

# ONCE UPON A TIME IN



Japan's capital is not all bright lights and future-forward. **Jenny Hewett** travels to the city with her parents in tow and finds that the beauty of Tokyo's landscape is flush with ripples of its past.

FROM LEFT: ELAINE LI; TOMOOKI KENGAKU/COURTESY OF TRUNK



Trunk House dining  
with garden view.  
Opposite: Tour guide  
Noriko Nagura.





**I'M IN SENSORY OVERLOAD**, standing in a sea of color. Vivid pops of orange, red, turquoise and gold explode into my periphery like starbursts. It's neon Tokyo—but not how many of us know it. Unlike the in-your-face irreverence of modern Shinjuku and Shibuya, this vibrant room in the neighborhood of Yushima is a meditation on ancient Japan. Thousands of sheets of delicate origami paper are neatly arranged in vertical Technicolor rows along the walls around me. Those that have been given identities now sit on the display shelf, folded into samurai, kangaroos, elephants and frogs. “It’s good exercise for my brain,” says 74-year-old Kazuo Kobayashi, his frost-white hair brushed back from his kind, lived-in, bespectacled face.

Leaning over his desk, Kobayashi-san’s fingers work in a slow and measured flow as he chats animatedly, tucking the canvas into shape. He rarely glances down; like the route he takes from home to this building each day, his craft has become second nature. Within moments my eyes have shifted to the finished work, orange in some folds and gold in others. “I felt like making a dragon because I met a couple from Poland this morning and I remembered that I saw a dragon statue when I was there many years ago,” he says, a little twinkle in his eye.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TOMOOKI KENGAU/COURTESY OF TRUNK; JENNY HEWETT; TOMOOKI KENGAU/COURTESY OF TRUNK; JENNY HEWETT (2)



▲ Kobayashi-san has been an origami sensei for 44 years; a dragon that reminds him of Poland.



Kobayashi-san is a fourth-generation origami master, having reached sensei level 44 years ago. His craft, which dates back to the sixth century, has been passed down from his forefathers, and origami-loving fans flock to see his demonstrations at Yushima’s international origami center, Ochanomizu Origami Kaikan.

Like Kobayashi-san, my passion, too, has been inherited. The daughter of a diplomat, I learned to traipse the world, collecting cultures, long before I could drive a car. Experiencing new places together is one of my family’s most treasured pastimes. But as my parents get older, our ancestral hand-me-down begins to take on even more meaning. So it seems fitting that my parents and I are sitting here side-by-side in Tokyo in an institution that family built. Kobayashi-san is just as surprised as we are when he finishes folding his next piece and hands it to my mum. Her face lights up: an origami emerald ring, almost an exact replica of the engagement piece she has been wearing for 45 years.

You’d expect to stumble upon such a time capsule of ancient Japan in Kyoto. Yet as I soon discover, Tokyo, too, retains strong currents of tradition. I’ve always thought that one of the most admirable qualities of Japanese culture is that, despite how busy people are, they put time and effort into nurturing their passions. And I find

◀ Karaoke classics await late nighters in Trunk House’s neon disco.

▲ The Hewett family, with chef Masa and butler Lee.



various nuances of this in the people we meet, from our butler Mori, who bonds with my Dad over their shared love of camping, to our tour guide Noriko, who achieves more in a weekend than I do in a year: handmade cat crafts, paintings, baked tarts and French cooking.

My parents and I have come to Tokyo to seek out the historic soul of the city. But what we find is multi-generational parallels that point back to purpose. I do wonder if, along with the country’s wealth and hyper-organization, it’s these deep-rooted, cultural heirlooms that led to Tokyo being picked as the first Asian city to host the Summer Olympics twice. The games, originally scheduled for this summer, now postponed to at least 2021, last took place here in 1964, when they were the first to reach a worldwide audience, broadcast globally on live TV via communication satellites (without having to physically fly the taped recordings around the world). This technological turning point was fitting for a country whose modern identity is tied to innovation. A lot has changed. But plenty hasn’t.

Founded as a *washi* paper-dyeing factory by Kazuo’s great-great-grandfather, Ochanomizu Origami Kaikan hosts paper-folding workshops and sells crafts and books, most of which Kobayashi-san has authored. Origami was once strictly considered a luxury for ceremonial purposes; it wasn’t until the Edo Period, spanning 1603 to 1868 when the arts flourished in Japan, that it began to emerge as a recreational activity. The factory runs as it always has on the fourth floor of this building (original, high-quality origami paper is still made and sold on



◀ With a little luck, you’ll spot a geisha wandering the thoroughfare outside Trunk House.





