supreme power. He chose Edo as his permanent base and began two-and-a-half centuries of Tokugawa rule.

BOOMTOWN EDO

In securing a lasting peace nationwide and ruling from Edo, Tokugawa Ieyasu laid the foundation for Tokyo's ascendancy as one of the world's great cities. In 1603, the emperor appointed him shōgun (military administrator), and the Tokugawa family ruled from Edo Castle (Edo-jō), on the grounds of the current Imperial Palace. It built up into the largest fortress the world had ever seen, with elaborate rituals shaping the lives of its many courtiers, courtesans, samurai and attendants. Edo would also grow to become the world's largest city, topping one million in the early 1700s and dwarfing much older London and Paris, as people from all over Japan flocked here to serve the growing military class.

This was the result of a canny move by the Tokugawa that ensured their hegemony. They implemented the *sankin kōtai* system of alternate residence. This demanded that all *daimyō*

in Japan spend at least one year out of two in Edo. Their wives and children remained in Edo while the *daimyō* returned to their home provinces. This dislocating ransom policy made it difficult for ambitious *daimyō* to usurp the Tokugawas. The high costs of travelling back and forth with a large retinue eroded their financial power as well.

Society was made rigidly hierarchical, comprising (in descending order of importance) the nobility, who had nominal power; the *daimyō* and their samurai; the farmers; and finally the artisans and merchants. Class dress, living quarters and even manner of speech were all strictly codified, and interclass movement was prohibited.

When Tokugawa Ieyasu died in 1616, his ashes were briefly laid to rest in Chūbu before being moved to Nikkō (p224). Generations of Tokugawas made improvements to the vast Tōshō-gu Shrine dedicated to his memory there, transforming it into one of the grandest in all Japan. A smaller version stands in the large park Ueno-kōen (p72) in Tokyo.

The castelike society imposed by Tokugawa rule divided Edo into a high city (Yamanote) and a low city (Shitamachi). The higher Yamanote (literally 'hand of the mountains') was home to the *daimyō* and their samurai, while the merchants, craftsmen and lower orders of Edo society were forced into the low-lying Shitamachi (literally 'downtown').

One distinguishing feature of those days was the pleasure quarters, where samurai would come to indulge in activities forbidden in the Yamanote: wine, women and song and not necessarily in that order. The most legendary of these districts was the Yoshiwara, to the northeast of present-day Asakusa.

Otherwise the typical residential neighbourhood of the Shitamachi featured squalid conditions, usually comprising flimsy wooden structures with earthen floors. These shantytowns were often swept by great conflagrations, which locals referred to as *Edo-no-hana*, or flowers of Edo; the expression's bravura sums up the spirit of Shitamachi. Under great privation, Shitamachi subsequently produced a flourishing culture that thumbed its nose at social hardships and the strictures of the shōgunate, patronising both the kabuki theatre and sumō wrestling, and generally enjoying a *joie de vivre* that the dour lords of Edo castle

ALL ABOARD!

Just as arteries and veins pump blood through the body, Tokyo's trains are the circulatory system of this city. Japan's first train line was built in 1872, connecting Tokyo with Yokohama; visitors can still see the original station near present-day Shimbashi Station. But even the most enthusiastic trainspotter of those days could not have imagined today's *rāmen* (noodle) bowl of a train map, a tangle of lines now operated by the Japan Railways (JR) and 13 subway lines operated by not one but two municipal systems.

Tokyo's transit system also stands out for its network of privately operated commuter train lines, ferrying suburbanites into hubs along the JR Yamanote Line, which loops around the city centre. Some of these early trains were streetcars connecting neighbourhoods of this fast-growing city, others shuttled holidaymakers as far as Nikkō (p221) and Hakone (p225), some 100km away.

Many private rail lines have namesake department stores. In 1929 Osaka-based Hankyū Railway became the pioneer in the train-line-as-real-estate-mogul concept, developing residential suburbs along its rail routes and connecting them to large retail complexes at its hubs. Tokyo rail operators followed suit, particularly after WWII; major hubs now include Shinjuku, Shibuya and Ikebukuro. Up to that point, department stores mainly catered to well-heeled consumers in chi-chi neighbourhoods such as Ginza and Nihombashi, but the train-affiliated stores were more democratic, allowing greater ease of access. That pattern continues today.

1600

Tokugawa Ieyasu, victor in the Battle of Sekigahara, establishes his capital in Edo, forming a shōgunate and beginning two-and-a-half centuries of peace under Tokugawa rule, known as the Edo period.

1638

Sakoku national isolation policy; Japan cuts off all contact with the outside world save limited trade with Dutch and Chinese off Nagasaki. The policy remains in place until the 1850s.

1853

Black ships of the US navy arrive in Japan under the command of Commodore Matthew Perry, who succeeds in forcing Japan open to US trade at ports of Hakodate and Shimoda.

1868

Meiji Restoration; Tokugawa shōgunate loyalists are defeated in civil war. The emperor casts off his figurehead role and assumes a position of supreme authority. Imperial residence moves to Edo, which is renamed Tokyo.

1872

Japan's first train line connects Shimbashi in Tokyo with Yokohama to the southwest, with services between Osaka and Kobe launched two years later, and Osaka–Kyoto services in 1877.

1889

Constitution of the Empire of Japan promulgated. Based on a Prussian model of constitutional monarchy, the emperor wielded great power but shared it with an elected Diet (parliament).

frowned upon. Today, the best glimpses we have into that time come from *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints; see p35).

Another feature of Edo that has left its mark on today's Tokyo was the division of the city into *machi* (towns) according to profession. Even today it is possible to stumble across small enclaves that specialise in particular wares. Most famous are Jimbōchō, the bookshop area; Kappabashi, with its plastic food and kitchen supplies; and Akihabara, which now specialises in electronics and manga (comic books), but in the past has been a bicycle retailing area, an area specialising in domestic household goods and a freight yard.

THE 'EASTERN CAPITAL' IS BORN

Edo's transformation from a grand medieval city into a world-class capital required an outside nudge, or *gaiatsu* (external pressure). This came in the form of a fleet of black ships, under the command of US Navy Commodore Matthew Perry, that sailed into Edo-wan (now known as Tokyo Bay) in 1853. Perry's expedition demanded, in the name of US President Millard Fillmore, that Japan open itself to foreign trade after centuries of isolation. Other Western powers were quick to follow in demanding the Japanese open treaty ports. The coming of Westerners heralded a far-reaching social revolution against which the antiquated Tokugawa regime was powerless. In 1867–68, faced with widespread antigovernment feeling and accusations that the regime had failed to prepare Japan for the threat of the West, the last Tokugawa shōgun resigned and power reverted to Emperor Meiji. In 1868 Meiji moved the seat of imperial power from Kyoto to Edo Castle, renaming the city Tokyo (Eastern Capital). This was known as the Meiji Restoration, and signified that power was restored to the emperor, and the imperial and political capitals were once again unified.

The Meiji Restoration was not an entirely peaceful handover of power. In Edo, some 2000 Tokugawa loyalists put up a futile last-ditch resistance to the imperial forces in the brief Battle of Ueno. The struggle took place around the beautiful temple Kanei-ji (p72), which, along with Zōjō-ji (p98), was one of Edo's two mortuary temples for the Tokugawa shōgunate.

The word Meiji means 'enlightenment' and Japan's new rulers pushed the nation into a crash course in industrialisation and militarisation. In 1872 the first railroad opened, connecting Tokyo with the new port of Yokohama, south along Tokyo Bay, and by 1889 the country had a Western-style constitution.

In a remarkably short time, Japan achieved military victories over China (1894–95) and Russia (1904–05) and embarked on modern, Western-style empire-building, with the annexation of Taiwan (1895), then Korea (1910) and Micronesia (1914).

Nationalists were also busy transforming Shintō into a jingoistic state religion. Seen as a corrupting foreign influence, Buddhism suffered badly – many valuable artefacts and temples were destroyed, and the common people were urged to place their faith in the pure religion of State Shintō.

