

TOKYO MOBILITY



CITY AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Tokyo is without boundaries. This becomes apparent when looking at a satellite view of the region which will show a sheer endless mass of grey spreading in all directions, connecting dozens of cities such as Saitama (1,2 million inhabitants) in the north, Chiba (1 million) in the east as well as Yokohama (3,7 million) and Kawasaki (1,26 million) in the south. The greater Tokyo area represents the biggest metropolis on the planet with a population of 35,2 million inhabitants in total.

Zooming in towards the heart of Tokyo City one must realize that there is no real center that one could focus on but that there are many centers of the 23 districts within: Shinjuku, Shibuya, Meguro, Minato and Chiyoda to name just a few of the more well-known. While many parts of the city have highrises and skyscrapers the actual cityscape of Tokyo is quite different from the futuristic image one might have in mind. For a great part, the city is quite low and thus far stretched out with the odd assemblage of higher buildings poking out here and there. The highest towers are situated in the commercial centers of Minato (Tokyo Midtown), Shinjuku and Chioda. After building regulations changed and height limitations fell, new developments have been changing the city's skyline in recent years. In 2012 Japan's highest structure and the world's highest tower, the Tokyo Skytree was completed.

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Tokyo city is home to around 12,9 million people as compared to Berlin's 3,5 and London's 8,2 million inhabitants. The Japanese capital spreads over a space of 2.188 square kilometers which is more than double the size of Berlin and a bit less than 1,5 times the size of London. When looking at the difference between daytime and nighttime population one can get an idea of how busy this city is: 2,5 million people enter and leave the city every day. With a workforce of 5,9 million people and assuming that most of them do not work from home, there are almost 6 million people commuting every day. One of the key methods of transportation is the Tokyo Metro and Toei metro system. With roughly 8,5 million daily passengers the city operates the busiest subway system in the world (followed by Seoul, Beijing and Moscow).

As we have seen, Tokyo is a widespread metropolis with numerous districts and smaller centers. Millions of people move through the city on a daily basis. To and from work, but also in their past time. They do sports, they go shopping, they meet friends. Just as in any other city. During our recent stay in Tokyo – for the occasion of the launch of smart forjeremy – we went to explore and to meet some people who would let us know their thoughts about living, working, relaxing and navigating in and through Tokyo.

In the second part of our Tokyo feature we are going to meet Mai Nguyen with her baby daughter Zoey who will spend a Sunday afternoon with us, showing us her favorite spots and helping us navigate through Tokyo.



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A DAY WITH MAI NGUYEN

In Part 1 of our feature we examined Tokyo from a bird's eye view. On a nice Sunday afternoon I decided to literally zoom in on the city and explore it at ground level. Rather than relying on maps or a sightseeing guide I am meeting Mai Nguyen who will provide us with a short tour of her favorite parts of Tokyo. Having her baby daughter Zoey with her all day makes it even more of an adventure: 'How to get around in one of the busiest cities on the globe... with a baby stroller?'

Our meeting point is two stops away from Shibuya, the quieter Daikanyama. Here, Mai's husband works at Bench at the Green, a small shop carrying a fine selection of menswear from the US and Europe. Through a maze of small streets with even smaller boutiques we reach one of the area's main attractions: the Tsutaya bookstore. Or, better put, megastore. Consisting of three 2-story glass cubes interconnected by gangways, each structure is the size of a regular bookstore in other countries. Here one can get lost in all various media new but also vintage. Surrounded by cafés, restaurants, a dog spa, and a bike store this area has the feel of a small village plaza: family friendly and less hectic than the main shopping districts in Tokyo. We see a lot of young families with children – lots of baby strollers! – and lots of well groomed canines.

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After a chat with friends and a quick coffee we then decide to try our luck with public transportation, to visit Harajuku the busy shopping area close to Yoyogi park. While it has been a center for independent youth fashion since the mid 1990s – brands such as A Bathing Ape, Neighborhood, Stüssy and X-Large opened their first boutiques here – from mid 2000 Harajuku has also been attracting upscale retailers such as Polo Ralph Lauren, Chanel, Prada or Bulgari who are now occupying impressive spaces alongside the main avenue Omotesando.

