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## **Tokyo on the cheap**

### **JAPAN**

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Japan's capital has a reputation as being a very expensive city.

Justin Norrie begs to differ.

I was treating a screaming hangover with a ¥490 (about \$5) bowl of gyudon (beef and rice) at a Matsuya restaurant when the news arrived.

In an email to my phone, a friend told me Tokyo had been rated the second most expensive city for expats.

If only it were true, I lamented in a moment of gross self-pity, I wouldn't have been able to afford all those ¥150 beers at my local Takadanobaba izakaya the night before.

A few months earlier I'd been in London, where I could barely find the cash for a bus fare let alone a few pints with overpaid friends in a tarty gastro pub. But somehow London had come in at third place, behind Moscow in first and my own adopted city in second.

A salaryman at my elbow pulled his face from a bowl of miso soup to concur that something was awry: "In the Bubble, yes, Japanese could drink the best imported whisky like water, but it was so expensive for tourists. Then we had deflation for a long time. Now Japan's cheap if you go to the right places."

The right places? I emailed Tokyo Free Guide, a volunteer tourism service whose workers charge only for expenses such as travel and meals, and asked for someone prepared to give up a day to help me find them.

Soon I was standing outside Harajuku station shaking hands with bubbly

38-year-old housewife Miwa Fukuda, who had travelled all the way from Yokohama, the port city one hour to the south of Tokyo.

I showed her my itinerary. She blanched: "One day for all these?"

"Yes," I said. "Plus any suggestions of your own. But please, no shrines and no temples. I can't take any more shrines or temples."

Our first stop was nearby on Meiji Dori at UT, the T-shirts-only branch of ultra-cheap and ubiquitous clothing chain Uniqlo. Around the corner, on the glittering boulevard of Omotesando, Bulgari, Chanel, Dior and other blue-chip European labels sell luxury goods to Japanese princesses. But in UT I found a vast selection of "design" T-shirts for just ¥1500 (\$16). In years gone by, I'd seen creations like these being sold by preening, po-faced staff in Paddington boutiques for more than \$100. (Sydney, nevertheless, came in at number 15 in the survey.)

As Tokyo's debilitating summertime humidity started melting our faces, Miwa made a crucial suggestion: "There's a 100 Yen store on Takeshita Dori. You can get a face towel there." Since the collapse of the Bubble Economy in the early '90s, 100 Yen stores (and their 99 Yen competition) have proliferated at a furious pace, all the while expanding their range to include everything from Hello Kitty accessories to toilet-seat covers. Inside Daiso 100 Yen store, a few metres from Harajuku's army of gothic lolitas and fake-tanned street toughs, I wandered past gardening tools, picture frames and stationery before finding what I was looking for.

It was time for a break and as fate had it we chanced by Caffe Veloce, which sells the cheapest chain-store coffee in the country. A cafe latte here costs ¥220. I ordered a round for a taste test.

After swallowing a few mouthfuls of my latte, I could honestly say to Miwa that chainstore coffee in Japan was universally awful. "Then again," I added, "I've also had ¥660 cups of swill from boutiques at Omotesando."

Beer, on the other hand, is good and extremely cheap no matter where you get it in Japan. For some reason though, many Japanese don't think it's cheap enough. "I drink a beer every day in summer," said Miwa as we left Veloce. "But I drink fake beer - happoshu (a low-malt, beer-like product). A lot of people do. It's so cheap and

light-tasting. You can get a can for ¥135."

In my emails to Miwa, I'd explained that I was keen to explore Shitamachi, otherwise known as old-town Tokyo. So, after a brief and free stop at the Suginami Animation Museum in Ogikubo - where I was able to reminisce about a childhood spent watching Japanese cartoon classics such as Galaxy Express 999 - she led me to Yanaka, a peaceful area whose old wooden homes and shops were spared the bombing raids during the war.

Here, with the powerful smell of senbei (crackers) shops and the alluring sight of wagashi (sweets) shops crowding our senses, we wandered off Yanaka-Ginza, the bustling shopping strip, into side streets dotted with antique and craft shops.

At Midoriya, an artisan was selling products made entirely from bamboo, including a flower basket constructed with 200-year-old wood, as well as beer cups, handbags and shoehorns.