▲ Contemporary art pays homage to Trunk House's past incarnation as a geisha home.

► Drift off on a cloud in the lone bedroom of Trunk House.

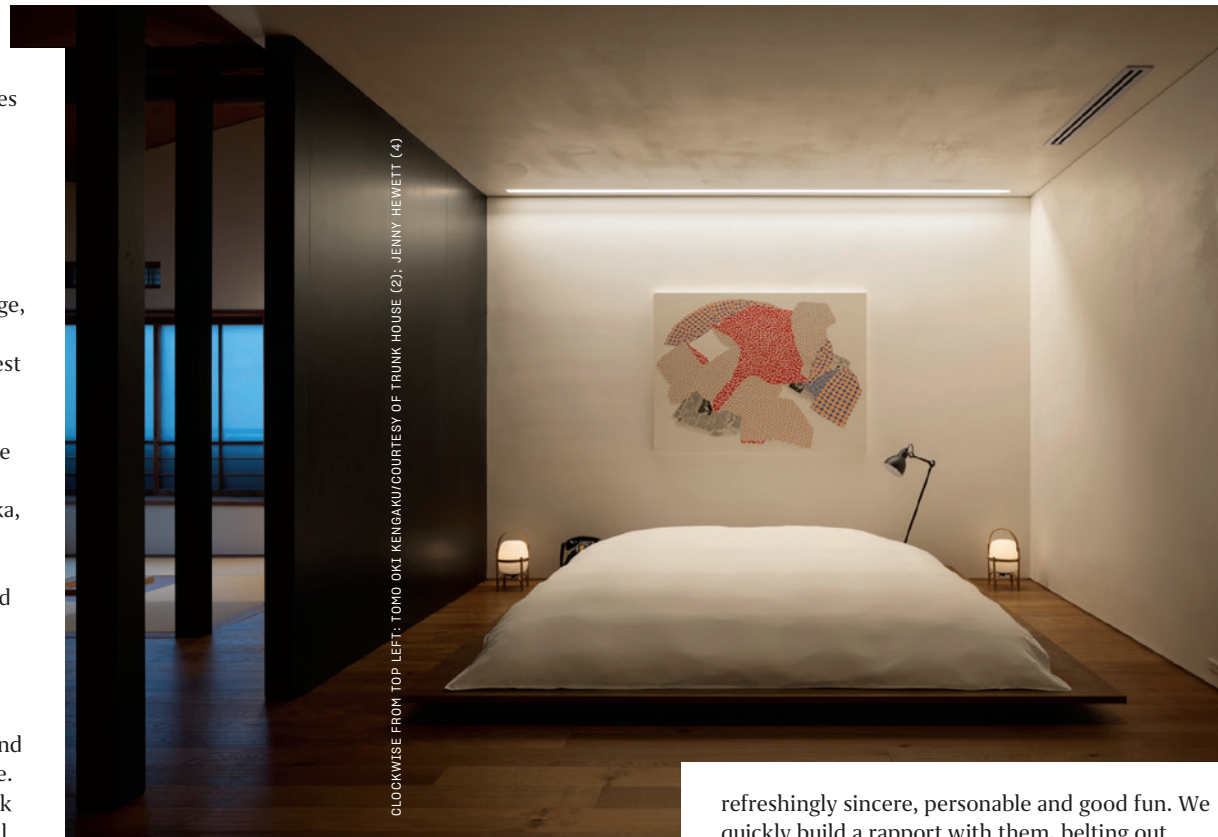
the premises) and visitor tours reveal the intricacies behind a dyeing process that has been around for more than 150 years.

“If you're lucky, you can see geisha walking down the street,” says Haruka Osaka, communications manager of the luxury one-room stay Trunk House, as she slides open the large, screen window and motions to the cobblestoned alleyway below. “We have 17 in this area. The oldest geisha here is 81 and the youngest is 18,” she says. “Palindromic geisha,” jokes my dad, a total math geek, who eventually persuades me to use that line in this story.

Tucked in a maze of narrow lanes in Kagurazaka, Tokyo's original geisha district now hidden in the heart of the urban sprawl, Trunk House is a rare boutique accommodation in a city that's inundated with skyscraping hotels. It's a 70-year-old former geisha house reimagined for modern indulgences. I'd never thought I needed a private disco room until I danced across this one's mini light-up floor.

Still, this one-of-a-kind bolt-hole, Tokyo's second Design Hotel, is an homage to the way things were. Teaming up with design studio Tripster, The Trunk Group preserved many of the townhouse's original features, including a pine tree and stone *genkan* entrance, and filled it with contemporary art, a large *senjo*-inspired Japanese cypress bath, butlers and a culinary team. The sleeping quarters are on the upper level, occupying what was originally a stage and training area. And with ample space for an extra single futon, our grown-up family of three doesn't feel crowded at all.

