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Tokyo on the Move - Episode 1 by Michael Kanert

Tokyo 5 Years After



They say Tokyo is a city of change. Constantly evolving, if you revisit one of its neighbourhoods after a decade away, you could find it entirely altered from the image of your memories.

Between the birth of my son and the coronavirus pandemic, it's been five years since last I was in Tokyo. And while I didn't find my former home unrecognizable — I lived there until 2017 — I did find it mid-chrysalis, with changes large and small already taking shape.

The most obvious difference was the taxis: the city's once-ubiquitous Toyota Crown sedans have disappeared, replaced by the JPN Taxi, a squat, high-roofed hybrid released in preparation for the Tokyo Olympics.

Like a familiar friend, the green Yamanote Line still hugs the city's core. But one new station now appears on the digital screens above the doors on every train: Takanawa Gateway, squeezed between Shinagawa and Tamachi station in 2020 as the 30th station on the line.

In Shinjuku, that busy hub of big shopping and hole-in-the-wall bars on the Yamanote's western side — and where I used to live — I found my old home station turned on its ear. The years I'd spent mastering its labyrinthine halls now wasted, it seems every entrance has been blocked or shunted by renovation work that isn't slated to be done until the 2040s.

A little to the north, I found the Ikebukuro area shifted in character. More young people fill the spaces between its bars, shopping centres, karaoke boxes and anime shops, and it's now said to rival Shibuya as Tokyo's centre for youth culture.

Technology, too, continues to move on: the average Starbucks or McDonald's is a little more likely to offer a charging station while you sit; and while Japan has long been famous for its iron grip on cash, credit cards have become more widely accepted in the big city, where even the convenience store clerks don't bat an eye if you pull out plastic instead of a tan 10,000-yen note.

When I next return, I can only expect more change — but this time, with my son a little bigger, I'll make sure it won't be half a decade before I'm back.



(To be continued next time)

Photo credit: Michael Kanert



Michael Kanert is a writer, editor and Japan travel specialist who lived in Japan from 2001 to 2017. While there, he served as managing editor of Tokyo city magazine Metropolis, and editor-in-chief of Japan travel site AllAbout-Japan. He also travelled the country as a regional tourism advisor. Michael now lives in Kitchener, Ontario, with his wife and son, and travels back to Japan as often as he's able.

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