

DEPARTURES

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JAPAN

Turning Japanese

With the XXXII Olympic Games only eight months away, a trip to Japan is set to be the hottest ticket of 2020. And while all eyes will be firmly fixed on Tokyo, there's a lot more to the Land of the Rising Sun than the host city. Sushi, sumo and samurai culture all await and thanks to flight operators such as Jetstar, a cultural awakening is now more accessible than ever

BY SCOTT HENDERSON

MY FIRST AFTERNOON in Japan is spent in an almost meditative state in the city of Sapporo. Silence surrounds my colleague and me, both of us brave enough to communicate only in brief whispers for fear of irritating the locals around us. Surprisingly, we're not at the 12th Century Zen gardens of Nakajima Park. That particular moment of tranquility awaits further down our itinerary. Instead, we're sitting inside the Sapporo Dome, the city's premier sporting venue, sharing this experience with 40,000 rugby fans.

If the Rugby World Cup's opening rounds are anything to go by there's little doubt that the 2020 Olympics are going to be a well-attended spectacle. The Japanese love a sporting contest and are fervent supporters of underdogs. They just prefer to show their appreciation through polite applause rather than boisterous barracking. Even in the midst of a rugby grudge match, a >

BIG IN JAPAN: CROWDS, SIGNS AND SOUNDS MAKE JAPAN A SENSORY EXPERIENCE.



FROM LEFT: SUSHI-MAKING WITH A PRIVATE SENSEI; HENDERSON'S RESPECTABLE SUSHI CREATION; A TRANQUIL GARDEN IN SAPPORO; A TEA MASTER WELCOMES GUESTS TO A TEA CEREMONY IN KYOTO; AUSTRALIA VS FIJI IN ACTION AT THE SAPPORO DOME.



crunching tackle or line-breaking burst that would elicit vociferous excitement in most global arenas, generates the type of subdued clapping more typical of the galleries of Augusta. The restraint reflects the extraordinary, often comedic, politeness of the Japanese people.

As we would find, the irony of watching a game packed with thunderous collisions in relative silence is just one of the many contradictions of this fascinating country. City streets are lined with people, neon signage is bright, cluttered and haphazard and the sound of robotic voices barking orders from unseen speakers is ever present. Yet among the chaos and excitement exists

a population so peaceful, kind-hearted and humble, you can only shake your head in amazement.

TOKYO DRIFT

With rugby the focus of our time in Sapporo, Tokyo provides a more well-rounded Japanese experience. You name the tourist cliché, we sought it out. The city certainly seems ready for the Olympics, having already experienced an influx of tourists. Our guide for the day, Akiko, informs us that in the past two years there have been an extra 20 million annual visitors to the nation's capital.

Thankfully, a retreat from the crowds is never far away with

gyoza and sake bars lining almost every street, offering a multitude of culinary possibilities. Seeking a more hands-on experience we head underground to the famed Ganko Ginza Ichome restaurant for a private sushi-making lesson. With the modern fashion and high-end boutiques of Harajuku buzzing above us, we're soon carving tuna and wrapping it around handfuls of rice under the tutelage of our very own 'sushi sensei'. Do we qualify as experts after the experience? Only in the manner in which we devour the fruits of our labour.

After consuming a sumo's share of sushi, a walk is definitely in order. Fortunately, the Harajuku area is also home to Meiji Jingu

Shrine. A spiritual oasis surrounded by trails that meander through a beautifully-manicured forest, the shrine is a monument to deified Emperor Meiji and his wife, Empress Shōken.