Before diving into the shopping crowd, we power up at a small American-style diner called “Golden Brown” situated in the luxury shopping mall Omotesando Hills. What at first might seem like a contradiction – burger vs. luxury goods – turns out to be a perfect match as everything about this place is as immaculate and well-considered as the surrounding boutiques: If you are looking for the best hamburgers, this is where you’d go. Not yet satisfied and in dire need of caffeine, we are looking for an elevated viewpoint to watch the sunset. Mai suggests we head on to Bills Café on the roof of Tokyu Plaza near Harajuku Station.



From up here we catch a glimpse of the masses of Sunday shoppers flowing in all directions through this area. It is clearly a much younger crowd than in Daikanyama. While Takeshita Street belongs almost entirely to teenagers, Omotesando and its side streets seem to be attracting affluent shoppers in their mid twenties to thirties. There are fewer families and hardly people above their 50s.

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During the last hours of our Sunday field trip through Tokyo, Mai shows us her favorite boutiques in the area, many of them just recently opened. She mentions that Harajuku has seen changes with some of the original Ura-Hara (“back streets of Harajuku”) retailers having moved business to Shibuya where Mai also likes to go shopping. Unfortunately, however, we have to call it a day. Baby Zoey getting just a little cranky now – she has been the most pleasant assistant tour-guide all day! – and our energy is running low, too.

But, we will meet up with Mai again for our third and last part of this feature when we learn more about her daily life and mobility in Tokyo.



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INTERVIEW WITH MAI NGUYEN

You are not from Tokyo originally. How did you end up here and what is your profession?

Yes, I'm originally from LA. I actually went to Pharmacy School but dropped out because I felt like it wasn't for me. I decided to move to Japan in August of 2005 and intended on staying only for 1 year but ended up staying until now (7.5 years later). I'm currently a buzz creator and run a party/ fashion interactive blog (<http://maisassygirl.blogspot.com>), which I started in 2007, while doing freelance PR for a variety of clients. I recently became a mother so I'm quite busy being a mom but still do little bits of PR here and there for clients when I have time. Before I became a mom I used to party and attend events every single night; averaging about 5-10 parties per day (of course more on weekends). Because I was everywhere before and knew the nightlife in Tokyo very well, I became the go-to person whenever friends or clients came to town.

Where in Tokyo do you live and how would you characterize your neighborhood. Are there any 'hip' areas in Tokyo at the moment where people like to live at right now?

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I currently live in Jiyugaoka, which is known as a higher end and more residential part of Tokyo. I'm not very far from Shibuya (about 10 minutes by train). Jiyugaoka actually has everything that I would need, like 3 different grocery stores, a few shopping malls, an electronic shop, etc.. I used to live in Nakameguro for 5 years, which is 2 stops away by train from Shibuya and 4 stops away from Jiyugaoka. I think most hipsters and creators live in Nakameguro. It's very convenient there as everything is a bike ride away. They also have a lot of good restaurants, local bars, and cool hang outs there.

What is the main difference between living in the US (Los Angeles, right?) and Tokyo? What are the pros and cons of being in Tokyo vs. Los Angeles?

The main difference between living in LA and Tokyo is the speed of how people move. In LA, everyone drives and I feel like the pace is much slower..whereas in Tokyo, I feel like everyone wants to get to their destination quickly so they walk fast, take the train (which is 99.9% on-time), take the bus, or ride their bike. The pros of being in Tokyo is that everything is ON TIME! Also public transportation is very convenient. In LA, driving can be convenient when you have to carry a lot of stuff but having to find parking sucks. I think living in LA makes you lazier too because I find that I end up driving across the street instead of just walking, like how I would in Tokyo.

Besides your neighborhood, which other parts of Tokyo do you spend time at?

I like to spend time in Daikanyama and Nakameguro. There are a lot of nice cafés and bookstores to chill at. I usually shop in Harajuku or Shibuya because I don't feel like going far. Haha When I used to go clubbing, I used to party everywhere from Shibuya to Harajuku to Aoyama and sometimes to Ageo all the way in Shinjuku! For food, I love Nakameguro and Daikanyama and sometimes Omotesando. I think my favorite part of Tokyo these days is Daikanyama. Because I have a baby now, I can't be in areas that are too busy and Daikanyama has a lot of baby shops and places baby can play. When people come to visit, depending on what they are into I take them everywhere, from Shibuya, Harajuku, Omotesando, Aoyama, Koenji, Kichijoji...There are a lot of landmarks, places to shop, parks to relax at, and cool architecture in those areas.