“This neighborhood is very traditional. We call it Little Kyoto,” says our 30-something butler, Mori, as he walks us around the area later that afternoon, pointing out traditional *izakaya* and the 50-year-old public bathhouse, Atami-yu. “We call our street ‘Hide-and-Seek Alley,’ because it's easy to get lost,” he smiles. Dressed in head-to-toe black with cloven-toed footwear (*tabi*) and an elegant uniform inspired by Japanese working clothes (*samue*), Mori has a slight British accent, having studied in London, and both he and his butler colleague, Lee, who was born in Japan to Korean parents, are



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TOMO OKI KENAKU/COURTESY OF TRUNK HOUSE (2); JENNY HEWETT (4)



◀ Fushikino revels in sake as much as the Michelin-starred fare they pair it with.

► Trunk House breakfast is more like edible bingo, and served alongside roasted tea.

refreshingly sincere, personable and good fun. We quickly build a rapport with them, belting out karaoke ballads in our neon-pink disco until 2 a.m.

Centuries ago, the geisha training here would have been doing something similar, albeit with more grace and cultural finesse. During the Edo Period, Kagurazaka thrived as an entertainment area due to its proximity to what was once the Edo Castle, which is now part of the Imperial Palace. It's one of the only surviving geisha districts in Tokyo, but it's also a microcosm of French culture thanks to the expat community that has settled here since World War II. Shinto shrines and boutiques selling cherry-blossom bonsai sit alongside French-language schools, European cafés, boulangeries and cheese shops, dog-grooming boutiques and Michelin-starred restaurants.

So, the area is awash in French wine, but being in Tokyo is, of course, a great opportunity to plunge into a complex array of sakes. Yoshio Aramaki and Yusuke Miyashita, head chef and owner, respectively, of one-Michelin-starred Fushikino, have dedicated their restaurant to this Japanese cultural treasure. Fermented rice wine has been made in Japan for at least 1,500 years and this fine-diner, which has held its star for close to a decade, does an elegant job of showcasing it, going so far as to provide a map to help diners learn more about where the sake comes from and how it's rated.

There are no menus and the sit-up, cedar counter seats just 11 diners who choose from seven or nine seasonal courses, which are paired with hot and cold sake from different prefectures, some of

► Chef Tomo, one of your two private chefs at Trunk House.

▼ Hide-and-Seek alley in the Kagurazaka district.



which have been combined together to create a unique flavor profile. Ingeniously, each pairing is served in a different ceramic vessel and when I visited, the little works of drinkable art accompanied small, Kyoto-style *kaiseki* dishes of red bream and squid sashimi with wasabi leaves, Kyoto-style sushi and mackerel with Chinese cabbage.

Booking ahead is advised for tables at Tokyo's awarded eats. But some of the best experiences in Kagurazaka fly under the radar. The culinary team at Trunk House don't boast a star, but they should.

“My name is Tomo. Tomorrow morning I serve you breakfast,” jokes inked-up assistant chef Tomo as our 10-course *omakase* dinner comes to a jovial close later that evening. Tomo is the Michelin-trained right-hand man of Trunk House's Hiroshima-born head chef Masa. Together they work the small kitchen, leading us on an intimate culinary adventure, preparing and plating each of the dishes on our table, right before our eyes.





▼  
Mr. Ogami's rice cracker stall.

▼  
Craft-beer flights of fancy at Yanaka Beer Hall.



▼  
Handle with care at Gallery Okubo.



JENNY HEWETT (6)

Uncomfortable laughter erupts when the barbecued soft-shell turtle appears, artistically, and somewhat confrontingly, presented in its shell. But with only a squeeze of lime for seasoning, it's surprisingly tasty. So much so that it almost overshadows the duck, aged in chestnut soy for a full two months, finely sliced and served *tataki*-style, and even the *tonkatsu*-style Kobe beef that really is as soft as butter. It's one of the more memorable dining experiences of my life, not in the least because of the free-flowing drinks and subsequent banter. One minute I'm eating eel Parmentier, the next thing I know, my dad is in the kitchen—almost unthinkable in Japan—with chef Masa giving a demo on sharpening knives.