Still fueled by raw fish, we take a 20-minute stroll across town to the city's greatest landmark, Shibuya Crossing. Along the way, traditional eateries slowly give way to flashier karaoke bars and an uptick in disembodied robot voices. It's the perfect place to bust out a tune or two, and if my daily drive into *MH* HQ is anything to go by, I should be a seasoned pro at karaoke. Sadly, upon entering Karaoke Kan karaoke bar perched directly above Shibuya Crossing, it seems the skills learnt spitting Kanye verses in my car don't transfer to crooning more karaoke-appropriate Frank Sinatra tunes. Kan is the bar featured in *Lost In Translation* and it's easy to imagine you have the same sultry vocal skills as a tipsy Scarlett Johansson. Word of warning: you don't. Second word of warning: the rooms in Kan aren't entirely soundproof, a fact we learn only when exiting down a corridor past a series of equally ambitious

performers. Be wary when belting out those Braithwaite classics!

Back outside, Shibuya itself is a lot to take in, assaulting all five senses at once (not dissimilar to my karaoke performance). It's the perfect time to find yourself a rooftop bar, enjoy the sunset and bask in a balmy Tokyo evening. Luckily for us, the ninth floor of the Pullman Tamachi, also known as Platform 9, offers views of the skyline, complete with *MH*-approved Japanese cocktails (egg whites and all).

SHRINE TIME

After a quick two-hour bullet-train ride from Tokyo, we arrive in Kyoto, a small city by Japanese standards and a better showcase of traditional culture. Small sake bar-lined alleys suddenly open onto hidden shrines populated by brightly-dressed geishas. There are cherry blossoms lining the streets and the architecture is the stuff of travel brochures.

Kyoto is rich in history, once Japan's capital city and home to the Shogun during the time of the samurai. A deep respect for this cultural heritage means many of the monuments to these

great leaders remain, including arguably the most famous palace in Japan, Nijo-jo Castle. A wander through the expansive, immaculately maintained grounds is awe-inspiring in its own right before you even get to the castle. The 400-year-old structure remains beautifully intact, a symbol of strength and defence from a centuries-long era of peace in the nation.

We continue our serene cultural journey with a traditional tea ceremony. It's the Japanese equivalent of a Bondi yoga session, complete with a difficult floor routine and the local version of shavasana. Lead by a tea master, the 30-minute ceremony is only slightly focused on the small cup of matcha you'll drink. Its true purpose is meditation, a chance to remove yourself from the noise and commotion of the outside world, to recentre your breath and to immerse yourself in the beauty of Japanese minimalism. The tea masters spend 10 years in training perfecting their meditative rituals. You're basically in some of the most qualified hands in the mental health game. Your only

challenge after achieving this level of Zen will be unfolding your legs, finding your feet again and rejoining the 21st century. As I make that difficult transition, I can't help thinking that perhaps it's cultural practices such as this that help the Japanese straddle the ancient and modern worlds, to create their own unique identity and flourish amid all their contradictions. ■

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Learn from our mistakes to avoid being a clueless Westerner

- **Pick up some basic Japanese.** Arigatou for thanks and Konichiwa for hello is a great start
- **Taxis are expensive** and often take longer than the train
- **If you do take the train**, have your destination on your phone written in Japanese
- **Curb your coffee habit.** Walking along the street eating and drinking is a cultural no-go in Japan
- **Catching the bullet train** between Tokyo and Kyoto? Ask the ticket office to book you a seat on the Mount Fuji side of the train so you don't miss the view of a lifetime

FLY Jetstar flies to Tokyo via Cairns and the Gold Coast daily. Jetstar also operates domestically within Japan. jetstar.com

STAY **Mecure Sapporo** Convenience is the name of the game for the Mecure. Centrally located with all the amenities for a no-hassle visit to Sapporo.



The Pullman Tamachi A brand new art hotel in Tokyo, it's less than 10 minutes via train from the heart of the city. The interiors here are a tourist destination in themselves.



MGallery Yura Hotel The MGallery is located in the cultural heart of Kyoto. This brand new hotel comes complete with its own indoor bamboo garden.



"Among the chaos exists a population so peaceful, kind-hearted and humble"



FROM LEFT: THE ICONIC MOUNT FUJI; SAKE BARS AND NIJO-JO CASTLE IN KYOTO; TOKYO'S HEAVING SHIBUYA CROSSING.