

CONTEXT TOKYO: IN CONTEXT

Traveling to Tokyo "in Context" means embracing the soul of the city beyond its well-trodden paths. It's about diving into the heart of Tokyo, where every corner tells a story, every meal is a chapter in a long, flavorful history, and the true essence of the city is not just seen but felt.

At Context Travel, we guide you to the core of Tokyo, shining a light on hidden histories and local narratives, and connecting you with experiences that make the city eternally memorable. These recommendations are carefully curated by Context experts to bring you closer to the authentic spirit of Tokyo, celebrating its lesser-known treasures and profound cultural richness.

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Meet Your Context Guides

Rafael Balboa ARCHITECT



Rafael is currently a correspondent for an Italian architecture magazine based in Japan and has lived in Tokyo for over 18 years. He received his Master's degree and PhD from the University of Tokyo under the guidance of Prof. Kengo Kuma. He is currently a Senior Guest Researcher at The University of Tokyo and guest researcher at Keio University. Member of the JIA (Japan Institute of Architects), he co-founded his architecture and urban design practice STUDIO WASABI in 2013. In 2017 he became Director of Casa Nano, an art residency in Tokyo part of Casa Wabi Foundation. An avid toy collector, he has a keen interest in the ludic-cultural aspects between people and their cities.

"Tokyo is very complex. It's a heterogeneous city and cannot be reduced to one place. I personally recommend seeing the city from the Tokyo Tower; it's higher than the Eiffel Tower and has a very '60s feel. And seeing the city from the water is also a very unique experience."

Jay Ferris LOCAL GUIDE



Jay received a Master's degree in Urban Planning from the University of Tokyo where he focused his research on the conservation of historic spaces and landscapes with a particular focus on food production and the agricultural families and communities in and around the city. Having been a resident of both rural and urban Japan, Jay has an appreciation for the visible transformation of the country's settled environments. He enjoys sharing information about its hidden history, constant development and endless layers.

"If you find you're getting bored, tired, or overwhelmed in Tokyo, let yourself explore off the main streets. And give yourself plenty of time in the city. In many ways, Tokyo can be thought of as just another big city, but all big cities have something hidden. You just have to know where to look. And Tokyo has a lot of that."

Anna Maude ART HISTORIAN



Anna earned her BA and MST from Oxford University. She has over 7 years experience working for major national museums around the world, including the British Museum and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Since moving to Tokyo, Anna has become a freelance writer, lecturer and cultural researcher. Her work has included providing expert feedback for the Japan Cultural Institute and Japan Tourist Association on a wide range of cultural sites across Japan. She has particular expertise in the field of prints and drawings, a subject on which she has published numerous academic articles and lectured at the California College of the Arts and the Tokyo University of the Arts. She is continually fascinated by the ever-changing urban landscape of Tokyo and the relationship between old and new in the Japanese aesthetic.

"A lot of travelers like to feel like they've discovered something for themselves rather than just going and following a list of tips or checking the box of top venues. Tokyo is one of those places where you're going to discover things you can be really proud of and you'll remember for a long time."

BITES OF TOKYO

Discover mouthwatering dishes in Tokyo and the best places to savor them

Sampota Cafe Nonbiriya

Stop in for a new take on some traditional dishes, and enjoy a rotating selection of sake or indulge in a coffee or beer.

[Google Maps →](#)

“A younger Japanese couple run this restaurant, and they have really infused the building with a lot of charm and history. It's incredibly charming. They have all sorts of different sakes, which are always changing, and they do a really nice take on omurice, a classic Japanese dish. You can get it anywhere, but here it's more of a risotto style rice with tomato and squid ink.”

- Anna, Art Historian

Nakame no Teppen Honten

This izakaya hides behind a small door in the back of a building. Find it, and you'll be treated to sizzling seasonal dishes and a vibrant atmosphere

[Google Maps →](#)

“You'll want to make a reservation here. The entrance is at the end of an alley, through a small door, but once you find it, the atmosphere is energetic and the food is delicious. If you like seafood, be sure to try the mackerel.”

- Anna, Art Historian

Department Store Food Floors

Tokyo's department stores are a true destination for a delicious culinary experience. Don't be fooled, these aren't a typical food court experience.

“When you don't know where to go, head to the top of a department store. There are usually a collection of restaurants up there and often a rooftop garden area where you can relax and get an interesting view thanks to Tokyo's green roof policy. No matter where you eat, if you have the option of having cold soba or udon with a dipping sauce rather than in a hot broth, get the cold ones! They are cooked to the perfect texture, so are better cold. “

- Jay, Local Guide

Sahsya Kanetanaka

Situated in Omotesando, this kaiseki restaurant features a Japanese garden and art pieces to enhance the experience of guests as they savor tea, sweets, or a light meal.

