

Tokyo in the afterglow

How will the “old-meets-new” Japanese capital look in the wake of the Games?



I'm a card-carrying Japanophile but, being as sporty as a sloth, my excitement over the Olympics has little to do with athletes. It's not that I can't appreciate elite competition or the camaraderie, but the Olympics have simply never been my thing.

Okay, it's Tokyo and I'm in lockdown so I wasn't going to miss the opening ceremony and, putting aside Covid concerns, I appreciated that it was typically Japanese – respectfully reserved in parts, tremendously techie (how about that drone globe?), quirky and spectacular. It represented Tokyo's “old-meets-new” catchcry and offered hope for universal solidarity. I may have shed a tear.

My first overseas trip introduced me to my first true love – Tokyo. It was, and still is, the most exciting city in the world. Our relationship was cemented when I moved to Tokyo temporarily at age 20 and it continued to blossom on frequent visits until I moved back in my early 40s, to Kyoto, where I deep-dived into food culture, wrote a book and met my husband – who's as besotted with Japan as I am. Returning to Australia, we launched a tour business to share our adoration and knowledge of Japan – also an excuse to spend more time in our spiritual home.

Locked in Australia since returning from our early 2020 tours, I'd be fibbing if I said the Olympics weren't sparking joy for me in their own special way. I've been dreaming, in Japanese, of friends – let's call them family – who've welcomed us into their lives and from whom we've learnt so much. Whether we were slurping sake and thick-cut sashimi in a backstreet izakaya filled with salarymen, learning the way of Zen meditation, tea ceremony or traditional dance or mooching around markets, they were there. As we witnessed the craftsmanship of sake, soy, miso or pickles, dug up daikon from a share-garden, took country train trips past rice fields, monkeys or mountain peaks reflected on lakes, or literally rang in the new year

with a giant brass bell, under the influence of temple incense and fluttering snow, they were patiently, enthusiastically there. They are still there.

I miss Japan's intuitive hospitality, unique aesthetic styles, natural beauty, and the punctuality of trains – spotlessly clean, ultra-fast trains. The upside to being absent is having time to reflect and appreciate the wonders of Japan. I'm desperate to return and peel off more layers of regional culture, history, and belief systems, but also to discover a new Tokyo. After witnessing many years of Tokyo's inconveniently, albeit neat and well-organised, mushrooming infrastructure around key Olympic venues there now exists enough ultra-convenience and fascination to erase all memory of the birthing process. Tokyo has a long history of reinvention so anticipating the transformation of the city once again (no, it's not finished yet) is a delectable amuse-bouche to the upcoming feast.

Sparkling shopping, dining and entertainment complexes such as the Tokiwabashi Torch Project or Shibuya's Scramble Square will inevitably surpass expectation. Cool new hotels will dramatically improve booking options. Public facilities such as a smarter transport system with a focus on accessibility will benefit the masses as will the automated street cleaners and extraordinary open-air artworks.

The Olympic village will transform into an affordable residential community with, in line with the philosophy of *mottainai*, nothing going to waste – even the athletes' bed bases are made from recyclable cardboard. State-of-the-art event sites offer new environments for entertainment, sports, and arts events. Green spaces, such as Miyashita Park (a rooftop park between Shibuya and Harajuku) would be a welcome addition to any city, but this frenetic hub was overdue for some TLC. The park's thoughtful design provides a well-appointed connection between two tight-knit precincts.

These Games have changed the host city's landscape, which will await locals and the tide of itchy-footed future visitors once restrictions ease. But, newbies, you'd better sharpen your elbows because those of us already smitten by Nihon's attractions are poised at the gate ready to bounce all over that new play equipment – and we're going for gold!



Food and travel writer Jane Lawson believes she was Japanese in a former life. The first place she'll go when she returns to Japan is anywhere she can drink sake and hug friends. Or even strangers.