During the Meiji period, and the following Taishō period, changes that were taking place all over Japan could be seen most prominently in the country's new capital city. Tokyo's rapid industrialisation, uniting around the nascent *zaibatsu* (huge industrial and trading conglomerates), drew jobseekers from around Japan, causing the population to grow rapidly. In the 1880s electric lighting was introduced. Western-style brick buildings began to spring up in fashionable areas such as Ginza. In 1904 Mitsukoshi became Japan's first Western-style department store,

TOKYO TOMES

- *Tokyo: Exploring the City of the Shogun* (2007), Sumiko Enbutsu – A veteran Tokyo walker presents a delightful series of strolls through historic areas.
- *Tabloid Tokyo: 101 Tales of Sex, Crime and the Bizarre from Japan's Wild Weeklies* (2005), Mark Schreiber – This hilarious compilation of translated Japanese tabloid articles exposes the city's sordid underbelly. The sequel is *Tabloid Tokyo 2*.
- *Edo, the City that Became Tokyo* (2003), Akira Naito – This beautifully illustrated history begins with primeval Edo, continues on to evil Edo, and concludes with the surrender of Edo Castle to the emperor. There are wonderful maps throughout.
- *Tokyo Sights and Insights: Exploring the City's Back Streets* (1992), Ryosuke Kami – This paean to vanishing neighbourhoods presents vivid sketches of districts off the tourist path.
- *Low City, High City* (1983), Edward Seidensticker – Chronicles the decline of Edo between the time of the Meiji Restoration and the Great Kantō Earthquake. A follow-up to this book, *Tokyo Rising*, charts the capital's postwar growing pains.

and its annexe in Nihombashi (1914) was called the grandest building east of the Suez Canal. However, if the Meiji Restoration sounded the death knell for old Edo, there were two more events to come that were to erase most traces of the old city.

A CATFISH JUMPS – THE GREAT KANTŌ EARTHQUAKE

Japanese have traditionally believed that a giant catfish living underground causes earthquakes when it stirs. At noon on 1 September 1923 the catfish really jumped – the Great Kantō Earthquake caused unimaginable devastation in Tokyo. More than the quake itself, it was the subsequent fires, lasting some 40 hours, that laid waste to the city, including some 300,000 houses. A quarter of the quake's 142,000 fatalities occurred in one savage firestorm in a clothing depot. (There are some sombre reminders of the earthquake exhibited at the Kantō Earthquake Memorial Museum; see p128).

In true Edo style, reconstruction began almost immediately. The spirit of this rebuilding is perhaps best summed up by author Edward Seidensticker (see *Low City, High City* boxed text; above): popular wisdom had it that any business which did not resume trading within three days of being burnt out did not have a future. Opportunities were lost in reconstructing the city – streets might have been widened and the capital transformed into something more of a showcase.

THE BEGINNING OF SHŌWA & WWII

From the accession of Emperor Hirohito (*Shōwa tennō* to the Japanese) and the initiation of the Shōwa period in 1926, Japanese society was marked by a quickening tide of nationalist fervour. In 1931 the Japanese invaded Manchuria, and in 1937 embarked on full-scale hostilities with China. By 1940 a tripartite pact with Germany and Italy had been signed and a new order for all of Asia formulated: the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. On 7 December 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, bringing the USA, Japan's principal rival in the Asia-Pacific region, into the war.

1923

Great Kantō Earthquake kills more than 140,000 and razes over half the city's wooden structures. An estimated 300,000 houses are destroyed, but the city's reconstruction plan is only partly realised due to money shortages.

1926

Hirohito ascends the Chrysanthemum Throne to become the Shōwa emperor. Presiding over Japan's military expansion across East Asia and atrocities committed by Japanese forces, he is spared trial by Allied forces after WWII.

1944–45

US firebombs Tokyo and drops two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; US occupation begins. The American overlords embark on a successful programme of demilitarisation and democratisation.

1947

New constitution adopted, including Article 9 in which Japan renounces war and the possession of armed forces. Despite this, Self-Defense Forces are eventually built up into a formidable military arsenal.

1952

US occupation ends; Japan enters a period of high economic growth. The Korean War provides a shot in the arm for Japanese manufacturers, who supply US forces.

1955

Liberal Democratic Party founded; it goes on to hold a virtually uninterrupted monopoly on power into the 21st century despite recurring corruption scandals and deep-seated factionalism.

THE UYOKU

Since the end of WWII, right-wing and nationalist sentiments have generally taken a back seat to moderate political views or outright apathy. However, there remain pockets of right-wing sentiment. These are most visible to the visitor in the form of sinister black buses and vans, which ply the streets of big cities blaring patriotic Japanese songs (that unfortunately always sound like the TV theme songs for kids' manga cartoons) at ear-splitting volume. These vehicles represent the propaganda arm of the *uyoku* – far-right political parties and organisations.

When not playing music, speakers often deliver lengthy diatribes against Japanese politicians or a litany of nationalist sentiments. Japanese pedestrians studiously ignore black buses blaring 100 decibels of noise, and when regular citizens do pay them any notice at all, it is usually to dismiss them as cranks. There is, however, a dark side to the *uyoku*: it acts as a volunteer police force for right-wing and right-leaning politicians, effectively prohibiting criticism of the emperor. This is done by intimidating would-be critics with threats of violence, which are occasionally carried out.

Despite initial successes, the war was disastrous for Japan. On 18 April 1942 B-25 bombers carried out the first bombing and strafing raid on Tokyo, with 364 casualties. Much worse was to come. Incendiary bombing commenced in March 1944, notably on the nights of the 9th and 10th, when some two-fifths of the city, mainly in the Shitamachi area, went up in smoke and 70,000 to 80,000 lives were lost. The same raids destroyed Asakusa's Sensō-ji (p85), and later raids destroyed Meiji-jingū (p109). By the time Emperor Hirohito made his famous capitulation address to the Japanese people on 15 August 1945, much of Tokyo had been decimated – sections of it were almost completely depopulated, like the charred remains of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, after they were devastated by atomic bombs. Food and daily necessities were scarce, the population was exhausted by the war effort and fears of marauding US military overlords were high.

THE POSTWAR MIRACLE

Tokyo's phoenixlike rise from the ashes of WWII and its emergence as a major global city is something of a miracle. Once again, Tokyoites did not take the devastation as an opportunity to redesign their city (as did Nagoya, for example), but rebuilt where the old had once stood.

During the US occupation in the early postwar years, Tokyo was something of a honky-tonk town. Now-respectable areas such as Yūrakuchō were the haunt of the so-called *pan-pan* girls (prostitutes), and areas such as Ikebukuro and Ueno had thriving black-market zones. The remains of Ueno's black market can be seen in Ameyoko Arcade (p70), which is still a lively market.

In 1947 Japan adopted its postwar constitution, with the now-famous Article 9, which barred the use of military force in settling international disputes and maintaining a military for warfare (although the nation does maintain a self-defence force).

By 1951, with a boom in Japanese profits arising from the Korean War, Tokyo rebuilt rapidly, especially the central business district, and the subway began to take on its present form. The once-bombed-out city has never looked back from this miraculous economic growth.

During the 1960s and '70s, Tokyo reemerged as one of the centres of growing Asian nationalism (the first phase was in the 1910s and '20s). Increasing numbers of Asian students came to Tokyo, taking home with them new ideas about Asia's role in the postwar world.

One of Tokyo's proudest moments came when it hosted the 1964 summer Olympics. In preparation the city embarked on a frenzy of construction unequalled in its history. Many Japanese see this time as a turning point in the nation's history, the moment when Japan finally recovered from the devastation of WWII to emerge as a fully fledged member of the modern world economy.

Construction and modernisation continued at a breakneck pace through the '70s, with the interruption of two Middle East oil crises, to reach a peak in the late '80s, when wildly inflated real-estate prices and stock speculation fuelled what is now known as the 'bubble economy'. Based on the price paid for the most expensive real estate at the time, the land value of Tokyo exceeded that of the entire United States, and Japanese companies went on a purchasing spree of international icons including Pebble Beach Golf Course, the Rockefeller Center and Columbia Pictures movie studio. When the bubble began to burst in 1989 with the crash of the stock market, the economy went into a protracted slump that was to last more than 15 years.

There were other, more disturbing, troubles in Japanese society. In March 1995 members of the Aum Shinrikyō doomsday cult released sarin nerve gas on crowded Tokyo subways, killing 12 and injuring more than 5000. This, together with the Kōbe earthquake of the same year, signalled the end of Japan's feeling of omnipotence, born of the unlimited successes of the '80s.

CITY OF THE FUTURE

Tokyo has weathered a long hangover since the heady days of the bubble economy. The doldrums have finally given way to lacklustre growth and unemployment that flirts with record 5% highs, but the government maintains the economy is still on a recovery path.