[Google Maps →](#)

“The menu is excellent. It stands out in terms of quality. The space was designed by Hiroshi Sugimoto, a famous photographer. There's a beautiful garden in front as well, so for people who like design, it's a very interesting experience.”

- Rafael, Architect

Kamachiku

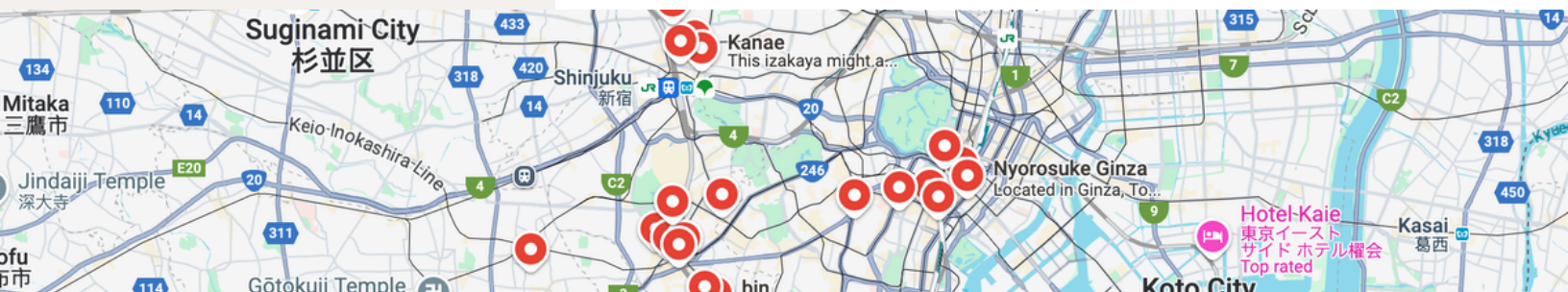
Fresh, hand-cut udon is served up in a restored storehouse overlooking a lush Japanese garden.

[Google Maps →](#)

“The building was renovated by Kengo Kuma. He kept the kura, an old structure where they would keep the rice. That became the restaurant. The specialty here is kamaage udon. The staff cook it right in front of you at the same moment you order, so it's really fresh. The tamagoyaki is fantastic, and the octopus salad is very good.”

- Rafael, Architect

Get our full restaurant list →



FAVORITE TOKYO NEIGHBORHOODS

Neighborhoods to explore when looking for an authentic slice of Tokyo life

Daikanyama

Daikanyamacho is a trendy area with brewpubs, coffee shops, and upscale shopping, featuring designer fashion and unique venues for live music. It also houses the historic Former Asakura Residence.

"It's just south of Shibuya, incredibly central but very off radar. I never see tourists there.

It's very stylish and has some interesting architecture. There are so many little streets and every single one of them is going to have something for you to find. There are also a lot of museums and art galleries as well. Be sure to visit the Kyu Asakura house, a Taisho-era Japanese mansion with a garden and the nearby park."

– Anna, Art Historian

Yanase

This area escaped the devastation of the earthquake and World War II air raids, and have largely remained unchanged. They exude the atmosphere of Edo-period Tokyo and maintain a leisurely pace of life.

"You'll find publishing houses, art galleries, antique bookstores, and cafés. It's impressively quiet compared to the bustling boulevards.

Often, there's a marble plaque on a house indicating that a famous person lived there. Eventually, you'll arrive at the Luxembourg Gardens, nestled in greenery, where the orange trees are brought out from May to November."

– Remy, Local Guide

Koenji

This area serves as a hub of underground and alternative culture. Located west of Shinjuku, this neighborhood is also a destination for vintage and independent storefronts.

"Koenji has a younger vibe. It's constantly changing. There are a lot of eclectic shops and covered areas that allow you to escape a rainy day while still getting a good look at this slice of Tokyo."

– Jay, Local Guide

Shimokitazawa

Shimokitazawa, or Shimokita, is a trendy district blending old-Tokyo charm with modern culture, featuring vintage shops, art shows, live music, and innovative dining.

"The ever-changing Shimokitazawa is interesting. After one of the two train lines that cross the area was buried, a still-in-progress linear park is taking place making the area a center of activity of all types.

What used to be full of second-hand stores now has a major eclectic range of shops and places to wander."

– Jay, Local Guide

Komagome

This neighborhood is in the Toshima district in North Tokyo. Here you'll find some of the best spots to observe nature and enjoy the sakura blooms in the spring.

"If you like to discover little gems on your own, Komagome is great for having a walk on a nice day. You'll see a range of living situations and different shops.

The Rikugien garden is also here – it's a quieter garden than most in the city."

– Jay, Local Guide

Ebisu

Ebisu is a fashionable district known for Yebisu Garden Place, an elegant complex offering upscale shopping and dining experiences. Additionally, the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography within the mall showcases international art, while the Museum of Yebisu Beer provides tours and tastings.

