

# HELLO,

Shopping in Tokyo, where street corners double as catwalks and the color-clashing individuality in a kind of live theater,

# City

daring flaunt their is not for the fainthearted. Or fans of the Gap.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

I WAS HEADED TO TOKYO, and I wanted Charlotte's umbrella. You know the one: clear, plastic and toted around by the always-cool Scarlett Johansson in the film *Lost in Translation*. I'd hunted around for them in Washington only to find pint-sized versions that barely covered my head, and were covered with ladybugs. So, on my long eastbound flight, I made my Tokyo to-do list: *Watch sumo; go to a tuna auction; buy umbrella.*



I didn't know much about this Japanese city of 12 million, but I knew I was headed to a place on the cutting edge of cool, where pop culture is served up as universally as white rice and green tea. Japanese influences are found worldwide, in music videos, movies and video games, and on the catwalk. So I figured see-through umbrellas were just this city's über-hip answer to foul weather, and I imagined that before long, I'd be one of the cool kids.

In fact, Tokyo is so hot when it comes to reinterpreting global fashion that if you are an American or European retailer, hiring fashion consultant Loic Bizel to take

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Tokyo's colorful—and sometimes clear—city life.

you on the Tokyo Fashion Tour ([www.tokyofashiontour.com](http://www.tokyofashiontour.com)) is a no-brainer. The nine-hour, \$600–\$700 private tour covers Tokyo's trendiest shops, blocks, styles, concepts and products. This was one guy who I wanted to meet, and I hoped that he'd have time to take me to a boutique so hip and underground that it hadn't yet been discovered by local fashion gurus.

"Meet me tomorrow at the corner of Omotesando and Meiji streets, in front of the Gap," he told me over the phone. The Gap? I was crestfallen. Still, the next day I went to Harajuku and sat on the steps of the three-floor chain that hogged what must be one of the world's most desirable—and expensive—pieces of commercial real estate. But the fashion show in front of the store was worth the price of admission. I eyed a woman wearing tight jeans under a flowing skirt with yellow sneakers and a guy in camouflage pants, a brown velvet blazer and pink Chuck Taylors. I saw purple glitter stilettos with khaki cargo shorts, ripped jeans with four-inch

platform shoes, the grunge look combined with *Little House on the Prairie* sweetness, the school-girl look on girls long out of school, vintage sportswear, berets next to top hats and everything so helter-skelter and fabulous that there seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the getups. And I saw *nobody* walk into the Gap.

"See, the Gap is empty," said Bizel, as he walked up to me, shaking my hand. "They're all here." He pointed across the street to **Laforet** ([www.laforet.ne.jp](http://www.laforet.ne.jp)), a collection of trendy Japanese boutiques that cater to 18- to 24-year-olds. We walked through the stores and parked ourselves at a coffee shop.

"People like to create their own style," Bizel said, as we sat down and he lit up a cigarette. "They are their own fashion designers, and they look for little details to



set themselves apart. They don't want the Gap, where everyone looks the same at the end of the day." Bizel, a Frenchman who arrived on the scene a decade ago, started his consulting business in 2001. His clients include companies such as Coach, Esprit, Quicksilver, Timberland and H&M—they all want to know what the small Japanese boutiques are doing. "They used to go to Paris or London," he said, "but they realize Japan is the best place for fresh ideas."

Here's how Bizel explains the Tokyo street fashion phenomenon: Most Japanese don't have choices when it comes to clothing. School-age kids and office workers wear uniforms (rush hour on the subway looks like one giant business suit). For the most part, the only time people can express

themselves through fashion is the period between school and office life—roughly ages 15 to 25. And since living quarters are generally too small for much decorating or entertaining, you get a lot of teens and 20-somethings who decorate ... themselves.

"All the boys and girls become their own stylist," Bizel explained. "They're influenced by TV and music, but the way they put it together is all their own." That's how you get the mishmash styles: layering, vintage, nautical, striped, metallic, camouflaged, messenger bags, man bags and, always, dangling cell phone charms.

The next day I met Gentaro Noda, a young Japanese designer who has a men's line called *Iliad*—sort of Tokyo-casual mixed with traditional tailored British touches such as piping and epaulettes. "It's all mixed up," he told me, showing off one of his army-style jackets with rabbit fur accents. "Young people will use anything to create originality." Noda experiments with textiles and designs, but said in the



MELANIE KAPLAN

end that clothes are just "fabric made into funny shapes. It's when people wear it that it becomes fashion."