The declining birth rate and population pose major problems for Tokyo and Japan – the birth rate for the capital is below 1% (even lower than the national average of 1.24%), while Japan's elderly continue to make up an ever-larger share of the population. No-one really knows how the system will manage to support the 30% of the population that is projected to be over the age of 65 in the next 25 years. The workforce is shrinking, but there are few signs that Japan is ready to embrace Western-style immigration, recently making all foreign visitors to the country subject to fingerprinting and facial photography upon entry as part of its security policy.

The government may fear deception and fraud, but domestic headlines are rife with corporate malfeasance scandals, from revelations that buildings in Tokyo have been constructed with forged quake-resistance data to news that Japanese paper companies have been passing off unused paper as recycled material.

Japan is also struggling with its international role, particularly the leeway allowed by its 'Peace Constitution'; former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō's decision to deploy Self-Defense Force (SDF) troops to aid allies in the war in Iraq was met with massive protests. The Defense Agency has been promoted to a fully fledged ministry and Japanese military cooperation with the US has escalated. One result was that the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lost control of the upper house of parliament in 2007, allowing opposition Democrats to cancel an SDF antiterrorism refuelling mission in the Indian Ocean for several months until its resumption in 2008.

Although Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda managed a rare summit meeting with Chinese leaders, Japan's international image has continued to suffer due to its 'scientific' whale-hunting programme and a perceived lack of repentance over its wartime atrocities. The government

1964

Tokyo Olympic Games are held, marking Japan's postwar reintegration into the international community and the first time the Games are hosted by a non-Western country.

1968–69

Tokyo University students take over administrative buildings to protest the Vietnam War. No-one is allowed to graduate in the 1969 academic year and entrance examinations are cancelled.

1972

Okinawa, captured and held by US forces in WWII, is returned to Japan. High concentration of US military bases on the islands has angered locals ever since.

1989

Death of Emperor Hirohito; Heisei era begins as Hirohito's son Akihito ascends the Chrysanthemum Throne; stock market decline begins, initiating a decade-long economic slump in Japan.

1995

Doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyō releases sarin gas on the Tokyo subway, killing 12 and injuring more than 5000. Guru Shōkō Asahara is sentenced to death for Aum-related crimes in 2004.

2007

Ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) loses majority in the House of Councillors to the opposition Democratic Party of Japan. Financial scandals and political gaffes by LDP members and a national pension accounting scandal are blamed.

CRISIS AVERTED – FOR NOW

On 6 September 2006 Japan exhaled a long-held breath – news had just broken that a future emperor was born. Tipping the scales at 2.56kg, Prince Hisahito, son of Prince and Princess Akishino, was the first male child born into the moribund Imperial Family in more than four decades, averting a crisis of succession to the Chrysanthemum Throne.

Japanese had been debating a change to the 1947 Imperial Household Law to allow females to ascend the throne since reigning Emperor Akihito's eldest son, Crown Prince Naruhito, has had no male children. The amendment might have made his young daughter, Princess Aiko, the first reigning empress since Empress Go-Sakuramachi in the 18th century; the succession laws were modified in the 19th century so that only men could be emperor.

Following Prince Hisahito's birth, a government bill to change the 1947 law was dropped, and the debate, which even included proposals to have concubines for Imperial princes, was quietly shelved. Currently third in line for the throne, the baby prince will eventually face tremendous pressure from the arch-conservative Imperial Household Agency to produce a male heir and maintain the world's oldest continuous hereditary monarchy. But if, like most men in the Imperial Family, he only has daughters or no children at all, it will be *déjà vu* all over again.

has turned to Japanese pop culture products such as anime (animated film) and manga as a foreign policy tool in the hopes that popular cartoon heroes will be better than bureaucrats at convincing people to embrace 'cool Japan'.

Little of this phases Tokyo, however. It has continued to build new subway lines and mega-complexes such as Tokyo Midtown, and has mounted a bid to host the Olympic Games in 2016. With that old Edo pluck, Tokyoites shrug off the looming demographic crisis and hope the Games can give their city a shot in the arm as it carves out a new role for itself as a centre of anime, manga, video games and other globally hot media.

ARTS

Tokyo's density has a sheer visual quality that sometimes makes it seem like a lurid anime or video-game backdrop. In its better moments it may resemble an *ukiyo-e* (wood-block print), such as when snow blanches the roof of Sensō-ji in Asakusa. That's when it's easy to see where the Japanese of old found inspiration in producing the wealth of traditional arts that Tokyo has helped foster. But the aesthetics of the built environment can also take the form of something as simple as the adorable, expressive graphics in advertisements or the way a department store clerk wraps a package.

If it's Art with a capital A you're after, Tokyo is experiencing a renaissance. You'll find it in the large museums, in matchbox-sized galleries, decorating the streets, at train stations and convention halls, on hulking stages and in tiny underground theatres in quiet neighbourhoods, and, incredibly, a lot of it is really good.

CONTEMPORARY ARTS

Visual Arts

Tokyo has one of the world's most vibrant contemporary art scenes and dozens of galleries throughout the city at which to view it.

The opening of the Mori Art Museum in 2003 was something of a watershed for the contemporary arts. More than a dozen excellent art galleries are consolidated in buildings such as Complex in Roppongi (p99) and near the eastern bank of the Sumida-gawa (p127). It's fair to say that the city's contemporary aesthetic heartbeat has never been heard more clearly.

Artists to look for include Miyajima Tatsuo, whose sculptures and installation pieces often incorporate numeric LCD displays; Sugimoto Hiroshi, famous for his time-transcending photos (eg exposing the film to a movie screen while the entire movie runs); and Nara Yoshitomo

and Murakami Takashi, both heavily influenced by manga (Japanese comics, p78). The signature style of Kusama Yayoi is motifs of dots and nets, which make their way onto hanging art, sculptures and even clothing. Ishiuchi Miyako appeared in the Japan pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale, with her collection *Mother*, exploring artefacts of her own mother's turbulent life in penetrating photographs.

Music

Tokyo has a huge, shape-shifting music scene supported by a local market of audiophiles willing to try almost anything. International artists make a point of swinging through on global tours, and the local scene surfaces every night in one of the city's thousands of 'live houses'.

Western classical music (p178) is performed by several outstanding local orchestras, such as the NHK Symphony Orchestra and the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra, and by visiting ensembles. Opera (p178) too has come to stay. Notable companies include the Fujiwara Opera, which specialises in French and Italian operas, and the Nikkai Opera, which mounts performances of Mozart and Wagner.

The jazz scene is enormous (see p186), as are the followings for rock, House, electronica and Latin jazz.

Mainstream music is dominated by the commercial J-Pop. Some of the biggest acts are young *aidoru* (idol) singers who owe their popularity to cute looks and a flood of media appearances. The all-girl group Morning Musume has been the standard in recent years, keeping things fresh by regularly 'graduating' some of its dozen-or-so members and holding auditions for new ones. The boy-band equivalent is SMAP, which has prospered since 1991 with about half as many members. Other current top J-Pop artists include singer-songwriter Utada Hikaru, the Korean-born Boa, Hamasaki Ayumi and long-time favourite Southern All Stars. Japanese bands also follow Western music trends such as hip-hop and rap.

Tokyo is famous for its cutting-edge club music scene. DJs here are as numerous as they come; some of the biggest names are DJ Cornelius, Ken Ishii and DJ Kentaro.

Enka is a musical style popular among older generations but its nostalgic charm occasionally attracts younger audiences too. Its lyrics and emotions emphasise themes of longing and tears, and musically it's usually languidly paced and in a musical scale that borrows from traditional Japanese music.

Tokyo is also one of the only cities in Asia where you may have the luxury of seeing up-and-coming performers playing in intimate venues. See p186 for more on where to go to check out the wide variety of music on offer.

And no discussion of the Tokyo music scene can be complete without a mention of karaoke. Karaoke started in Japan in 1971 and remains wildly popular, as a walk down just about any alley at night will evidence. Go with a group, and you'll almost certainly be expected to perform; most karaoke bars and 'karaoke boxes' (private rooms with karaoke equipment) have at least a few English songs.

Commercial Theatre

Commercial theatre in Tokyo encompasses classical and contemporary dramas and musicals, both home-grown and imported, staged by large entertainment companies and starring well-known actors, singers and other celebrities. If you're struck by a sudden hankering for a Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Romeo and Juliet*, or a Japanese-language performance of the *Phantom of the Opera* you might just be in luck.