"Ebisu is close to Shibuya, which is very busy, but Ebisu feels a little bit more selective. Many people who live here are more established and tend to be a little bit older. It's not as hectic as Shibuya. You'll find many good restaurants and bars here."

– Rafael, Architect

Kiyosumi Shirakawa

Kiyosumi Shirakawa features Japan's top modern art gallery, numerous trendy coffee shops, and offers classical Japanese aesthetics at Kiyosumi Gardens and Kiba Park's Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo.

"This neighborhood is in the low part of the city, what we call the shitamachi. has some beautiful gardens, including the Kiso Gardens. And in between there are many bookstores and little shops, as well as the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo which is a very nice institution of art."

– Rafael, Architect

UNIQUE LOCAL SHOPS

Explore distinctive local shops that offer authentic crafts, products, and histories

Greengrocers

Local produce retailers can be found throughout the city, providing access to seasonal fruits and vegetables.

“You'll find greengrocers in local spots across the city. They tend to be under train tracks or tucked away on a side street.

You'll find a great range of produce that you won't see in the supermarket, and it's all very seasonal. Most Japanese locals will use their nearby greengrocer, so it's worth a visit for a taste of local life.”

- Anna, Art Historian

minä perhonen

Minä Perhonen is celebrated for its creative, vibrant hand-drawn patterns and artisanal craftsmanship, focusing on exquisitely crafted everyday clothing.

“Designer Akira Minagawa has a series of shops, this is one of them. The whole experience of shopping here has been thought out very carefully, from the glass on the windows to the wallpaper to the flooring to the clothes.

The clothes are beautiful, you'll find modern Japanese and Western style items here.”

- Anna, Art Historian

[Google Maps →](#)
[Website →](#)

Papa Bubble

Watch as candies are expertly kneaded, cut, and crafted from scratch before your eyes.

“It's a little bit out of the way, but if you're interested in seeing a neighborhood and keeping kids entertained, head here. Kids can watch the staff roll up and cut the candy and then get a treat. It's also on a shopping street; you'll run into some unique shops and restaurants here.”

- Jay, Local Guide

[Google Maps →](#)
[Website →](#)

Dover Street Market Ginza

Created by Comme des Garçons founder Rei Kawakubo, this destination is well-known for Japanese and international luxury designers, as well as emerging brands.

“The curation of the space is very high end. For people who like design, it's a really unique space, from the architecture to the interior design to the products that they sell. And at the top of the building, you have a Miwa Jinja, a small shinto shrine.”

- Rafael, Architect

[Google Maps →](#)
[Website →](#)

Nakano Broadway

This multi-story shopping venue should be on any collector or manga aficionado's list of things to do in the city.

“A developer started building this building for the Olympics in 1964, but they ran out of money and had to sell the first four floors. Now, you'll find different shops there.

You can find some of the best watch shops or collectors items. Murakami's headquarters are also here, along with one of his shops.”

- Rafael, Architect

[Google Maps →](#)
[Website →](#)

Kitte

Situated adjacent to Tokyo Station, this department store features high-end shops, dining options, and a complimentary museum. The sixth floor offers an outdoor terrace with a stunning view of Tokyo Station.

“This space was renovated by Kengo Kuma. It has many shops filled with well selected designers and craftsmen, and you'll find a combination of traditional Japanese crafts and more modern works.

There is also a museum, Intermediatheque, run by the university and Japan Post. It's quite an interesting place.”

- Rafael, Architect

[Google Maps →](#)
[Website →](#)

FAMILY FRIENDLY ACTIVITIES

The parks, museums, and kid-friendly places our experts recommend to keep young travelers engaged

100 Yen Shops

DAISO is a popular chain, but look for Can*Do or Seria. These shops offer a variety of items at an affordable price.

“These shops tend to have a great selection of toys, stationary, and craft items. Everything is affordable, and should always be on any family's list of things to visit when in Tokyo.”

- Anna, Art Historian

Haru-no-Ogawa Play Park

This playground is a five minute walk from the subway and surrounded by restaurants for a quick bite after playtime.[

[Google Maps →](#)

[Website →](#)

“A visit to one of Tokyo's mud parks is a must. Haru-no-Ogawa is centrally located in Shibuya, and it's open year round.

There are supplies like hoses, shovels, tires, and more, and kids are free to create their own games, build dams or dig puddles, or join adults for a bonfire in the colder months. Consider bringing a change of clothes for your child or checking the freecycle bin for hand-me-downs.”

- Anna, Art Historian

Inokashira Park

Enjoy the swan paddle boats, walking paths, zoo, and cherry blossom trees in this large park located in western Tokyo.

[Google Maps →](#)

[Website →](#)

“There is plenty of space for everyone here, and families can stop for a bite at one of the cafes or restaurants located between the park and Kichijoji Station. This is also a great place to explore on your way to the Ghibli Museum.”