Walking in the blistering afternoon sun was taking its toll, so my ever-helpful guide suggested lunch at the Matsuya department-store food court in Ginza, where I refuelled with a bento box in air-conditioned comfort. In the Bubble years it was famously (and apocryphally) said that the value of the property in Ginza was worth more than the whole of California. Given that, my lunch seemed very reasonably priced at just ¥650.

As I congratulated Miwa on her thrift, we made the 15-minute walk to Hamarikyu Gardens, a tranquil collection of immaculately landscaped fields and ponds dating back to 1654 when it was a villa for the Tokugawa Shogunate. Things have changed a little since then. The gardens are now bordered by Shiodome's towering business district. For the entrance fee of ¥300 we were able to wander past a 300-year-old pine and over to a pavilion on the water, where we sat seiza-style (with our legs tucked beneath us) on tatami mats and enjoyed powdered green tea and wagashi made from anko (sweet red bean paste) - another ¥500, making the gardens the most extravagant experience of the day. The afternoon was waning, so I decided to let Miwa free to set out on her journey home but not before asking directions to Yodobashi Camera's Akihabara store where, she informed me, a large collection of massage chairs was available for use free of charge.

Of course, Tokyo, like any international city, offers innumerable ways to blow a lot of money for a little enjoyment. But its huge selection of cheap entertainment and, in particular, affordable dining and drinking options, now make it a relatively easy city for the miserly traveller to enjoy.

The cost of my day's lengthy proceedings, including Miwa's lunch and refreshments (she insisted on paying for her train fare to and from home, and also tried to pay for her own lunch), came to ¥3250, leaving ¥750 from the budget I had set myself. Just enough for five ¥150 beers, I realised, as I set out for a massage on my way back to the local.

Where to go and what to do

Wasshoi This cheap and cheerful izakaya, on Meiji Dori about eight minutes' walk from Takadanobaba station, serves ¥150 beers and sticks of grilled vegetables and meat starting from ¥80. 2F, 1-3-13

Takadanobaba

Gifuya A very cheap diner near the bottom of Shomben Yokochō (Piss Alley), about five minutes' walk from the west exit at Shinjuku station. The food, which is mostly Chinese, includes large bowls of ramen for ¥420 and plates of excellent gyoza for ¥350. 1-2-1

Nishi-Shinjuku

Alternatively try any of the hundreds of outlets for gyudon chains Matsuya, Yoshinoya, Naka-u or Sukiya. Beef bowls start at about ¥300. Uniqlo Clothes are a bargain at this budget chain store. The UT branch is on Meiji Dori at 6-10-8 Jingumae, about 100 metres from the crossing with Omotesando Dori.

Daiso 100 Yen store Tokyo's best 100 Yen store is a four-storey wonderland that stocks everything from socks to gardening accessories. Village 107, 1-19-24 Jingu-mae.

Suginami Animation Museum Visitors can look at original animation artwork for classic Japanese cartoons such as Galaxy Express 999 and Captain Harlock free of charge. The museum also has a library of anime episodes, many of which have English subtitles.

3-29-5 Kamiogi To get to Yanaka, take a train to Nippori station, go out the north/west exit, turn left at street level and head straight

over the hill.

Matsuya department store The food court on the basement floor is stocked with an impressive selection of bento boxes (starting at about ¥650), wagashi and other foods. 3-6-1 Ginza, opposite the giant Apple Store, which has free internet on level 4.

Hamarikyu Gardens Open from 9am to 5pm (last entry 4.30), they are a three-minute walk from Shiodome station (Oedo line) or a seven-minute walk from Tsukiji-Shijo station (Oedo line) and Shimbashi station (Ginza, Asakusa and JR lines).

Yodobashi Camera 1-1 Kanda.

Hotel New Koyo "Economy backpackers" accommodation. It offers singles for ¥2500. 2-26-13 Nihonzutsumi. 03 3873 0343.

Khaosan Tokyo This backpacker hostel chain has dormitory beds for ¥2000. [www.khaosan-tokyo.com](http://www.khaosan-tokyo.com)

Tokyo Free Guide This service provides English-speaking guides who specialise in different sightseeing attractions ([www.tokyofreeguide.com](http://www.tokyofreeguide.com)). The Japan National Tourist Organisation website ([www.jnto.org.au](http://www.jnto.org.au)) also has details about Goodwill Guides, another free service.