

After last train in Tokyo, a second city comes to life

11:45 p.m., Shibuya scramble

It begins with a flutter of anxious energy. Checking watches and phones, and with concerned glances toward the dwindling number of trains as the station clock ruthlessly slices away the minutes overhead. The urgency picks up pace under fluorescent lights. A sudden burst of energy jolts through the crowd of salarymen, late-night diners and fashionable young people — groups say their farewells and the running begins, the slap of sandals and sneakers hitting the pavement, the clatter of high heels.

It's Friday night in Tokyo and, in the busy Shibuya district, some people are racing home, waiting to be swallowed up by the sleek-bodied trains and ferried off into the night. Others are going in the opposite direction of the trains, heading deeper into the labyrinthine streets and alleys of Shibuya, hunting for a destination to spend the night. As pandemic-era border restrictions evaporate along with memories of requests for club patrons to "talk quietly," the city's nightlife is picking back up. With it, there's a sense of possibility.

Outside the station, wearing a baggy T-shirt and with bleached blonde hair, 21-year-old RJ is about to enjoy a night out in Tokyo. A student, he had been playing baseball in different cities across the United States before heading to Japan, and now he's sitting across from [the watchful eyes of the officers at the *kōban* \(police box\)](#), near one of the many mouths of Shibuya Station, waiting for his friends to arrive.

RJ doesn't know exactly what to expect, but grins when I ask him about his hopes for the evening. The ideal scenario, he says, is to meet a girl and maybe end up at a "love hotel," a type of pay-by-the-hour accommodation. "I'm just being honest," he adds, with a laugh.

He isn't that concerned about getting home due to Tokyo's relative safety, the same reason he doesn't have to plan his night out too carefully.

"I'll stay in a hotel, or in the club, or here (at Shibuya Station). I guess there's a lot of people in the streets around 4 a.m., 5 a.m. Tokyo is really safe," he says. "I've lived in LA, there's no way people can stay out all night on the streets (there). Here, that's fine, especially for guys."

While physical safety may not be a top concern, Tokyoites are still shaking off the specter of COVID-19. Face masks are less uniformly worn, but still visible even on hot summer nights. Mobile data has shown that foot traffic is recovering, although it has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. Similar increases haven't spread to other sectors, as companies minimize their nighttime services as part of a trend that began before the virus even arrived. In recent years, banks have limited their ATM hours and some convenience stores have resorted to "staff-less" operations amid a broader decline in population. By some estimates, Japan could be facing a shortage of more than 11 million workers by 2040, and profitability has grown more elusive.

Such issues feel distant on the streets of Shibuya at midnight, as young women who look like elegant vampires with long black hair, sparkling dresses and impossibly high heels disappear into the night, shoppers show off their new purchases and groups of office workers bid each other energetic rounds of “*otsukare-sama*” (good job today).

Kaori Uemura, who works in events and advertising, is used to finishing work late. Dressed tidily with a lanyard still around her neck, she takes a photo of a piece of billboard advertising, and with that, her day is officially done and she’s ready to head home. While she recalls past runs for the train, she is not part of the sprinting pack tonight. “*Ganbatte*,” (“Do your best”) she says, as I continue to observe the flow of people.

Under a starless sky as the billboard advertising gleams like ominous eyes, across the road from the iconic Shibuya crossing, people funnel in and out of the open mouths of the station, swallowed up into the night.

1 a.m., Marunouchi business district

As some toddle toward bed and others gear up to hit the town, a cohort of lawyers, finance workers and professional service staff toil deep into the night as colleagues around the world hammer out deals, tally trades and play the markets. The late-night conference call is a part of the metabolism of global corporate life here.

It’s a 14-hour flight from Tokyo to London. Almost 13 hours to New York. For Japan-based businesses, COVID-era restrictions emphasized more than ever that other markets need only be a Zoom or phone call away.

Michihiro Nishi, a partner at international law firm Clifford Chance, is fielding a steady stream of international clients and visitors. Nishi has worked for international law firms for around 15 years, and has advised on complex high-profile merger and acquisition deals — including Nikkei’s acquisition of the Financial Times. He is no stranger to the all-nighter. He recalls days with long hours concluded by early morning food runs, his nights sometimes stretching toward 5 a.m.

“Until recently, I worked for a U.S. law firm where some matters involved U.S. aspects. When I worked with U.S. colleagues, inevitably, I had to work into the early hours due to the time difference,” Nishi says.

Nishi, a self-described gourmand, notes the difference of food options prior to COVID-19 and afterward, as some brick-and-mortar operations faded away.

Unlike other cities, Tokyo never implemented harsh lockdowns, instead officials formally requested that restaurants close early and stop serving alcohol. Nevertheless, the number of *izakaya* (Japanese-style pubs) in operation dropped drastically — from 7,200 in December 2019 to 5,844 at the end of 2021, according to Tokyo Shoko Research, despite the rolling out of government assistance programs.