My admittedly fashion-challenged friend Brandon and I spent a couple days walking around **Harajuku** and **Shibuya** (lingering on narrow Takeshita-dori Street), where youth culture—over the top and spectacular—trumps all. Some teens walked the streets to be seen and photographed, while others flitted from one tiny store to the next, accumulating just the right pieces for their ensembles. One of the most talked-about new shopping areas is **Omotesando Hills** ([www.omotesandohills.com](http://www.omotesandohills.com)), an upscale American-looking mall just a few blocks from Harajuku. Shops include Heddie Lovu, Yves Saint Laurent and Dolce & Gabbana, where you can buy a ripped jean skirt the size of a laptop for the price of one night at the luxe Conrad Hotel.

BRANDON HUFF (3)

## WHERE TO STAY

With the touch of a button, open the curtains, heat the toilet seat or boil water for tea. The rooms at the **Conrad Tokyo** (1-9-1 Higashi-Shinbashi, Minato-Ku; 81-3-6388-8000; [www.conradtokyo.co.jp](http://www.conradtokyo.co.jp); standard/City Room ¥59,000/\$504), which opened last year, are so much fun—and so beautifully and minimally decorated—you won't want to leave.

Enjoy one of the largest hotel rooms in Tokyo and spectacular views at the new **Mandarin Oriental Tokyo in Ginza** (2-1-1 Nihonbashi Muromachi, Chuo-ku; 81-3-3270-8800; [www.mandarinoriental.com/tokyo](http://www.mandarinoriental.com/tokyo); standard double/Deluxe Room ¥62,000/\$530). Super high-tech, with 45-inch LCD TVs in the bedroom and smaller versions above the bathtub, the rooms are also filled with treats to soothe your soul: a yoga mat, plush Italian robe and aromatic bath salts.

If you're saving for your shopping spree, go budget on your lodging at the family-run **Sawanoya Ryokan Inn** (2-3-11 Yanaka, Taito-Ku; 81-3-3822-2251; [www.sawanoya.com](http://www.sawanoya.com); standard double with private bath ¥9,870/\$84, plus Japanese breakfast for ¥945/\$8), which has become a popular overnight spot for American visitors. Most rooms share a communal bathroom, and all rooms have a TV, towels and a kimono.



The Conrad Hotel

## GETTING AROUND

Narita International Airport is about 37 miles from downtown Tokyo, and a taxi will put you back about ¥25,000 (\$214). Save your cash for shopping and take the Airport Limousine bus for ¥2,900 (\$25; [www.limousinebus.co.jp](http://www.limousinebus.co.jp)), which takes you and your luggage nonstop to the Tokyo City Air Terminal and directly to some hotels (allow two hours during rush hour). In town, the subway is safe, mind-bogglingly clean, affordable, convenient and wonderfully organized by color and numbers. The system has 274 stations on 12 lines and runs until midnight. Maps and announcements are in English. Try to avoid rush hours and consider yourself lucky if you find a seat at any time of day. Tokyo buses are less user-friendly for foreigners because they don't have English announcements. Taxis—which are clean and easy to hail—are available when they display a red light in the lower corner of the windshield. Enter via the back left door and expect to pay a base fare of ¥660 (\$5.50). Tipping isn't expected (in taxis or elsewhere), unless the service is exceptional. **A note on Yen:** For the latest conversion rates, check out [www.xe.com](http://www.xe.com).

## JAPANESE EATS: FAST & FRESH

Thank heaven for 7-11. Actually, they were **AM/PM** stores, but on several occasions, hungry, tired and loath to once again face an all-Japanese menu at a traditional restaurant (and the challenge of communicating with a server), we popped into a convenience store and picked up some sushi from the refrigerated section. When the cashier asked if we wanted chopsticks, we nodded our heads "hai" and were eating fresh, bargain sushi within minutes. For sit-down fast food, try *kaiten*-sushi, or conveyor belt sushi, where tiny plates circle past patrons. Plates might hold a slice of watermelon, a sushi roll or a cupcake, each priced at ¥100, or just under a dollar. Servers count the empty plates for your grand total. There are good restaurants in many department stores, so you don't have to break long from shopping. And don't underestimate the ramen, available at most traditional restaurants and noodle stands. On the street, be sure to try *daifuku* (dumplings filled with a paste of sugar and beans) for dessert.