Popular but quirky, the all-female Takarazuka troupe offers a musical experience that is unlike any other. Founded in 1913, partly as an inversion of the all-male kabuki theatre and partly as a form of entertainment for a growing middle-class with money to burn, Takarazuka combines traditional Japanese elements with Western musical styles. Interestingly, in light of its history, its most devoted admirers now comprise young women who swoon with romantic abandon over the troupe's beautiful drag kings. Takarazuka adopted its present revue format in the late 1920s, and except for the WWII years – during which the troupe proved an ideal propaganda tool – has continued to perform musicals and revues set in exotic locations.

top picks

CONTEMPORARY ART VENUES

- National Art Center, Tokyo (p99)
- Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan (National Museum of Modern Art; p74)
- Mori Art Museum (p95)
- Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (p127)

Underground Theatre

Theatre the world over spent the 1960s redefining itself, and it was no different in Tokyo. The *shogekijō* (small theatre) movement, also called *angura* (underground), has given Japan many of its leading playwrights, directors and actors. Like their counterparts in the West, these productions took place in any space available – in small theatres, tents, basements, open spaces and on street corners.

Today's *shogekijō* takes on realistic themes, such as modern Japanese history, war and environmental degradation. Socially and politically critical dramas (such as those by Kaneshita Tatsuo and Sakate Yōji), psychological dramas (eg by Iwamatsu Ryō, Suzue Toshiro and Hirata Oriza) and satirical portrayals of modern society (eg by Nagai Ai and Makino Nozomi) have come to the fore and even attracted attention overseas.

Venues include the Suzunari Theatre outside the city centre in Shimokitazawa, and Die Pratzte, near Kagurazaka Station in Tokyo. And there always seems to be at least one troupe performing English-language theatre. See [p177](#) for listings.

Butō

In many ways, *butō* (contemporary dance) is Japan's most exciting dance form. It is also the newest, dating only from 1959, when Hijikata Tatsumi (1928–86) gave the first *butō* performance. *Butō* was born out of a rejection of the excessive formalisation that characterises traditional forms of Japanese dance and of an intention to return to the ancient roots of the Japanese soul.

Butō performances are best likened to performance art rather than traditional dance. During a performance, one or more dancers use their naked or seminaked bodies to express the most elemental and intense human emotions. Nothing is forbidden in *butō* and performances often deal with taboo topics such as sexuality and death. For this reason, critics often describe *butō* as scandalous, and *butō* dancers delight in pushing the boundaries of what can be considered tasteful in artistic performance.

Cinema

Japan has a vibrant, proud, critically acclaimed cinematic tradition. Renewed international attention since the mid-1990s has reinforced interest in domestic films, which account for an estimated 40% of box-office receipts – nearly double the level of most European countries. This includes not only artistically important works, but also films in the science-fiction, horror and 'monster-stomps-Tokyo' genres for which Japan is also known.

The golden age of Japanese cinema began with Kurosawa Akira's film *Rashōmon*, which won both the Golden Lion at the 1951 Venice International Film Festival and an Oscar for best foreign film. The increasing realism and high artistic standards of the period are evident in such milestone films as *Tōkyō Monogatari* (Tokyo Story; 1953), by the legendary Ōzu Yasujiro; Mizoguchi Kenji's classics *Ugetsu Monogatari* (Tales of Ugetsu; 1953) and *Saikaku Ichidai Onna* (The Life of Oharu; 1952); and Kurosawa's 1954 masterpiece *Shichinin no Samurai* (The Seven Samurai), which was later remade into the classic Western movie, *The Magnificent Seven*.

The 1960s gave the world such landmarks as Ichikawa Kon's *Chushingura* (47 Samurai; 1962, based on the Akō incident) and Kurosawa's *Yōjimbo* (1961).

Up against TV and, later, video, cinema attendance in Japan declined through the 1980s, yet Japanese filmmakers continued to set standards: Kurosawa garnered acclaim worldwide for *Kagemusha* (The Shadow Warrior; 1980), which shared the Palme d'Or at Cannes, and *Ran* (1985). Imamura Shōhei's heartrending *Narayama Bushiko* (The Ballad of Narayama) won the Grand Prix at Cannes in 1983. Itami Jūzō became perhaps the most widely known Japanese director outside Japan after Kurosawa with such biting satires as *Osōshiki* (The Funeral; 1985), *Tampopo* (1986) and *Marusa no Onna* (A Taxing Woman; 1988). Ōshima Nagisa scored critical success with *Senjo no Merry Christmas* (Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence) in 1983.

In the 1990s Japanese directors received top honours at two of the world's most prestigious film festivals: *Unagi* (Eel; 1997), Imamura Shōhei's black-humoured look at human nature's dark side won the Palme d'Or in Cannes and 'Beat' Takeshi Kitano took the Golden Lion in

TOKYO ON FILM

- *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō Monogatari*; 1953) – Ōzu Yasujiro's story of an older couple who come to Tokyo to visit their children only to find themselves treated with disrespect and indifference.
- *Godzilla* (*Gojira*; 1954) – It's become almost a cliché, but watch it again and you'll find a powerful metaphor in this city that spent the first half of the 20th century being beaten down and getting right back up again.
- *The Bad Sleep Well* (*Warui Yatsu Hodo Yoku Nemuru*; 1960) – Kurosawa Akira's first film after breaking from Toho studios centres on a protagonist who marries the boss's daughter as part of an intricate plan to avenge his father's death.
- *Tokyo Pop* (1988) – Fran Rubel Kuzui's breezy comedy about a lonely American songstress who finds redemption, fame and love in the here-today-gone-tomorrow world of J-pop.
- *Shall We Dance?* (1997) – A bored salaryman risks it all to learn the low-brow art of ballroom dancing. Footage includes some wistful shots of Tokyo at night.
- *Distance* (2001) – A subtle meditation on togetherness and loneliness, Koreeda Hirokazu's follow-up to *After Life* follows four people into the woods as they seek the truth about lovers and friends who belonged to a murderous cult. Though clearly an examination of the phenomena of Aum Shinrikyō (see [p28](#)) and the subway sarin attacks, this film is blissfully free of dogma.
- *Lost in Translation* (2003) – Tokyo takes on a muted gleam in Sofia Coppola's Oscar-winner about two guests at the Park Hyatt, sharing a moment away from loveless marriages. Bill Murray is in finest deadpan form, and the movie made Scarlett Johansson a star.
- *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003) – Kon Satoshi's animated film uses a group of homeless men to explore the city's post-bubble underside. They come across a baby and don't quite know what's hit them.
- *Nobody Knows* (*Dare mo Shiranai*; 2004) – Koreeda Hirokazu's slow and depressing but somehow life-affirming tale of four children forced to fend for themselves after their heinous mother abandons them. Based on true events.
- *Kamikaze Girls* (*Shimotsuma Monogatari*; 2004) – One of the daffiest buddy movies ever made, and the only one we know that pairs a country girl obsessed with Lolita outfits from Tokyo boutiques with a biker chick who spits to punctuate her sentences. Written and directed by Tetsuya Nakashima.
- *Train Man* (*Densha Otoko*; 2005) – After a shy *otaku* (supergeek) falls for a woman he defended from a drunkard, he turns to online pals for help with his feelings of love. This hit from director Masanori Murakami helped put *otaku* and Akihabara culture on the map.

Venice for *Hana-bi* (Fireworks; 1997), a tale of life and death, and the violence and honour that links them. The undisputed king of current Japanese cinema, 'Beat' Takeshi is a true renaissance man of the media; he stars in and directs his films, and is an author, poet and frequent TV personality.

These days, a new generation of directors is emerging, it includes: Izuru Kumasaka, whose *Asyl-Park and Love Hotel* won Best First Feature at the 2008 Berlin Film Festival; Koreeda Hirokazu with *Dare mo Shiranai* (Nobody Knows; 2004), winner of the Best Actor prize at the Cannes Film Festival for its young star Yagira Yūya; and Kurosawa Kiyoshi with *Cure*.

Naturally, the world's blockbusters also screen widely in Tokyo. See [p188](#) for cinemas.

