



Text: CHARLEY LANYON | Photos: IRWIN WONG

TOKYO UNEARTHED

If you like your nightlife weird and wonderful, the Japanese capital has some jaw-dropping options

FOR SHEER VOLUME AND surreal other-worldliness that will leave you blinking, nowhere compares to Tokyo. Where else can you start the evening with psychedelic dinner theatre, sample some of the best beer and whisky on the planet, receive a few lashes from a dominatrix, then greet the wee hours with a cocktail in the company of real live penguins? The downside? Tokyo is expensive and huge, addresses are often non-existent, English rarely spoken, and most of the good places are well off the tourist radar. Don't panic: we've got the insider's guide.

WHAT'S YOUR POISON?
Shinjuku's Golden Gai bar district (main), and other Tokyo nightspots.

LIFE IS A ROBOT CABARET

How about enjoying a beer while post-apocalyptic babes in leather bikinis ride robots and battle for the future of the universe? This one's hardly off the tourist track since Anthony Bourdain called it "the best show on earth", but Robot Restaurant in Shinjuku is an absolute must-see. Be sure to make a reservation; tickets are ¥6,000 (HK\$500).
1-7-1 Kabukicho, Shinjuku



ART BAR DONE RIGHT

Art bars are trendy at the moment, though most are overpriced and obnoxious. That's not the case with Bar Kodoji, a "photographer's bar" in Shinjuku's Golden Gai bar district. Kodoji is tiny and packed to the rafters with rare Japanese photography books. Fans of the art form may well see one of their heroes propped up at the bar. Low-key with a healthy dose of grit, Kodoji is one of Tokyo's coolest places to get a drink. Kodoji doesn't advertise its address. Just ask around.

RAW POWER: Saya in Nonbei Yokocho, Shibuya (below) where the barman doubles as a sushi chef; !BAR! SmallLight in Kichijoji (left); Amulet D (bottom).



CHARM CITY

A unique Japanese drinking phenomenon is the micro-bar: a tiny watering hole that can accommodate at most half a dozen people. These venues exude charm and make you feel like you are in your own private bar. Some of the best are in Nonbei Yokocho – literally "drunk alley" – in Shibuya: a warren of tiny bars in old pre-war buildings. If they're not too full, check out the birdhouse-like Amulet D, or my personal favourite, Saya, where the bartender is also a sushi chef. *1 Chome 25 10, Shibuya*



GIN AND TONIC ICHIBAN

Tokyo lends itself to hyperbole, so here's some more: !BAR! SmallLight, in the trendy neighbourhood of Kichijoji, serves the best gin and tonic on the planet. I don't know why – they don't use any fancy ingredients, just an average gin and convenience store tonic – but it hands down the best G&T I've ever had. Impeccably hip music plays softly and groups bigger than eight will find themselves with no place to sit. The bar is in an alley off the main shopping street.



THE GOOD STUFF

Japan is a quality-obsessed country and the notion "if it's worth doing, it is worth doing right" informs every aspect of its nightlife. At Zoetrope in Shinjuku, classic films play silently, while the bartender guides you through the largest selections of Japanese whiskies in Tokyo. Don't miss the Minnoh Beer, a craft brew from Osaka. Their stout routinely wins best beer in the world.

3F, 7-10-14 Nishi-Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku



PLEASURE AND PAIN

For those who want a more hands-on experience, try Black Rose, an S + M bar with a nearly 20-year history. Newcomers looking to dip a toe into kink will be thrilled, but diehard masochists might find it all a bit tame. There is a show on a hydraulic stage and attendants will whip you, or drip hot wax on you for an extra charge. I went on my birthday, but was crying too hard to get through the requisite 30 lashes.

Just south of the Nishi-Azabu crossing in Roppongi, Minato



BIRDS AND BOOZE

Although it's not nightlife as such, a discussion of the weird and wacky in Tokyo would be remiss without a mention of Tori no Iru cafes and bars, or bars where there are birds present.

They're all the rage in Japan, and it's easy to see why: you can't get much more surreal than enjoying a drink while an owl perches on your head. Tori no Iru Cafe boasts a large selection of owls. It's often crowded, doesn't accept reservations, and welcomes bird lovers in one-hour shifts. At Penguin Bar Ikebukuro, there are penguin pictures on the walls, penguin videos on a loop on the televisions overhead, and an aquarium with three actual penguins. Though there are strict rules and the birds seem well cared for, we're not convinced by this trend of keeping wild animals in bars.

Penguin Bar Ikebukuro, 1/F COSMY1, Ikebukuro 2-38-2, Toshima-ku; Tori no Iru Cafe, Seven Star Mansion, 1/F 2-6-7 Kiba, Koto-ku

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE:

Black Rose (above); Penguin Bar Ikebukuro, and Tori no Iru Cafe (left); Maid Café (bottom); The Vibe Bar (top right).

TOO CUTE

Maid cafes will either be your dream come true or hell on earth. Sit down to an ice-cream sundae decorated to look like a kitten – for about the price of a new pair of shoes – while a long-suffering maid calls you master and says, in a grating childlike voice three octaves too high, to call her “meow meow”. Prepare to leave with both your bank and soul broken. Just head to Akihabara and let the maids on the street show you the way.



HITS THE SPOT

Japan is well known for its unique take on sex. The Vibe Bar, a vibrator theme bar in Shibuya, was opened as a safe place where women and couples can talk about sex. It has over 300 sex toys, as well as great cocktails, and some of the most over-the-top decor you'll ever see. The front door is enough to turn away more conservative drinkers: designed to resemble an orifice most of us emerged from, but I for one never expected to walk back into. There is a cover charge of ¥2,500 that includes two drinks. Don't miss the bathrooms.

Women and couples only.

Dogenzaka 2-7-4 Shimizu, Shibuya

Night visions

Getting there

There are many flights from Hong Kong to Tokyo. The most affordable are usually through Hong Kong Express, which flies daily to Haneda airport around midnight, returning early in the morning.

Staying there

Tokyo has endless accommodation options from hostels to high-end hotels. The best value and experience is at some of the city's ryokans or traditional inns.

• Homeikan Hon Kan

10-5, Hongko, 5 Chome, homeikan.com

• Bunkyo-Ku, Tokyo

tel: +81 3 3811 1181

At the other end of the spectrum, Grand Hyatt boasts stunning views of the city from Roppongi Hills.

• Grand Hyatt Tokyo

6-10-3 Roppongi, Minato-Ku

tel: +81 3 4333 1234

tokyo.grand@hyatt.com