

The megalopolis of Tokyo is deceptive. It's less like New York than Los Angeles or San Francisco; more like a collection of neighborhoods or cities that have engulfed each other. It seems less crowded than its reported population of 8.3 million would imply, except on the roads and at certain hours riding the subway. Travel is easy as long as you walk or take the subway.

Language is an immediate barrier to West meeting East. You will find Japanese who speak English, but the Japanese script can be extremely daunting to occidentals. Even so, through gestures, pointing, guessing, and blunders, it's possible to get where you want to, see what you want to, and even eat, though what the waiter brings may not always be what you expected. Many restaurants make the choice easier by displaying replicas of the meals they offer.

The Japanese diet differs greatly from that of most Westerners. Seafood in all its varieties (eel, octopus, seaweed, kelp, prawns, cuttlefish, etc.), prepared raw, fried, steamed, or barbecued and served with rice or noodles, is a staple. Western-style breakfasts are available at major hotels. And, of course, there's always McDonald's. On the street, vending machines offer hot or cold tea and coffee; some even offer beer.

A stroll through the markets and shops of Tokyo reveals the prosperity the country has gained since the end of World War II. Specialty foods and eateries fill the lower level of a department store. Upper floors offer the latest in fashions and electronics.

Little clues reveal that even Japan has its indigents and economic woes. Inside one of Tokyo's public parks, an old man ties a ramshackle campsite amongst the trees. At the main entrance, expatriates from the Middle East while away the day chatting and joking. Foreigners of all sorts spread their trinkets and handicrafts on the sidewalks leading into the park. Housing can be so expensive that the debt is passed along to the next generation.

An imported American conversion van sells for US\$ 50,000. A good used car might sell for US\$ 14,000. A new bicycle costs about US\$ 165. Gas is about US\$ 1 a liter.

As income increases, so does the income tax. A single person making roughly US\$ 41,000 a year would pay 10.1% in taxes, a married couple would pay 4.6%. Increase that to US\$ 410,000 a year and the tax rate increases to 50% and 48.8%, respectively. A few years ago, a clerk might average US\$ 25,000 a year; a plant manager might average US\$ 61,000.





The quickest way to travel from city to city in Japan is by bullet train. The sleek, white train zips along at 220 km an hour, with two-minute stops at major stations. The ride is smooth, quiet, and comfortable.

The ride from Tokyo to Nagoya and on to Kyoto passes south of elusive Mt. Fuji. Every bit of farmable land seems to be planted with rice paddies, tea bushes, mulberry trees, or other crops. Ponds are planted with lotus blossoms or stocked with eels. Mountains and forests limit the "usable" land to about 20% of Japan's total area of 147,200 square miles.

The ride also reveals a highly industrialized nation whose pastimes include golf and "pachinko," a pinball-type game. Huge, net-enclosed driving ranges are easily spotted all along the route. Pachinko parlors rival the slot-machine halls of Las Vegas, with their gaudy lights and numbing chink, chink, chink of metal on metal. Top spectator sports include baseball and sumo wrestling.

Kyoto served as Japan's capital from A.D. 794 until 1603. Before then, Nara served as the seat of government and religion. Both cities remain religious and cultural centers, with hundreds of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. A unique feature of Nara is its deer park, where tame deer crowd around visitors in hopes of being fed cereal wafers sold by vendors. The park also features the Todaiji Temple, home of the 53-ft-tall Great Buddha statue. ☐

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