Fiction

Most of Japan's national literature since the Edo period has been penned by authors who have written about or spent most of their lives in Tokyo. From Natsume Soseki to Mishima Yukio to Murakami Haruki, the literature written in and about the metropolis has served as the playground of the national imagination. Not surprisingly, both of Japan's Nobel Laureates, Kawabata Yasunari and Ōe Kenzaburo spent the bulk of their writing lives in Tokyo (Ōe eventually left to escape the Japanese press).

And the trend continues as a new generation of Tokyo writers takes the stage. In April 2004 the Akutagawa Prize – one of the nation's most prestigious – was awarded to the two youngest Japanese writers to have ever received it, both of them women: 19-year-old Kanehara Hitomi and Wataya Risa, aged 20. The previous youngest winners included Ōe Kenzaburo and current Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintarō, who were both 23 when they won.

TOKYO FICTION

- *I Am a Cat* (1905–1906), Sōseki Natsume – Sōseki's best known for *Kokoro*, but this merciless turn-of-the-century narrative, told from the point of view of a cat, is way more fun.
- *Snow Country* (1948), Kawabata Yasunari – Written in the years just before WWII, this novel by one of Japan's two Nobel Laureates tells the tale of a Tokyo dilettante's cruel, tragic affair with a mountain geisha.
- *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea* (1963), and *After the Banquet* (1960), Mishima Yukio – If you're looking for unsettling beauty, reach for the former. History buffs will want the latter tome, which was at the centre of a court case that became Japan's first privacy lawsuit.
- *A Personal Matter* (1964), Kenzaburo Ōe – A 27-year-old school teacher's child is born brain-damaged. His life claustrophobic, his marriage failing, he dreams of escaping to Africa while planning the murder of his son.
- *Coin Locker Babies* (1980), Murakami Ryu – A coming-of-age tale centred on the lives of Kiku and Hashi, two boys left to die in coin lockers by their mothers. Both survive. The latter part of the book follows Hashi through Toxictown, a futuristic danger zone. This is Murakami at his most poetic.
- *Norwegian Wood* (1987), Murakami Haruki – Set in the late '60s against the backdrop of student protests, *Norwegian Wood* is both the portrait of a young artist (as recounted by a reminiscent narrator) and an ode to first loves. Murakami is perhaps Japan's most celebrated novelist, and this is his most celebrated work.
- *Kitchen* (1988), Yoshimoto Banana – Yoshimoto gets a bad rap as a lightweight writer. It's true, *Kitchen* relentlessly chronicles Tokyo's fast-food menus and '80's pop culture, though underlying the superficial digressions are hints at a darker deeper world of death, loss and loneliness.
- *Idoru* (1997), William Gibson – This novel paints Tokyo's dark postearthquake future, after the grim reconstruction made possible by ominous nanotechnology. Shinjuku looms large, as does megawatt Akihabara.
- *Out* (1998), Kirino Natsuo – A gritty thriller about downtrodden female employees of a *bentō* (boxed-lunch) factory who become a band of murderesses. Winner of Japan's grand prize for crime fiction.
- *Snakes and Earrings* (2003), Hitomi Kanehara – This Akutagawa Prize–winner traces the downward spiral of a woman spellbound by a mysterious tattoo artist.
- *Tokyo Year Zero* (2007), David Peace – In devastated postwar Tokyo, a not-so-saintly police detective tracks a serial killer.

Poetry

While Japanese traditional poetry, such as the 17-syllable haiku or the 31-syllable *waka*, is most closely associated with the ancient capital of Kyoto, it has a history in Tokyo as well. Japan's most famous poet of all time, Matsuo Bashō, led a literary society here and began his journey to write his renowned work *Oku no Hosomichi* on the banks of the Sumida-gawa. Today it's not uncommon to see large busloads of retirees setting off on haiku composition trips, often to inspired locations such as the stops on Bashō's journey through northern Japan. Haiku remains extremely popular and its five-seven-five syllable structure is also used in the media to construct ad slogans.

Contemporary poetry in Tokyo is alive and well and read mostly by the dedicated. One exception to this trend is Tanikawa Shuntaro (*Map of Days, Naked*), whose inspired verse has earned him not only a loyal following, but interviews in fashion and pop culture magazines. Also of note is Shiraishi Kazuko (*Let Those Who Appear*), whose rowdy, lyrical poetry has earned her comparisons to American Beat poet, Allen Ginsberg.

TRADITIONAL ARTS

You don't have to visit a museum to see old art forms in Tokyo. From kabuki-attired pitchmen in TV ads to lacquered mousepads to folding fans *sensu* (folding fans) emblazoned with corporate logos, traditional arts and crafts are everywhere in the capital, and are subject to continuous innovation.

Painting

From AD 794 to 1600, Japanese painting borrowed from Chinese and Western techniques and media, ultimately transforming these towards its own aesthetic end. By the beginning of the Edo period (1600–1868), which was marked by a wide range of painting styles attracting enthusiastic

patronage, Japanese art had come completely into its own. The Kanō school, initiated more than a century before the beginning of the Edo period, continued to be in demand for its depiction of subjects connected with Confucianism, mythical Chinese creatures or scenes from nature. The Tosa school, which followed the *yamato-e* (Japanese world) style of painting (often used on scrolls during the Heian period from 794–1185), received commissions from nobility eager for scenes from ancient classics of Japanese literature.

Finally, the Rimpa school (beginning from around 1600) absorbed the earlier styles of painting and progressed beyond conventions to produce a strikingly decorative and delicately shaded form of painting. The works produced by a trio of outstanding artists from this school – Tawaraya Sōtatsu, Hon'ami Kōetsu and Ōgata Kōrin – rank among the finest from this period.

Wood-block Prints

Far from the Chinese-inspired landscapes and religious-themed paintings, *ukiyo-e* (literally 'pictures of the floating world'; wood-block prints) were for the common people, used in advertising or in much the same way posters are used today. The subjects of these wood-block prints were images of everyday life, characters in kabuki (p36) plays and scenes from the 'floating world', a term derived from a Buddhist metaphor for life's fleeting joys.

Edo's particular floating world revolved around pleasure districts such as the Yoshiwara. In this topsy-turvy kingdom, an inversion of the usual social hierarchies imposed by the Tokugawa shōgunate, money meant more than rank, actors and artists were the arbiters of style, and prostitutes elevated their art to such a level that their accomplishments matched those of the women of noble families.

The vivid colours, novel composition and flowing lines of *ukiyo-e* caused great excitement when they finally arrived in the West; the French came to dub it 'Japonisme'. *Ukiyo-e* was a key influence on impressionists and post-impressionists (eg Toulouse-Lautrec, Manet and Degas). Yet among the Japanese, the prints were hardly given more than passing consideration – millions were produced annually in Edo, often thrown away or used as wrapping paper for pottery. For many years, the Japanese continued to be perplexed by the keen interest foreigners took in this art form.

The compact but exceptional Ukiyo-e Ota Memorial Art Museum (p111) has rotating exhibitions, while the Edo-Tokyo Museum (p125) has a section describing *ukiyo-e* and how they were made.

Ceramics

Japan has one of the world's great ceramic traditions, from early Jōmon earthenware to the humble aesthetic of the tea ceremony and brightly coloured vessels sold overseas for big prices. Tokyo is not a significant centre for ceramic making, but has some great venues to learn about ceramic styles and their appreciation.

Various museums around town host ceramics exhibitions – Tokyo Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan (Tokyo National Museum; p73) is a particularly good example. Department-store art galleries are also good places to catch a show. The remarkable online gallery www.e-yakimono.net has all the information you need about ceramic styles and appreciation.

Folk Crafts

The *mingei* (folk crafts) movement was launched in the early 20th century as an attempt to counter desire for cheap mass-produced goods and promote the works of ordinary craftspeople instead. Central to the *mingei* philosophy is *yo no bi* (beauty through use), where everyday objects should bring pleasure through their aesthetics, touch and ease of use.

Mingei movement leaders included potters Hamada Shoji (1894–1978) and Kawai Kanjirō (1890–1966), the eccentric genius potter and painter Munakata Shikō (1903–75), Serizawa Keisuke (1895–1984) for his amazing textiles and the British-born potter Bernard Leach (1887–1979).

To see some *mingei* works, visit the Crafts Gallery (p51) of Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan (National Museum of Modern Art).

