

Finding Tokyo

BY MARK C. R. PAN

AS I STEPPED OFF THE TRAIN and onto the platform of the station I was swept away by a current of hurrying Japanese. I had already traveled thousands of miles, and having made it this far, I was determined to make it the rest of the way. This was the moment I had envisioned for years. I was here, in Tokyo, and it was magnificent.

Since the beginning of my love affair with Japan, Tokyo had been my Mecca. Tokyo was the nexus of electronics, manga, sumo, and the modern Japanese culture I had heard so much about, but never experienced firsthand. My friends and I all took Japanese in high school and often talked about going to Japan when we grew up. I had lived my entire life in one city, surrounded by friends and family. Japan was the first foreign country I had ever been to, and traveling to Tokyo by myself was an opportunity for me to see what I was made of.

All that was left to do was find a place to sleep for the night. I thought I'd just walk out of the station and use my map to find one of the hotels listed in my guidebook. Anywhere would be fine — I'd sleep in a large drawer if I had to. Ueno Park was close by, if it came to that. It's not like Tokyo is a hellacious jungle of pachinko parlors, street vendors, and back alleyways- or so I thought.

I stood slack-jawed and silent on the sidewalk in front of the station. The realization of being alone in Tokyo was starting to make me feel nervous. It was about seven o'clock at night and already dark. I looked around and spotted a beacon of hometown familiarity: Starbucks, the savior for any native Seattleite who feels a bit disoriented. The excitement and travel of the day had made me forget to eat and the hot coffee felt good in my empty stomach.

I took out a map and tried to find my location in relation to the hotel where I wanted to stay. When I asked the attractive young Japanese woman sitting next to me where I was, her friendly face tilted sideways and she wrinkled her brow in thought as she looked at my map. It was at this moment that I realized the map was an American-made map. It had none of the Japanese street names on it, rendering it practically useless. The woman did her best to point out our location, and I thanked her in my broken Japanese

Mark Pan graduated in 2004 with a degree in Interdisciplinary Visual Arts. He traveled to Japan in fall 2002 while studying with the Semester at Sea program.

before setting out.

After more than an hour, I still hadn't found much in the way of places to stay. The only hotel I stumbled across was booked for the night. Well, I thought, if this is how things are in Tokyo, then damn it, I'll just have to sleep in the park. I had joked about doing so, but it hadn't occurred to me that I might actually have to.

I walked into Ueno Park, past the young couple making out in the shadows, and the group of teens smoking in their school uniforms. I walked until I found what appeared to be a nice spot to spend a homeless night. Apparently it was a nice spot; it was someone else's spot. Sleeping in the park was no longer an option.

By this time, my love for Tokyo was running on fumes. I hailed a cab and asked the driver to take me to the elusive hotel in my guidebook. Like the woman in Starbucks before him, the cabbie tilted his head to the side and wrinkled his brow. He told me he didn't know where it was and that I should walk. I was stunned, and asked him to take me to any hotel, so long as it was cheap. Again with the tilted head. Finally the cabbie told me to get out of his car.

What the hell is wrong with this city? I wondered. What kind of place has cabs that won't take a fare? Did I smell? Did my American accent offend him? This was bullshit.

The cold, dark sidewalk was unwelcoming as I stepped out of the taxi. Once again I found myself standing lost and alone on the mean streets of Tokyo. I had all but given up when one flashing neon sign caught my attention above all the others. It was off in the distance, but I could read it clearly. "HOTEL" it said, in big, bold, beautiful English letters. I gathered my hope and carried it towards the sign, praying all the way that there would be a vacancy.

When I arrived, I found that the entrance was in the back of the building, but I was so eager to find a place to stay that I didn't think twice about it. It didn't register with me that by now I had walked quite some way from the main part of town. In my hurry, I didn't pick up on the meaning of the pink hearts and pictures of smiling young girls all around me. I opened the door and was greeted by a stern-faced older woman.

"Can I stay here?" I asked. Her reply was a barrage of angry Japanese that would have made a trucker blush. She shook her index finger at me with such intensity and fury that I suddenly realized where I was.

There are four types of hotels in Tokyo. There are Western-style hotels and traditional Japanese inns called Ryokens. There are also Capsule hotels—single person holes in the wall for businessmen too drunk to go home to their wives. Then there is fourth kind: love hotels, designed for businessmen

who don't want to go home to their wives. Even though I didn't have a companion, I begged the old woman to let me stay nonetheless. My pleas only seemed to infuriate her more, and she blurted another assault of fast-paced Japanese, shooing me away like a stray dog.

Back on the street, my vision of Tokyo crumbled around me. All that remained was the rubble of my worst fears. The people of Tokyo had changed. They were no longer foreign friends I hadn't met yet; they were enemies. Every curious stare became an open challenge. Every bump in the arm became an attempt to pick my pocket. The fear and frustration, loneliness and feelings of failure had all reached a pinnacle at that moment. Tokyo had transformed from Eden into Inferno in less than 12 hours.

Defeated and dejected, I made my way back to the train station. I slumped down into seat 24A in car number five and quietly slipped out of Tokyo on the last bullet train of the night.

A few days later I ran into one of my friends in Kobe. We made small talk over dinner and I asked her what she had done so far in Japan.

"I had the best time," she said. "Some friends and I went to Tokyo."

"Oh, how was it?" I asked.

"Incredible. We rode the bullet train, saw the Imperial Palace, and get this...I got to watch sumo wrestling! Sumo wrestling! It was awesome."

"Wow," I said. "Tokyo sounds great."