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# FUTURE PAST PERFECT: TOKYO TALES



Travellers can now enjoy more convenient flights to Japan with a new daily service to Qatar Airways' second gateway, Haneda, near central Tokyo, launching on June 18. Resident Danielle Demetriou explores a sprawling metropolis that somehow manages to fuse the bold and the futuristic with the traditional and the cultural – with surprisingly Zen results.



NEW ROUTE  
**June 18**

Words by Danielle Demetriou

It's Saturday afternoon in Tokyo. In one popular shopping district, neon flashes across the skyline, music videos blare from mega-screens, and the streets throng with teenagers, housewives, and salarymen.

Just a short walk away, however, an altogether different scene unfolds. A granny cycles slowly along a narrow street lined with traditional wooden houses, delicate willow trees, a Shinto shrine, and a generations-old *senbei* cracker shop.

Say the word '**Tokyo**', and a jumble of conflicting images are likely to spring to mind. The Japanese capital is famously one of the most dynamic, modern, and futuristic cities in the world – as embodied by its gleaming cloud-brushing architecture, innovative commercial technology, and trend-triggering street-fashion tribes.

But there is another equally seductive but perhaps less high-profile side to Tokyo: lurking in the shadows of the skyscrapers is often a charmingly slower-paced world of quiet lanes, old-school tea shops, family-run sushi restaurants, and friendly local neighbourhoods.

Despite this maelstrom of contradiction, perhaps one of Tokyo's most seductive charms is how well these different worlds slot together: not only is it a clean, virtually crime-free, and easy-to-use city that works like clockwork, it also has a surprisingly calm and harmonious atmosphere.

And common threads can be found running throughout the old and the new alike – such as a near-reverential respect for quality craftsmanship, as embodied by both impeccably designed hotels at the apex of skyscrapers and traditional wooden homes.

The eastern district of **Asakusa** is perhaps the best springboard for

experiencing both modern and traditional Tokyo: once famed for its now dwindling *geisha* population, the area still offers an atmospheric taste of old Tokyo.

Centre stage is the city's oldest Buddhist temple, **Sensōji** – a lively complex complete with a dramatic red gate, a colourful daily market, incense burning, and fortune-telling sticks.

All around the temple are networks of small lanes, lined with *kimono* shops, traditional tearooms, and *yakitori* meat-on-stick stands with plastic-crate seating on the streets.

One hidden gem is **Sometarō**, a generations-old *okonomiyaki* restaurant in an old traditional wooden house, where shoes are slipped off at the door and pancake-style meals are cooked on hot plates at low tables on *tatami*-mat floors.

But as is often the case in Tokyo, it's not just about the old: just across from the entrance of the temple is one of the city's newest design hotels – Gate Hotel Kaminarimon – complete with sultry guestrooms, a stylish French fusion restaurant, and a 14<sup>th</sup>-floor rooftop terrace.

Meanwhile, just a few doors down is another example of modern Japanese architecture – a striking wooden Jenga-esque structure created by the iconic architect Kengo Kuma and housing Asakusa's visitor's centre.

But for the ultimate taste of new Tokyo? A quick glance at the skyline from Asakusa will reveal one of the city's newest and shiniest symbols of its status as a modern, cutting-edge metropolis – **Tokyo Skytree**.





*Pedestrians at the famed crossing of Shibuya district in Tokyo, Japan. Shibuya is a fashion center and nightlife area.*



Created by the iconic architect Kengo Kuma, the Asakusa's visitor's centre.

The world's tallest broadcast tower – an elegant white latticed design stretching 634m into the clouds – embodies all things innovative, from its anti-earthquake structural engineering to the high-speed elevators that whisk visitors to the two viewing platforms offering epic 360-degree urban views.

But beneath its shiny modern façade, there are still classic examples of Japanese attention to detail, as reflected in the jaunty yellow-and-blue uniforms worn by staff as designed by the cult Tokyo brand *minä perhonen*.

The tower, located just a short walk across the **Sumida River** from Asakusa (or a hop on the train), is surrounded by a swish new complex, complete with shops, restaurants and, perhaps less predictably, an aquarium.

Back on the other side of Tokyo, another area to make a beeline for is the **Harajuku-Omotesandō** district. Say the 'H' word and dynamic images of fashion-forward teen tribes will undoubtedly spring to mind. Such an expectation will be confirmed by a quick stroll along **Harajuku's Takeshita Dōri**, a pedestrianised street lined with fashion boutiques, vintage stores, second-hand Vivienne Westwood outlets, and its famed strawberry crêpe and waffle stands.

Look out for the 'Gothic Lolitas' in platform shoes, frilly petticoats, and made-up faces, and attempt to spot what people around the world may be wearing in the future (although the brave young men currently wearing skirts over their trousers may be sporting a trend that is a fraction too avant-garde for the rest of the world).