Ikebana

Key differences between ikebana (flower arranging) and western forms of flower arranging are the illusion of space, the interplay between the flowers and the vessels or baskets used to display them, and the sense of balance created when a flower is placed just so. The popularity of ikebana is evident in the eye-pleasing creations in the city's shop windows and the *tokonoma* (sacred alcoves) of its private residences. Bamboo baskets, remarkable for their complexity and delicacy, are popular for use in ikebana.

See [p196](#) for information about ikebana classes.

Tea Ceremony

First things first: the tea ceremony is not about drinking tea (well, only a little). As much a philosophy as an art, *sadō* (the way of tea), combines a host of related arts and crafts: ceramics, kimono, calligraphy, ikebana, food, traditional architecture and garden design.

Originally the pastime of samurai and Zen priests, *sadō* placed great emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of simplicity and naturalness, which together with humility create a spirit called *wabi-sabi*. Tea-master Sen no Rikyū codified the practice in the Momoyama period. Today a proper tea ceremony takes place in a tea room of 4.5 tatami mats. Seasonal ikebana and scroll paintings, the selection of ceramics and utensils used in the preparation and serving of the tea, the sweets accompanying the tea, and the design of the adjoining garden should all unite to create an 'only-in-this-moment' experience.

Opportunities to participate in a full tea ceremony are exceedingly rare anywhere in Japan; if you are invited, *accept* (but not so eagerly as to show immodesty). Otherwise, many places around town offer the same sort of whisked green tea (*matcha*) with a sweet in far less formal settings. The teahouse at Hama Rikyū Onshi-teien ([p66](#)) is particularly lovely, located in the centre of a pond. Inquire at shrines, temples and smaller museums for other options.

Nō

Nō originated from the combination of indigenous Shintō-related dance and mime traditions, and dance forms that originated elsewhere in Asia, and it really came to the fore in Kyoto between 1350 and 1450. Rather than a drama in the usual sense, a *nō* (dance-drama) seeks to express a poetic moment by symbolic and almost abstract means: glorious movements, grand and exaggerated costumes and hairstyles, sonorous chorus and music, and subtle expression. Actors frequently wear masks while they perform before a spare, unchanging set, which features a painting of a large pine tree.

Most *nō* plays centre around two principal characters: the *shite*, who is sometimes a living person but more often a demon or a ghost whose soul cannot rest; and the *waki*, who leads the main character towards the play's climactic moment. The elegant language used is that of the court of the 14th century.

Some visitors find *nō* rapturous and captivating; others (including many Japanese) find its subtlety all too subtle. If you are going to take in a *nō* performance, familiarise yourself with the story and characters beforehand. If all else fails, the intermissions of *nō* performances are punctuated by *kyōgen* (short, lively comic farces).

For performance information, see [p176](#).

Kabuki

If *nō* has a history of catering to the elites, with themes of the afterlife and classical Japanese legend, kabuki originated as art for the common people, with dialogue, lively music, breathtaking costumes, an absence of masks, casts of dozens and stagecraft that was – and remains – unique in the world of theatre.

Although kabuki is most closely associated with Edo, it began in Kyoto around 1600 when a charismatic shrine priestess called Okuni and her troupe started entertaining crowds with a new type of dance people dubbed 'kabuki', a slang expression that meant 'cool' or 'in vogue'.

Okuni's dancers were not above prostituting their talents, and when fights for the ladies' affections became a bit too frequent, order-obsessed Tokugawa officials declared the entertainment

a threat to public morality. Women's kabuki was banned, and troupes of adolescent men took over the female roles, a development that only fed the flames of samurai ardour. Finally, in 1653, the authorities mandated that only adult men with shorn forelocks could perform kabuki, which gave rise to one of kabuki's most fascinating and artistic elements, the *onnagata* (an actor who specialises in portraying women).

Over several centuries, kabuki has developed a repertoire of popular themes, such as famous historical accounts and stories of love-suicide, while also borrowing copiously from *nō* ([opposite](#)), *kyōgen* and *bunraku* ([below](#)). Many kabuki plays border on melodrama, while others vary from stories of bravery to elaborate dance pieces.

Unlike Western theatre, kabuki is actor-centred. Kabuki actors are born to the art form – the leading families of modern kabuki go back many generations – and training begins in childhood. Sons often follow their fathers into the *yago* (kabuki acting house) to train in order to perpetuate an ancestor's name on stage. Thus, the generations of certain families (eg Bando and Ichikawa) run into the double digits. The Japanese audience takes great interest in watching how different generations of one family perform the same part. Actors today enjoy great social prestige, and their activities on and off the stage attract as much interest as those of film and TV stars.

Ingenious features of kabuki include the revolving stage (a kabuki invention), the *hanamichi* (a raised walkway connecting the stage to the back of the theatre, which is used for dramatic entrances and exits), *koken* (on-stage assistants) and *hikinuki* (on-stage costume changes).

Another unique aspect of kabuki is the *kakegoe*, enthusiastic fans who shout out the name of the *yago* (home studio) of their favourite actors at pivotal moments such as well-known lines of dialogue or poses called *mie*. Actors note they miss this reinforcement when performing overseas (but don't try it yourself!). See *Kabuki-za* ([p176](#) and [opposite](#)) for more details.

Puppet Theatre

Japan's traditional puppet theatre developed at the same time as kabuki, when the *shamisen* (a three-stringed lute), imported from Okinawa, was combined with traditional puppetry techniques and *jōruri* (narrative chanting). *Bunraku*, as it came to be known in the 19th century, addresses many of the same themes as kabuki, and in fact many of the most famous plays in the kabuki repertoire were originally written for the puppet theatre. *Bunraku* involves large puppets – nearly two-thirds life size – manipulated by up to three black-robed puppeteers. The puppeteers do not speak; a seated narrator tells the story and provides the voices of the characters, expressing their feelings with smiles, weeping and starts of surprise and fear. Although *bunraku* is most closely associated with Osaka, the best place to see it in Tokyo is the New National Theatre (Shin Kokuritsu Gekijō; [p178](#)).

Rakugo

A traditional Japanese style of comic monologue, *rakugo* (literally, 'dropped word') dates back to the Edo period (1600–1868). The performer, usually in kimono, sits on a square cushion on a stage. Props are limited to a fan and hand towel. The monologue begins with a *makura* (prologue), which is followed by the story itself and, finally, the *ochi* (punch line, or 'drop', which is another pronunciation of the Chinese character for *raku* in *rakugo*). Many of the monologues in the traditional *rakugo* repertoire date back to the Edo and Meiji periods, and while well known, reflect a social milieu unknown to modern listeners. Accordingly, many practitioners today also write new monologues addressing issues relevant to contemporary life.

top picks

TRADITIONAL ART VENUES

- *Bijutsukan Kōgeikan* (Crafts Gallery; [p51](#))
- *Musée Tomo* ([p99](#))
- *Tokyo Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan* (Tokyo National Museum; [p73](#))
- *Ukiyo-e Ota Memorial Art Museum* ([p111](#))

ARCHITECTURE

Tokyo's awesome built environment looks part Legoland, part sci-fi video-game backdrop, part heaving neon anarchy. Disasters and lax planning laws have obliterated most heritage buildings and modern ones are scrapped and rebuilt every 20 years or so, giving the cityscape an inspired heterogeneous character similar to an immense Escher print. Unlike Kyoto, laid out under grid-based Chinese geomancy principles, the city of Tokyo evolved concentrically around Edo Castle, and its medieval design has a strong labyrinthine dimension; several excellent English-language books explore these themes (p27). The resulting cityscape is a fantastic mishmash of impermanent structures grafted onto ancient patterns, so old and new are always right before your eyes.

FOREIGN INFLUENCES

Until the end of the Edo period (1600–1868), the city's houses and shops were almost entirely constructed of wood, paper and tile, and early photos show a remarkable visual harmony in the old skyline. Japan first opened its doors to Western architecture with the Meiji Restoration. Japanese architects immediately responded to these new influences, but some 20 years later, a nationalistic push against the influence of the West saw a resurgence in the popularity of traditional Japanese building styles.

This ambivalence towards Western architecture continued until after WWI, when foreign architects, such as Frank Lloyd Wright came to build the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo (since demolished for safety reasons, although the façade can be seen at Meiji Mura, a culture-history park near Nagoya, two hours from Tokyo on the bullet train). Wright introduced the International Style, characterised by sleek lines, cubic forms and materials such as glass, steel and brick. Other pre-WWII monoliths still stand in Marunouchi and Yūrakuchō opposite the east side of Hibiya Park; American bombers spared them and they were used for postwar command facilities.