Our favorite meal was at **Ginza Rin Sushi** (1-6-6 Ginza, Chuo-ku; 03-3538-7775) in a neighborhood that is known for its high-end shopping (for the over-40 set), art galleries and twinkling lights. Service was impeccable, and the sushi (which set a new standard of fresh) was garnished with micro-tomatoes (pea-sized), still on the vine.

Our biggest cuisine-related thrill was the **Tsukiji Fish Market**—the largest fish market in the city, if not the world. Tsukiji is a 10-minute walk from the Conrad, and the earlier you get there, the better (anytime between 5:30 and 9 a.m., you will find wholesalers in their stalls and forklifts zipping around with styrofoam crates of eel or octopus). The tuna auction is the main attraction. Think of it as the Wall Street of tuna, with yelling, cowbell-ringing and chain-smoking. You can watch the buyers walk around and examine the huge fish with sharp tools and flashlights before they bid on them.



Fashion on parade.

Next stop was **Shibuya 109** ([www.shibuya109.jp](http://www.shibuya109.jp)), which Brandon wisely skipped: it's girl-land. The tall cylindrical building is a vertical mall with more than 100 boutiques and is the quintessential hub of girly fashion. I made my way around hundreds of 15- to 22-year-old girls, dressed in micro-minis, sexy knee socks, stilettos and dangly earrings. Shops were filled with short-shorts and punky accessories, sequined tank tops, cowgirl shirts, sparkly shoes and more leg warmers than I'd seen since the '80s. The bubbly store employees—who looked just like the shoppers—yelled over the loud, clubby music about sales and new items. One girl walked in front of her store holding a backless shirt, yelling, "Sexy! Sexy!"

Once Brandon and I had a grasp of Tokyo street fashion, we decided to go shopping—but not for clothes. We headed to the **Akihabara** district, fondly known as Akiba, to outfit ourselves with electronics and accessories. The district is reputedly the largest area of electronic appliances and devices in Tokyo, and it's also teeming with Internet cafes and 100-yen stores.

Our peppy guide (free, English-speaking, volunteer guides can be arranged through



[bashi.com](http://www.bashi.com)). They claim to have 600,000 items—from amps to air conditioners, metronomes to memory sticks—but the massive refrigerated battery section alone was enough to impress me.

For a little comic relief after serious electronics shopping, we stopped by the playful **Tokyo Anime Center** ([www.animecenter.jp](http://www.animecenter.jp)), a short walk from Yodobashi. The center opened in March and provides the latest on Japanese animation, with a gallery, recording studio and 3-D theater.

After several days of shopping as spectator sport, I'd passed up anime toilet paper and fringed suede boots—and I still didn't have my umbrella. I was convinced that I must own one of these ubiquitous accessories. (We couldn't even get away from them at a rain-free baseball game. When the Swallows hit a homer, fans pulled out miniature clear umbrellas, opening and closing them as they cheered.) Halfway through our trip, Brandon bought me one



for under \$3. I was thrilled. I took it out in the morning just hoping it would rain and when it did, I joined the throngs of people toting them. In a place where everyone tried to make their own fashion and stand out, I was delighted to fit in with the crowd.

But I still wasn't clear on the clear plastic. When I returned home, I decided, once and for all, to get to the bottom of this umbrella craze. If anyone could understand their appeal, the Tokyo fashion guru would. I e-mailed Bazel. "Why are they so popular?"

"Every Westerner thinks they are cool," he responded. He explained their role in Japan, and I cringed as I scanned his e-mail. Priced between ¥150 and ¥500, clear umbrellas are sold at convenience stores for people who forgot their regular raingear. "They are actually not fashion items," he wrote, "just disposable ones." I thought about the rainy days in Tokyo when I'd look up and marvel at the canopy of clear plastic overhead, and I laughed out loud at my ignorance. But I was still a fan. Disposable, *humph!* I proudly hung the umbrella on a hook in my hallway and waited for it to rain. ☺

BRANDON HUFF (4)

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## GETTING THERE

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the Systemized Goodwill Guide Program) told us that the area used to attract mostly *otaku*, or geeks, but thanks to the popularity of a geek-turned-hero tale (that was adapted for a TV series, movie and *manga*, Japanese comic books), the perception of the computer geek has changed. More women and families now shop in Akiba, at mass-appeal stores such as the gigantic, nine-story **Yodobashi Camera** ([WASHINGTON FLYER 28 NOVEMBER | DECEMBER 2006](http://www.yodo</a></p></div>
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