- Jay, Local Guide

Mt. Takao

As one of the closest natural recreation areas to the city, Mt. Takao is a popular destination for locals and visitors alike. Explore its 7 hiking trails and multiple shrines, or visit the monkey park.

[Google Maps →](#)

“If you need a break from the city, within an hour you can be on a mountain in west Tokyo with a view over the suburbs. You can hike the mountain or take the ropeway up. There are viewpoints along the way, and a beer garden at the top for parents.”

- Jay, Local Guide

River Cruise on the Sumida

Break away from the city bustle and capture a different view of the city from the water.

“The relevance of water in Tokyo is very interesting, because compared to other cities, you won't get an awareness of the city from outside. It's not like London or San Francisco, with their skylines.

When you travel on the Sumida River, you'll get a very different impression of Tokyo, and you'll end up in a beautiful garden, the Hama-rikyu Gardens.”

- Rafael, Architect

Shinjuku Gyo-en

Shinjuku Gyo-en is a large public garden in Tokyo, originally the Naitō family's residence during the Edo period.

[Google Maps →](#)

[Website →](#)

“This park has three type of gardens; a French garden, an English garden, and a Japanese garden with some gifts from the Taiwanese government. So it has a lot of variety for anyone looking to chill out and just to spend time in nature. One of the problems in Tokyo is that there's not much space for kids to play, and here is a space where they can do that.”

- Rafael, Architect

Tokyo National Museum

The Tokyo National Museum in Ueno Park, Tokyo, is Japan's oldest and largest art museum, operated by the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage.

[Google Maps →](#)

[Website →](#)

“There is a comprehensive exhibition on traditional Japanese arts and crafts, and there is also a play area where younger kids can play, read books, or relax if they're feeling overwhelmed. The museum also has a fantastic bookstore for older children and adults.”

- Rafael, Architect

READ, WATCH, LISTEN

Books, shows, movies, and podcasts recommendations from our experts to enrich your travel experience

READ

The Rainbow

By Kawataba Yasunori

[Buy Online & Support Your Local Bookstore →](#)

"The Rainbow is full of pathos and heartbreak, conjuring a vision of postwar Tokyo and the impact historical events had on a single, broken family. I enjoyed this book primarily for its descriptions of places - the father was an architect and frequently discusses sites visited from this perspective. In many ways aesthetics steer the story as much as the human drama, which makes for an unusual but beautiful book."

– Anna, Art Historian

The Japan Times

[Read Online →](#)

"You can get a few articles for free, or you can get a month's subscription. Sometimes, this publication covers things before the news in Japan does. It's the best English-language source for things happening not only in Tokyo, but around Japan."

– Jay, Local Guide

The Empire of Signs

By Roland Barthes

[Buy Online & Support Your Local Bookstore →](#)

"This text may be short, but it serves as a great introduction to Japanese culture. It elaborates on the generalities of the city of Tokyo and its culture. It's easy to read, and the author makes good use of metaphor to help you decipher what he saw during his visit."

– Rafael, Architect

WATCH

Tokyo Story

[Watch on HBO Max →](#)

"This movie follows an older couple on a trip to visit their children in postwar Tokyo. You'll get a feel for the complexity of Japanese society and the changes that have occurred over generations."

– Anna, Art Historian

Walk, Don't Run

[Watch on Youtube →](#)

"Rather than watching before, consider watching this after your trip. Some of the things the characters do in the film would never happen here. But it offers a clear juxtaposition between what people often expect and what life is actually like. There are many scenes that are still recognizable today, so you may be able to recognize places you visited."

– Jay, Local Guide

Perfect Day

[Watch on Hulu →](#)

"This is relevant to me for two reasons. First, because it's a true story of an individual who understands the simplicity of life through cleaning the popular Tokyo toilets designed by famous architects in Tokyo. Second, because the onsen where the main character bathes every day is just behind my architecture studio, so it resonates with the area that I experience every day."

– Rafael, Architect

LISTEN

Karaoke in Tokyo

"Tokyo takes karaoke seriously. Rent a private room in a karaoke hall with your friends or family and get ready for a unique experience."

– Anna, Art Historian

Shiina Ringo

[Listen on Spotify →](#)

[Listen on Apple Music →](#)

"Although the lyrics are in Japanese, many of her songs reference different places in Tokyo. One of her songs mentions a particular street which I often ride my bike on, and when I'm sitting at the light, that song always pops in my head."

– Jay, Local Guide

1996 - Ryuichi Sakamoto

[Listen on Spotify →](#)

[Listen on Apple Music →](#)

"Sakamoto was a Japanese composer and musician who influenced electronic music innovation. This album collection includes his famous works and two new pieces for a piano trio."

– Rafael, Architect