After WWII the aggressively sculptural stone and concrete work of French architect Le Corbusier exerted strong influence on Japanese architects, and by the mid-1960s Japanese architects were beginning to attract attention on the world stage for their unique style.

EARLY STYLE ICONS

The best known of Japan's 20th-century builders was Tange Kenzō (1913–2005). The mixing of Le Corbusier and traditional Japanese forms can be seen in Tange's buildings, including the National Gymnasium (1964; p108) in Yoyogi-kōen, Hanae Mori Building (p112) and Sōgetsu Kaikan (1977; p93). His skyscraping Tokyo Metropolitan Government Offices (1991; p116) was modelled after the great European cathedrals – look up from the plaza below and see if it doesn't remind you of Notre Dame in Paris. Also look out for the Fuji TV Headquarters (1996; p132) in Odaiba; its latticelike frame suspends a giant orb that looms like the Death Star over Tokyo Bay.

In the 1960s architects such as Shinohara Kazuo, Kurokawa Kisho, Maki Fumihiko and Kikutake Kiyonori began a movement known as Metabolism, which promoted flexible spaces and functions at the expense of fixed forms in building. Kurokawa's *Nakagin Capsule Tower* (Map p65; 8-16-10 Ginza, Chūō-ku; ③ Ōedo Line to Tsukijishijō) is a seminal work, designed as pods which could be removed whole from a central core and replaced elsewhere. His last great work, the National Art Center in Roppongi (2006), weaves undulating vertical forms into a strikingly latticed, organic structure.

TEMPLE OR SHRINE?

The quickest way to distinguish a Buddhist temple from a Shintō shrine is to examine the entrance. The main entrance of a shrine is customarily a *torii* (Shintō shrine gate), usually composed of two upright pillars, joined at the top by two horizontal crossbars, the upper of which is normally slightly curved. *Torii* are often painted a bright vermilion, though some are left as bare wood. In contrast, the *mon* (main entrance gate) of a temple is often a much more substantial affair, constructed of several pillars or casements, joined at the top by a multitiered roof. Temple gates often contain guardian figures, usually *Niō* (deva kings). Keep in mind, though, that shrines and temples sometimes share the same precincts, and it is not always easy to tell where one begins and the other ends.

Shinohara finally came to design in a style he called Modern Next, incorporating both modern and postmodern design ideas combined with Japanese influences. This style can be seen in his Centennial Hall (1987) at the Tokyo Institute of Technology, an elegant and uplifting synthesis of clashing forms in shiny metal cladding. Maki, the master of minimalism, pursued design in a modernist style while still emphasising elements of nature – such as the roof of his Tokyo Metropolitan Gymnasium (1990; p197), which takes on the form of a sleek metal insect. Another Maki design, the Spiral Building (1985; p113) is a favourite with Tokyo residents for its user-friendly design, gallery space, café and shops.

Isozaki Arata, who originally worked under Tange, also promoted the Metabolist style before becoming interested in geometry and postmodernism. His work includes the Cultural Centre (1990) in Mito, about an hour from Tokyo, which contains a striking geometric, snakelike tower clad in different metals, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

Kikutake, meanwhile, went on to design the Edo-Tokyo Museum (1992; p125). This enormous structure, encompasses almost 50,000 sq metres of built space and reaches 62.2m (the height of Edo Castle) at its peak.

Another Tokyo architect to break onto the international scene in recent years is Taniguchi Yoshio. He had some important commissions in Japan – including the Gallery of Hōryū-ji Treasures (p74) at Tokyo Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan (Tokyo National Museum) – but his first overseas project was as big as they get: the 2004 renovation and expansion of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

NEXT GENERATION BUILDERS

In the 1980s a second generation of Japanese architects began to gain recognition within the international architecture scene, including Ito Toyo, Hasegawa Itsuko and Andō Tadao. This younger group has continued to explore both modernism and postmodernism, while incorporating the renewed interest in Japan's architectural heritage. One of Ito's most striking recent designs, built in 2004, *TOD's Omote-sandō Building* (Map p110; 5-1-15 Jingūmae, Shibuya-ku), looks as if it was wrapped in surgical tape. Andō's architecture utilises materials such as concrete to create strong geometric patterns that have so regularly appeared in Japan's traditional architecture. Two of his landmarks are around Omote-sandō: *Collezione* (6-1-3 Minami-Aoyama, Minato-ku) and *Omote-sandō Hills* (Map p110; 4-12 Jingūmae, Shibuya-ku). See also p112.

Across the street from Omote-sandō Hills is the new *Christian Dior store* (5-9-11 Jingūmae, Shibuya-ku) by a young protégée of Ito's, Sejima Kazuyo, together with her partner Nishizawa Ryūe in the firm SANAA. They and others like them are quietly becoming the next generation of great Japanese architects; projects include museums in Spain, in New York and Toledo, Ohio, USA.

top picks

CONTEMPORARY BUILDINGS

- **Spiral Building** (1985; p113) Clean lines and a user-friendly interior have made this design by Maki Fumihiko one of Aoyama's best-loved buildings.
- **Asahi Flame** (1989; Map p86) Famously capped by a representation of a golden flame come to be known as the 'golden turd', Philippe Starck's late Bubble-era design is one of Tokyo's most recognisable modern structures.
- **Tokyo Metropolitan Government Offices** (1991; p116) Tange Kenzo's new city hall has both heft and airiness; great, free observatories mean it's popular too.
- **Edo-Tokyo Museum** (1992; p125) Architect Kikutane seems to have thumbed his nose at time in designing a history museum that so clearly represents a vision of the future. Wonderful *Star Wars* feel.
- **Fuji Television Japan Broadcast Center** (1994; p132) The signature building of Odaiba, and well worthy of the title.
- **Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo** (1995; p127) Yanagisawa Takahiko's wild design feels like an experiment in outrageous geometry. Steel and concrete blend harmoniously into the surrounding urban park.
- **Tokyo International Forum** (1996; p52) This wonder of glass stands tall in Ginza.
- **Prada Aoyama Building** (2003; p113) Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron's creation is a marvel of white-on-white, encased in a crystalline honeycomb.
- **Roppongi Hills** (2003; p94) Jon Jerde created a phenomenon of East-meets-West, ancient-meets-future and stark beauty-meets-crass-commercialism.
- **National Art Center, Tokyo** (2006; p99) Kisho Kurokawa's last great work is an undulating meshwork embracing seven large exhibition halls unsupported by columns.

ENVIRONMENT & PLANNING

Comprehensive pollution laws (introduced in 1967), one of the best public-transport systems in the world and an ongoing commitment to recycling programmes continue to make Tokyo one of Asia's most environmentally viable supercities.

Adding to the liveability of the city are the numerous parks that dot the landscape. There are thousands ranging from pocket parks to riverside promenades and sprawling affairs dating back to samurai times, frequented year-round as the city's mild climate makes them accessible and the marked changes in seasons make them appealing.

THE LAND

Tokyo is famously earthquake prone because it lies at the junction of the Eurasian, Pacific and Philippine tectonic plates. To compound the problem, much of the city and many crowded residential areas are built on loosely consolidated landfill, which could theoretically mix with underground water during a big tremor, causing portions of the city to collapse.

On 17 January 1995 the city of Kōbe (about 600km from Tokyo) was devastated by an earthquake measuring 7.2 on the Richter scale, and it left Tokyoites wondering 'what's in store for us?'

Although imperceptible earthquakes happen nearly every day in Japan, the last one to give Tokyo a major shakedown was the 7.9-magnitude 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake (p27). Thankfully, Tokyo today is not the city it was in 1923. Its architects have been leaders in designing buildings to withstand earthquakes; some skyscrapers are on rollers or casters, others are reinforced at intervals. Yet the prospect of another major quake remains a grim one, and the devastation in Kōbe served as a reminder that no amount of earthquake preparation is too much. Meanwhile, more and more skyscrapers are going up in Tokyo due to relaxed building codes.

The government's Meteorological Agency in 2007 launched a quake warning system that broadcasts alarms 10 to 20 seconds before strong shocks are expected to hit an area based on preliminary vertical tremors. So far, its prediction rate has had mixed success.

To learn about earthquake safety, visit the Ikebukuro Bōsai-kan (p123).

