

*Winning entry for British Airways Magazine New Talent Competition*

## **Tokyo: The Floating World**

Tokyo is overhead and underground. It's an electric monster - louder and crazier than Godzilla, always mutating, ready to sink back into the sea.

You could spend a lifetime here and never get beyond Tokyo Station.

I've been here two months and it feels like I've only scratched the surface.

Karaoke palaces and Pachinko parades roar as a stream of salarymen and students drift in and out, in various stages of drunken merriment.

Tourists meander through Otemachi Station struggling to read the signs and fighting with ticket machines.

But Tokyo is also a place of beauty, of convenience.

Packed into towerblocks overhead is every product or service you could ever imagine and some you couldn't: gourmet sweet shops, aquariums, cinemas, bathhouses, cat cafes, dance studios, and bars serving oceans of beer and entire forests of grilled animals.

If you get hungry or thirsty in Tokyo just keep riding the escalator until you find what you're looking for.

As it gets dark the male hosts flit in and out of the shadows around Shibuya, enticing girls into their clubs with flattery and soulful questions about blood types and star signs.

They sneak outside between dates sometimes to check their hair and knock back Ukon no Chikara, a fix all pre-hangover cure, before returning to the women who pay for their company.

Around the corner otaku guys sit in maid cafes, enjoying the cutesy attention from doting, robotic girls as they eat omelettes with rice and drink iced coffee.

Young couples in Electric Town flirt over arcade games, mouthing along to famous anime songs on Taiko drum machines and passionately gunning down zombies and aliens.

The Lolitas shriek as they totter along Shinjuku in their heels. They have strange moments of otherworldliness that can make me gawp; sometimes I flinch when I spot one wearing glowing red contacts.

One evening I walked with a group of friends out along the river near our apartment blocks and we followed the smell of beer and yakitori until we stumbled on a summer matsuri, with thudding drums and entire generations of Japanese families dancing and performing on an outdoor stage.

The floating world is still doing business long after the trains stop running - Yoyogi Park bustles as people pour out of clubs and sit around drinking Chu Hai and nattering in the balmy night air.

Salarymen start to arrive on the early morning trains, convenience store staff smoke outside, and cafes serve steaming coffee alongside breakfast sets that are laid out with architectural precision.

And as the light returns Tokyo wakes up all over again.