Just around the corner, however, in true Tokyo style, another side of the city awaits: the glamorous world of **Omotesandō**, a sleek Zelkova-tree-lined boulevard which is home to a string of architect-designed fashion flagships, from Louis Vuitton to Prada.

The top end of Omotesandō is home to a clutch of the most iconic of Japan's legendary fashion designers – Comme des Garçons, Issey Miyake, and Yohji Yamamoto all have stores along the same stretch and are well worth a perusal.

Hidden gems include a string of small Arts & Science stores housed in an old apartment block nearby – the space and products alike embodying the Japanese aesthetic of beautiful heritage craftsmanship applied to minimalist, modern designs, from shoes and soaps to quality tailoring. (Don't miss its bijou café **Down the Stairs** for equally stylish tea and cake.)

Just opposite is the **Nezu Museum**. Here, a minimalist bamboo and glass walkway, created again by the architect Kengo Kuma, leads to a light-filled, modern space – famous for its expansive private collection of 7,000-plus traditional Japanese artworks relating to calligraphy, ceramics, bamboo crafts, textiles, and tea-ceremony tools.

The unashamedly modern and minimalist Japanese structure is surrounded by lushly manicured traditional gardens, complete with

modern tea rooms, offering an unexpectedly green and peaceful oasis in the heart of the city.

The Nezu is perhaps a classic example of a famed bastion of old-meets-new Tokyo – one of many such examples in a city defined by its endless contradictions and surprises alike. 🍡



#### SHOPPING (FASHION AND CRAFTS)

Resistance is often futile when it comes to retail therapy in Tokyo, a widely acknowledged urban temple to consumerism. From avant-garde fashion to minimalist crafts, a spectrum of 'Made in Japan' goods are likely to seduce visitors, and the neighbouring **Harajuku, Omotesandō**, and **Aoyama** areas are all hot spots for retail indulgence. One gem is **Sou-Sou**, perhaps Japan's version of Marimekko, an iconic Kyoto company which gives traditional Japanese textiles and products a modern makeover with its signature bold prints – from one-toed *tabi* socks, bags, and baby clothes to modern kimono-style jackets and trousers. [sousou.co.jp](http://sousou.co.jp). For an edgier avant-garde makeover? The brave should venture into the bold confines of the new Harajuku flagship of **Christian Dada**, a luxury punk label by designer Masanori Morikawa, much loved by none other than Lady Gaga. [christiandada.jp](http://christiandada.jp). For a non-fashion-related retail fix, not far away is **Hakusan**, a Japanese ceramics company from southern Kyushu famed for its delicate, simple, and minimalist porcelain, which has an affordable factory shop in Omotesandō. [1.ocn.ne.jp/~hakusan](http://1.ocn.ne.jp/~hakusan). Higher up in the same building is **Imabari**, the place to head for famously fluffy and high-quality towels crafted by specialists in **Shikoku** (Imabari towels can be found in almost every 5-star hotel bathroom in the city). [imabaritoweljapan.com](http://imabaritoweljapan.com). 🍡



### CERAMICS STUDIO SIMPLICITY

Shinichiro Ogata is the creative force behind design-and-ceramics studio Simplicity. He is a man who perfectly captures the essence of modern Japanese minimalism, with his sleekly designed products and spaces – as embodied by the *origami*-esque wrappings for traditional *wagashi* sweets and the simple-lined ceramics in his Higashiya tea stores and Higashiyama restaurant ([simplicity.co.jp](http://simplicity.co.jp)). He is also involved in the design of the hotly awaited new Andaz Hotel, which opens in Tokyo's Toranomom Hills in June ([tokyo.andaz.hyatt.com](http://tokyo.andaz.hyatt.com)).



### MINÄ PERHONEN

minä perhonen is one of Tokyo's creative gems – a Finland-inspired design company created by Akira Minagawa, whose self-proclaimed goal is to “produce clothes which do not lose their allure through the lapse of time”. The label is increasingly celebrated for its beautifully designed graphic textiles and nostalgia-tinted interior products as well as its simple, modern clothing. Its main store is in the Shirokanedai neighbourhood ([mina-perhonen.jp](http://mina-perhonen.jp)).

### REIKO SUDO

The queen of Japanese textiles is undoubtedly Reiko Sudo, the co-founder of Nuno Corporation, a company that produces beautifully crafted textiles firmly rooted in traditional Japanese techniques, wrapped up in a modern design twist. Her textiles pop up all over the place – inside the sleekly designed guestrooms of the Mandarin Oriental hotel in the Nihonbashi district, fashioned into clothing by Issey Miyake, in regular art exhibitions across the capital and, of course, in their main Tokyo store ([nuno.com](http://nuno.com)). 📍

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#### ✈️ FLIGHT FREQUENCY

Qatar Airways has daily flights from Doha to Narita, Tokyo and commences daily flights to Haneda on June 18, 2014.