While the pandemic exacerbated the trend of closures, ingrained challenges such as high rental costs and staffing shortages had been plaguing the industry for some time. Tokyo Shoko Research found there were 842 restaurant bankruptcies through 2020 in Japan — the highest number recorded, eclipsing the 800 that closed in 2011, the year of the Great East Japan Earthquake.

After COVID-19 border restrictions subsided, business travelers began to flow back into Tokyo. In-person meetings are now ramping up again with powerful figures from the global economy such as [Warren Buffett](#) jetting in for meetings, while others investors look to snap up “cheap” companies and make the most of the weak yen.

The shift is noticeable for firms working across markets, with business travelers seizing the opportunity to visit Tokyo and find a sense of momentum again.

“Now COVID is essentially over, people have started coming to Japan,” Nishi says. “I’m visiting a lot of clients in foreign countries or within Japan. There’s a real increase in the number of guests.

“The number is much larger than pre-COVID, because during the past two to three years, people refrained from visiting Tokyo — now they’re all coming,” he continues, noting that he’s busy with client dinners, pitch meetings and “lots of social gatherings that are right now taking place.”

“Town is really lively and people are enjoying the nightlife again,” he says.

2:20 a.m., Shinjuku Ni-chome

While high-powered business meetings are taking place into the wee hours across the city, 20-somethings Rose, Noland, Annie and SungMin are reveling in the freedom of the night in Shinjuku Ni-chome, home to Tokyo’s best-known LGBTQ-friendly district.

Along the maze of streets, rainbow pride flags and colorful murals cover the walls. Thudding faraway club music wafts down from second-floor bars and up from basements. In a cluster, the friends congregate while the glowing white lights of vending machines give off a faint hum.

Rose, who has ornate nails, which she says she uses to shoo away annoying men, says the group are regulars to the neighborhood.

“We’re out here all the time, because it’s the queer space,” she says. “It’s a strong community here.”

Annie, who wears a sunshine yellow top and a constant smile, enjoys the sense of freedom. “At work you have to be very put together. I have to be very professional. ... I’m a 28-year-old woman, but I don’t feel like that on the inside. It’s a release to say what I want and be who I want,” she says.

SungMin, who scatters witticisms across the conversation, echoes this thought.

“Japan is kind of strict so you have to have fun at night,” SungMin says. “That’s part of Japan. Everyone in a Japanese company drank the night before. Everyone is kinda hungover. Because the work culture in Japan is so strict, when you go out at night, it’s dark, it’s night, it’s time to have fun.”

It’s mutually agreed that a good night is spent dancing, and dancing is an antidote to work pressures.

“COVID restrictions are ending, the borders are open, everyone is just happy to be in a space with a lot of people, enjoying the latest Lady Gaga track,” Rose says.

The night crowd sees the city in a different way, from another angle. Poet and novelist Michael Ondaatje once wrote “Half the life of cities occurs at night. ... There’s a more uncertain morality then.” For clubs,

this is the time when the money flows in and the lights are dim.

Away from Shinjuku Ni-chome, the consolidation of Tokyo's club scene, which saw the closures of venues like Contact and Vision, has burned holes in a key part of nighttime culture. Faced with challenges similar to the late-night service industry, independent clubs also face staffing challenges, with some venue owners looking increasingly to overseas workers to fill talent gaps.

At the same time, developers are pushing into their turf with large mixed-use club spaces — like the 48-story Kabukicho Tower, which opened in April and boasts facilities ranging from restaurants, cinemas and hotels and airport transport links, to a large 1,500-capacity live venue with VIP seating.

This venue was spotlighted at a recent event held by the Japan Night Time Economy Association (JNEA), which is campaigning to inject life into Tokyo's night and club scene. But stubborn challenges — including regulations and the way aspects of laws are enforced, staffing shortages and transportation links — persist.

JNEA Director Tak Umezawa says that several property developers have joined the association as member companies and are “really getting serious about developing the nighttime economy.”

“During the COVID period, the nighttime was labeled as something really evil,” Umezawa says, referring to rules that broadly targeted late-night activities. He notes that there has since been a realization among developers that high-class offices are not enough of a magnet to draw people to a city center, hence there has been a rethinking of what should be offered.

“That nighttime agenda has several other important purposes,” Umezawa says, noting that while there is an economic benefit, the cultural and social benefits of a healthy night scene are important for the creative health of the city.

“If you think about, for example, the lesbian or gay community, during the daytime, (these individuals) are distributed fairly thinly across towns, across companies. Assuming that you belong to a minority group, you probably are a minority group in any organization you belong to,” Umezawa says.