GREEN TOKYO

Tokyo has an excellent recycling system duly enforced by garbage collection services. In apartments, homes and businesses, all garbage must be separated into burnable, nonburnable and recyclable bags. Garbage that is not appropriately bundled is simply not picked up.

Foreign visitors are often surprised at the lack of garbage bins in public places. Eating while walking in Japan is almost never done, except at fairs or the occasional ice-cream cone. Otherwise, the rule is to hold on to your rubbish (trash) until you get home. Under duress, train stations and convenience stores usually have bins, typically separated into those for paper (sometimes newspapers and magazines), cans, bottles, and other rubbish, with handy pictures.

Overall awareness of environmental problems is mixed in resource-poor Japan. While some Japanese manufacturers lead the pack when it comes to products that save energy (Toyota's Prius was the first mass-produced gasoline-electric hybrid vehicle), others are ridiculously wasteful when it comes to packaging – it's common to find, say, a bag of marshmallows or cookies with each item sealed individually in plastic.

Meanwhile, climate change has forced large cities such as Tokyo to institute public campaigns to lower surface temperatures through measures such as installing rooftop gardens. Laws passed in 2002 require all new and reconstructed buildings to include a roof garden. The measures were adopted to combat Tokyo's infernal summer heat – temperatures have risen 3°C in the last hundred years – and also to beautify its concrete expanse.

Another strategy is keeping air-conditioner use to a minimum by dressing down in summer – the government's popular Cool Biz campaign has seen stuffy bureaucrats, politicians and businessmen renounce their suits and ties in the sweltering months for open-neck short-sleeve shirts. The Warm Biz campaign encourages them to dress more warmly to save on heating costs.

URBAN PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

Tokyo has looser building restrictions than many giant cities, and this is evident in its chaotic, ugly sprawl. Japan, where buildings are regarded as disposable commodities and usually junked after 20 years, has long been criticised for its failure to protect historic structures from the wrecking ball – landowners have inordinate power to decide what kind of buildings will go up on their property, often only a tiny slice of land.

Tokyo's neglect to limit businesses to certain zones began after WWII, when reconstruction was paramount. But in 2006 the Tokyo Metropolitan Government finally moved to protect the skyline surrounding three early-20th-century buildings – the Diet, the State Guest House and the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery. It was probably too little too late, but the declining birth rate means that more space will open up and the ordinance may serve as a precedent for better planning and preservation.

Tokyo is also encouraging the renovation of decrepit office buildings and boosting train services to reduce congestion. In 2008 it will launch yet another subway line, the Fukutoshin Line running between Ikebukuro and Shibuya.

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Based in Shinjuku, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government is the bureaucracy running the metropolis, which has the 127-member Metropolitan Assembly as its legislature and a governor. However, Tokyo's 23 inner wards, or *ku*, have autonomous local governments with their own elected assemblies and mayors. Within Tokyo and surrounding the 23 wards are 26 cities, five towns and eight villages, all of which have their own assemblies.

Local politics in Tokyo is very much overshadowed by national politics because the Japanese parliament, the Diet, is located here too. It's divided into two houses: the lower, House of Representatives, and the upper, House of Councillors. The party that controls the majority of seats is the ruling party and has the right to appoint the prime minister, who appoints a cabinet.

In theory, the Diet is a multiparty governing body; in practice, it is controlled by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which since its formation in 1955 has held sway with the exception of a few years in the mid-1990s. See p91 for information about tours of the National Diet.

ECONOMY

Although it looked as if Japan was going to take over the world economically through the 1980s, by the 1990s Japan's economy was in a certifiable recession and remained so until very recently. Unemployment hovered around 5% (high by national standards), homelessness rose (visible in major encampments in districts such as Ueno and Shinjuku), corporations approached bankruptcy and bank loans turned into bad debts. The result: deflation, increased public debt and

WHAT'S IN A KEIRETSU?

Businesspeople from abroad who come to work in Tokyo are often mystified by the structure of companies and interpersonal relationships. Business, they quickly learn, is never just business, but depends on a complex set of social relationships and corporate bonds that can never be accessed in a few meetings but must be built over years.

At the centre of this system, and of the economy, are *keiretsu*, alliances of businesses based on cross-shareholding (aka business cartels). This configuration, with a bank at its core, links a number of companies together. Each *keiretsu*, however, has only one enterprise in each industry, preventing competition within the group.

Although for years foreign companies, especially those from the USA, whinged about the exclusivity and seeming impracticality of these tight-knit alliances, they have recently begun to adopt the model themselves. In Japan, *keiretsu* are often viewed as safety zones for lifetime employment, with employees being shifted horizontally from one enterprise to another as components of the group become less fiscally viable. But the bad loan crises of the 1990s hit *keiretsu* banks hard, forcing some to merge with rivals. The conglomerates remain a force in Japanese business, but they are weakening as the prospect of lifetime employment continues to evaporate and surviving globalised competition becomes increasingly paramount.

growing concern over how to support a greying populace (Japan has one of the world's oldest populations, with life expectancies over 77 years for men and 85 for women). However, 2005 marked the beginning of a turnaround, which appears, finally, to have traction – land values in the city rose for the first time since 1991, and the Nikkei index is once again climbing high.

Some smart Tokyoites used the bubble to regenerate. People under 40 began to reject the stability of lifetime employment in favour of more compelling, often more flexible, independent jobs. The emblem of this movement was Horie Takafumi, who in 1995 dropped out of Tokyo University (Japan's most prestigious) at the age of 23 to found a consulting company that eventually morphed into Livedoor, one of Japan's leading internet services and DVD-rental empires. Horie's showy personal trappings – fast cars, T-shirts instead of suits, brash corporate takeover bids and being a general media hound – infuriated the old-line corporate world. They also landed him in a book-cooking scandal that has periodically splashed across the headlines in recent times.

MEDIA

Tokyo is Japan's media capital. *Terebi* (TV) networks based here include NHK (the national broadcaster), Fuji TV, Nippon TV, TBS and TV Asahi; their headquarters are destinations for Japanese visitors. Breakfast broadcasts vary from sober reporting of world news to chipper chatter about the latest pop-star gossip. Daytime TV focuses on cooking and chat shows for housewives, and late-afternoon anime (p78) for kids. Infotainment, variety and quiz shows are popular night-time fare.

Programming from overseas is typically dubbed, but many Japanese TVs have a 'bilingual' button for watching shows in their original language.

Japanese are voracious readers, and the country's newspapers have the world's highest circulation rate. Major *shimbun* (newspapers) include the liberal *Asahi Shimbun*, the conservative financial daily *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (aka *Nikkei*) and the more populist *Mainichi Shimbun*, right-wing *Sankei Shimbun* and *Yomiuri Shimbun*, which boasts the world's largest circulation. Sports newspapers are targeted at male readers (often with racy photos to match), and the lurid *shūkanshi* (weekly tabloids) compete intensely for the most sensational stories – you'll see them advertised on trains citywide. See p251 for English-language publications.

The quality of Japanese journalism depends heavily on the news provider. A typical government corruption scandal might first surface as a scoop in a more aggressive weekly tabloid, be picked up by TV variety shows, then appear in mainstream newspapers before finally making headlines on conservative NHK. The public broadcaster's coverage of politics ranges from timid to reverential, mirroring that of putatively independent press agencies such as Kyodo News.

In all media, however, granting anonymity to sources is extraordinarily common; even eyewitnesses to traffic accidents will have their faces blurred or voices distorted in a TV news report. Though there is a high degree of press freedom in Japan, social mores and systems such as exclusionary press clubs mean mainstream media are generally better at roles such as reporting breaking news than investigative journalism and criticism. Freelance journalists and independent media struggle against company-centred thinking but have small, dedicated readerships.

Despite their traditional love of newspapers and NHK, Japanese are increasingly relying on the internet and mobile phones for news and other information. Japanese online forum 2channel (<http://2ch.net>) can log more than three million posts in a single day, covering everything from political scandals to suicide notes and hate speeches, and is the largest site of its kind on the net; its popularity is gaining on traditional media.

top picks

NEWS SITES

- **Japan Times** (www.japantimes.co.jp)
- **Mainichi Daily News** (<http://mdn.mainichi.jp>)
- **Nikkei Net** (www.nni.nikkei.co.jp)
- **Kyodo News** (<http://home.kyodo.co.jp>)
- **Asahi Shimbun** (www.asahi.com/english)

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