Kindness is priceless in Tokyo and it rarely comes with expectation. *Omotenashi* translates to hospitality, and more specifically, the above-and-beyond generosity for which the Japanese are renowned. “In most antique shops you can't touch, but mine you can,” says Atsuko Okubo, dressed in a kimono, as she welcomes us into her family's tearoom in Yanaka the next day. Her father is a fourth-generation antiques collector and they offer tea ceremonies on the second level of their Gallery Okubo tea-ceremony shop.

“Your Granny I used to have one of these Noritake China dinner sets,” my mum says nostalgically as she peers into a glass cabinet. There's no hard sell, simply an offer to view their collection, which they graciously share with guests. You are invited to select an antique cup to sip from—the oldest has a vintage of 150 years. “Please

don't break anything,” our guide, Noriko Nagura, says gingerly. I stand as still as I can.

But to experience the true essence of this city and how it once lived, don't stop at tea. Affectionately known as Temple Town, Yanaka is one of the city's last remnants of old Tokyo. It miraculously avoided a series of dire events in the 20th century and many original houses and temples still remain. “Yanaka is famous because it survived the three crises,” Noriko says. “The Great Earthquake of 1923, the bombings of World War II, and the Bubble Period in the 1980s.” To better understand the history of Tokyo, and how it rebuilt from such natural and manmade devastation, visit the Edo-Tokyo Museum at nearby Ryogoku.

The quiet residential streets are a tapestry of old and new: contemporary cafés, public bathhouse turned art gallery SCAI, local fishmongers, tatami art, paper boutiques, specialty-food stalls, Mr. Ogami's rice-cracker shop, and Yanaka Beer Hall, which brews craft beer using water from Mount Fuji.

Later we stroll under an archway of gnarled trees in Yanaka Cemetery that will soon flower with cherry blossoms. It's a gentle reminder that change is upon us. We can't see the complex network of roots entangled underground, but the trees are a fitting metaphor for this city and our shared experience of those in it. Much like the people we have met on this heart-warming trip to Tokyo, my own ancestors have influenced who I am and what I do. Travel is at the root of my family's identity. But as the years have passed, our relationship has evolved. The world is my office. And now my parents get to visit me in it. ➤

▼  
Michelin-starred beauty at Fushikino.



## The Details

### Stay Trunk House

Contemporary one-room stay in Tokyo's original geisha district with private disco, culinary team and butlers. [trunk-house.com/en/](http://trunk-house.com/en/); doubles from ¥500,000 per night.

### Hoshinoya Tokyo

Luxury urban *ryokan* set in a skyscraper with a rooftop *onsen*, daily tea ceremonies and a fine-diner downstairs. [hoshinoya.com/tokyo/en/](http://hoshinoya.com/tokyo/en/); doubles from ¥189,284.

### Eat + Drink

**Fushikino** Kyoto-inspired tasting menus of either seven or nine courses with sake pairings. [fushikino.com/en/](http://fushikino.com/en/); dinner for two from ¥24,000.

**Yanaka Beer Hall** Casual eatery serving *izakaya*-style bar snacks and craft-beer flights; 81-3/5834-2381; lunch for two from ¥3,000.

### Konjiki Hototogisu

One of the latest Tokyo ramen venues to attain Michelin's Bib Gourmand status. Prepare to queue. 81-3/3373-4508; lunch for two from ¥2,000.

### Do Ochanomizu Origami

**Kaikan** Original *washi* paper factory and origami center with souvenirs and classes. 81-3/3811-4025; classes from ¥1,000.

**Gallery Okubo** Antiques store and gallery offering unique tea ceremonies. [gallery-okubo.tokyo](http://gallery-okubo.tokyo); tea ceremonies from ¥1,100.

### Guide

**Noriko Nagura** English-speaking tour guide with extensive knowledge of Tokyo and its history. 81-80/7827-9466, [Noriko\\_Nagura@hotmail.com](mailto:Noriko_Nagura@hotmail.com); tours from ¥26,000 for four hours. — J.H.

## What's New

**Peek your head out of the history books and visit these modern additions to Tokyo, too.**

**Japan Olympic Museum** Learn about the 120-year history of the world's greatest sporting event. [japan-olympicmuseum.jp/en/](http://japan-olympicmuseum.jp/en/); admission ¥500.

**Shibuya Scramble Square** Head to rooftop observation deck Shibuya Sky to get a bird's-eye view of the most iconic pedestrian crossing in the world. [shibuya-scramble-square.com](http://shibuya-scramble-square.com); admission ¥2,000.

**Mori Building Digital Art Museum** **Epson teamLab Borderless** Along with permanent exhibitions, this psychedelic digital art museum has seasonal artworks that are showed for a short time only. Check the website for updates. [borderless.teamlab.art](http://borderless.teamlab.art); admission ¥3,200.