“But if you have a community hub for gay or lesbian people, it's a place, you can create new bonds, make friends, and feel very safe and embraced,” he continues. “That kind of social infrastructure is very important for a creative city. That's a social benefit, and there is a cultural benefit too, because if you think of new cultural trends, whether it's music or fashion, most of them come from the night scene — edgy places in the night scene.”

4:50 a.m., Toyosu Market

Outside, a steady stream of white trucks roll toward Toyosu market, and the warm and slightly acidic smell of fish hangs in the air. A stone's throw from Tokyo Bay, the tuna, yellowtail and sea urchin caught throughout the night are funneled here before making their way to restaurants in the capital or even flown farther abroad to destinations in Asia and North America to meet demand. Workers in black and orange rubber boots mill around, directing one another and hauling items to and fro.

While there's a demand for the produce, the largely male fishing workforce is dwindling — in 2020 workers in the sector were down 6.3%, according to government numbers — yet the demand for

Japanese seafood remains high. Yellowtail exports increased to record levels in 2021, according to data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. Despite the tuna market taking a hit during the pandemic, the industry is recovering.

As the clock ticks closer to 5 a.m., when Toyosu's tuna auction begins, a sense of momentum builds, chefs clad in white aprons walk toward restaurants and security guards take their positions, adjusting the orange cones that act as a barrier to where the action is happening. That's because there's another side to Toyosu. A steady stream of tourists has begun to file in to line the open windows and watch the workers below. Smatterings of Mandarin, Spanish and English can be heard, with around 30 people up early (or really late) to watch the scene unfold.

Inside the world's largest tuna market, silvery fish lay spread across large tarps like teeth or piano keys. Around the edges of the building, empty wooden crates and polystyrene boxes, like caskets, are piled high.

Since the borders opened, tourism has been picking up, and with this an economic boost. Americans Aubry and Michael Erickson are on their honeymoon in Tokyo. The affection between them is unmistakable, as though their life together up to this point has been one long, shared smile.

"We're staying in Tokyo, then we're going to a *ryokan* (Japanese-style inn), then to Kyoto, then to Okayama and back to Tokyo to fly home," says Aubry, who has visited Tokyo before and wanted to share the experience with her husband.

"I love it, I feel like I could have grown up here," Michael says of his first impressions of Tokyo, smiling dreamily.

Tonight they'll eat *yakitori* (skewered chicken), then later they will travel to Kyoto and will eat *kaiseki* (traditional Japanese multicourse dinner).

"I loved the 'Jiro Dreams of Sushi' documentary," Aubry says. "In it they show the tuna auction. We wanted to see that in real life."

As tourism begins to pick up and travelers like the Ericksons crisscross the country, the economic boost is reviving parts of the economy, with luxury hotel developers plotting expansions in Japan. Meanwhile, Japan's retail sales rebounded in May, exceeding expectations. Japanese whisky, surprising flavors of KitKats and stationery products have also enjoyed a boost, according to the Nikkei, as travelers look to take a piece of Japan home with them.

This month, department store Takashimaya upgraded its earnings outlook following strong demand from foreign travelers.

5:10 a.m. / Shinjuku Station

As the station attendants move inside gleaming ticket boxes, one side of Tokyo nears its end, while another begins to flicker back to life. Initially, the change moves at a different pace to the urgency of the late night. It moves with the soft spread of morning light. But quickly the mood changes and life picks up again.

An American couple clad in black athletic wear are jogging to Yoyogi-Hachiman Station, carrying backpacks and bags through the sleepy streets of Yoyogi. "We don't have to run," the woman implores, trailing behind her faster, fitter partner. Then she checks her phone and sees the time and picks up the pace as they dash toward the train station.

In Shinjuku, it's a steady stream of night-shift workers, bleary-eyed partygoers and men in crumpled suits stumbling toward Shinjuku Station, the busiest train station in the world. There's a slight rush for the first train (when you're tired, even those few minutes between first and second train are precious), and a few muster the energy to sprint. Walking up to the ticket gates, the chirps, trills, beeps and announcements of the station come to life like wildlife in a forest.

As a series of contagious yawns appears to travel down the platform like a wave at a baseball game, the train arrives and the passengers collapse into the empty seats, most leaning their heads against any firm surface they can find. Across from me, a young woman in a shiny skirt and pair of charm-covered high-heeled Crocs is peacefully sleeping. A few seats down, a man looks like he's studying intently, perhaps heading to an exam in the Tokyo suburbs. Then there are the Montbell-clad hikers, heading past the suburbs and into the mountains outside the capital.

The first train feels like a true passing of the torch between the night and day Tokyoites. It's more peaceful than its last-train sister, but that doesn't last too long as the city starts to hum back to life. And in 18 hours, they'll do this all over again.