



## Backstreets

# ASAKUSA, TOKYO

THE BUSTLING ENCLAVE SURROUNDING ONE OF JAPAN'S OLDEST TEMPLES EXEMPLIFIES THE COLLISION OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY AT THE HEART OF THE JAPANESE EXPERIENCE, WRITES **ALEXIS BUXTON-COLLINS**.

If you find yourself overwhelmed by Tokyo's constant bustle, the city's oldest district provides a welcome respite from the onslaught to the senses. Centred around a 7th-century Buddhist temple (which has been rebuilt many times), Asakusa predates Tokyo by centuries. And despite sustaining significant damage in the Second World War, it still caters abundantly to the spiritual and secular needs of its residents.

Pilgrims once arrived at Sensō-ji temple via the Sumida River, but four railway lines now bring more than 30 million visitors a year. The people-watching is reason enough to visit Nakamise-dori, a 250-metre walkway in front of the imposing red and gold temple that's lined with souvenir shops and stalls tempting sweet teeth with glutinous *kibi dango* (mochi balls), piping hot *taiyaki* (fish-shaped cakes filled with red bean paste or custard) and moreish *kaminari-okoshi* (crispy rice cakes).

As night descends, the crowds head west and give thanks to the pilgrims who kickstarted Asakusa's thriving restaurant scene. This is where dishes such as shoyu ramen, tempura donburi, yakitori and sakuramochi are said to have originated and it's easy to spend several days tasting the local specialties. The district's long history also makes it a natural base for traditional artisans – the Edo Taito Traditional Crafts Center showcases everything from ornate bamboo screens to traditional instruments – while Kappabashi Street is famous as a one-stop shop for all your kitchen needs.



## EAT + DRINK

### USE YOUR NOODLE

Step into SOBA SHONIN and the sounds of traffic are quickly replaced by customers slurping bowls of cold buckwheat noodles. Each morning the chef makes a handful of varieties from a menu that includes green tea, poppy seed and yuzu soba. And, if you can't decide between them, a mixed box lets you sample all five. [soba-shonin.com](http://soba-shonin.com)

### THE HAPPIEST STREET

Every evening, dozens of lantern-lit izakayas spill out onto the street as HOPPY-DORI transforms from a nondescript thoroughfare into one big party. The atmosphere is cheap and cheerful, with tables groaning under the weight of fried snacks and bowls of hearty meat stew as revellers salute each round of Asahi with a hearty "Kampai!"

### A TASTE OF TRADITION

There are no English signs at cash-only DAIKOKUYA TEMPURA, where old-school edomae tempura is the order of the day. Favouring seafood rather than vegetables, this style comes pre-sauced and provides the perfect counterpoint to the sweet flesh of the giant prawns and whiting inside. [tempura.co.jp](http://tempura.co.jp)

### HAVE A BALL

Though it's 'only' been around since 1954, ONIGIRI AAA YADOROKU is the oldest restaurant in Tokyo specialising in the densely packed rice balls known as onigiri. Eighteen fillings (including glistening orbs of salmon roe and umami-rich shiitake mushrooms) have earned a bib gourmand from Michelin and inevitably sell out before the posted closing time. [onigiriyadoroku.com](http://onigiriyadoroku.com)



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** *Kamarimon* is a popular attraction in Asakusa; Shop for indigo-dyed wares at Wanariya; *Kappabashi-dori* is known for its kitchenware; OMO3 Asakusa looks onto the Sensō-ji temple. **OPPOSITE** (from far left): Bustling Nakamise-dori; The ancient Sensō-ji temple; Wander in and out of izakayas in Hoppy-Dori.



“There is a lot of tradition in Asakusa thanks to the old shrines and temples. But if you explore beyond those things, you will find many secrets like Asakusa Chikagai, where I make new friends every night.”

*Ryo Miyachi, owner of Ninja Bar*

## DAWN TO DUSK A day out in Asakusa

### MORNING...

Dodge local dog walkers (or watch from the OMO3 hotel's rooftop) as monks greet the rising sun by ringing the large bell in front of SENSŌ-JI, then follow the sound of chanting to the grand gilded shrine. When you're ready to find out what the day holds, step outside and get your fortune told for 100 yen.

### AFTERNOON...

Wander past the shop at EDO TAITO TRADITIONAL CRAFTS CENTER on your way to WANARIYA, where intricate patterns on tie-dyed shirts, shawls and bags use 48 shades of *aizome* (indigo dye). You can then learn the secrets of this ancient craft at a workshop that teaches you how to make your own artwork. [wanariya.co.jp](http://wanariya.co.jp)

### EVENING...

The prices at Tokyo's oldest western-style bar have remained largely unchanged for decades (as has the decor) and KAMIYA

remains a popular haunt for locals and tourists alike. Try the house Denki Bran ('electric brandy') liqueur, which has inspired generations of writers and poets. [kamiya-bar.com](http://kamiya-bar.com)

### SHOPPING THERE

A giant chef's head at the entrance to Kappabashi Street beckons foodies to explore hundreds of shops selling everything you need to open a restaurant, from menus and uniforms to hand-carved chopsticks and carbon-steel chef's knives. And everyone stops at GANSO SHOKUJIN SAMPLE-YA to check out the

surprisingly realistic plastic food replicas (bacon bookmark, anyone?). [ganso-sample.com](http://ganso-sample.com)

### STAYING THERE

It's hard to beat the location of OMO3 ASAKUSA, which is just a block from Sensō-ji and has west-facing rooms (and a rooftop terrace) looking directly onto the temple. If you need help making sense of the neighbourhood, sign up for regular activities including dawn temple tours and *rakugo* (comedic storytelling) performances. [hoshinoresorts.com](http://hoshinoresorts.com)