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How mobile are you in your daily/weekly life and how do you get from A to B in Tokyo?

With the baby I usually take the train and bus or just walk. It's quite tiring but this is the only way. Getting into a taxi with a baby stroller is not easy. Also I don't live a cheap taxi ride away anymore. Before I had a baby though I did take a taxi a lot or use a bike. I walked when I had time to kill.

In general, I'm not as mobile as I used to be unless I carry her in an Ergo carrier. Also, I found that most stations are not baby stroller friendly and don't have ramps when they are popular places like Shinjuku or Roppongi station. Hiroo station does not have escalators or elevators but a lot of expats and families live there! I don't understand why they don't build an elevator! For that stations that do have elevators, I have to walk pretty far and it might not be the nearest exit to the ground floor where I want to go. The first time I went from Shibuya to Omotesando, which is 1 stop on the Ginza line (which I cannot use because there is no elevator), I had to walk all the way to Shibuya Hikarie, and take a few elevators to the Hanzomon line to Omotesando. Instead of taking 5-10 minutes this took almost 30 minutes. I'm used to this now so I can get there faster these days. I think all newer stations have easy access elevators. I am still learning though. Shibuya to Meiji-jingumae (Harajuku) has gotten easier, but I can also take a bus from outside of Shibuya station to get to the Harajuku Crossing.

Finding a particular address in Tokyo is quite difficult. How does the system work and how do you navigate?

I totally agree. I do use landmarks, such as Starbucks or convenient store (7 Eleven, Lawson, etc.). I used to use clubs as landmarks. Hehehe. I think these days people just use Google Maps on their smartphones...but before GPS, I think people just followed paper maps. The real estate people still use physical maps to find houses.

How important is owning a car and driving in Tokyo?

I do not drive in Tokyo. It would be nice to have a car because sometimes I want to go to Costco or IKEA or Akachanhonpo (kids shop) where I would need to buy a lot of big things. But the problem is parking and I think we have to pay about 30,000 Yen (approx € 250 or US\$ 320) more to have a parking space in our apartment complex. I have a few

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friends who drive. I think because their job requires them to be very mobile and they have to travel far sometimes. For instance one of my friends is a stylist so he has to wake up really early or work late sometimes and might have to travel far and having a car is easiest for him.

If you were to buy a new car what aspects would you look for and what are the regulations for owning a car in Tokyo?

If I had to buy a car, it would need to be big enough to fit a baby car seat. However I wouldn't want a car that is too big because there are many narrow roads in Tokyo. I think it's difficult to get a license in Tokyo..it costs about 300,000 Yen (approx. € 2.500 or US\$ 3.200) to go to driving school and then you have to pass the test and the laws are different than the US so I would have a difficult time understanding it.

A lot of European cities are supporting the use of bicycles in cities with designated cycle lanes and routes. Do you think this could also work in Tokyo?

I think there are bike lanes in Tokyo but people don't really follow the rules much. In terms of routes, this could work, but I think either way people will take the shortest way even if it's not the proper street.

How would you improve the aspect of mobility in Tokyo?

I wish all the stations and shops were more baby friendly. Some of the supposedly baby friendly restaurants are downstairs and don't have a ramp or elevator so it doesn't make any sense! Perhaps having a lane or mothers and baby strollers would help when there is congestion at the stations as well. Maybe having a car on the train that is only for mothers would be nice. I can't even count the times when people just push themselves onto the train and nearly break my stroller (I usually carry baby in Ergo during crowded rush hour times). I think there really needs to be a train made for moms..

If you only had one hour to spend in Tokyo – where would you go and why?

I would probably spend it at a baby café where my daughter can play in the kids play area and I can have a quiet time to myself! Hehe...

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LINKS:

Tokyo / Official Website

<http://www.metro.tokyo.jp/ENGLISH/>

Tokyo Skytree:

<http://www.tokyo-skytree.jp/en/>

Tokyo Metro:

<http://www.tokyometro.jp/en/>

A Day with Mai Nguyen:

<http://store.benchtyo.com/>

<http://tsite.jp/daikanyama/>

<http://www.omotesandohills.com/english/>

<http://www.goldenbrown.info/>

<http://omohara.tokyu-plaza.com/en/>