

PRIME TRAVELER

Tokyo, Off the Map

東京

The city beneath the guidebooks. Neighborhoods, systems,
and small rules of etiquette that turn a good trip into the
one you can't stop talking about.

PRIME TRAVELER · INSIDER TRAVEL INTELLIGENCE

CONTENTS

- 01** Before You Land

- 02** Moving Through the City Like You Live There

- 03** Eating: The System Nobody Explains

- 04** Neighborhoods Nobody Puts on a Top Ten List

- 05** Nightlife Without Getting Quietly Ripped Off

- 06** Baths, Tattoos, and the Etiquette Nobody Tells You

- 07** Timing the Big Sights

- 08** Money, Tax-Free, and the Cash Reality

- 09** The Tells That Peg You As a Tourist

- 10** Quick Reference Cheat Sheet

Before You Land

The single biggest difference between a smooth Tokyo trip and a frustrating one happens before you ever leave the airport. Get these few things right on day one and the rest of the city opens up easily.

Get an IC Card Before You Do Anything Else

Tokyo runs on a tap-to-pay transit card, usable on nearly every train, subway, and bus, and also at convenience stores, vending machines, and plenty of small shops. You can set this up digitally on your phone before you even land, which skips the arrival queue entirely. If you'd rather have a physical card, the machines at the airport train station are straightforward, but budget a few extra minutes since they're rarely fast at peak arrival times.

Send Your Luggage Ahead

Japan has a same-day and next-day luggage forwarding service used constantly by locals and almost never by tourists, who instead drag suitcases through train stations and up stairs. Counters at the airport can ship your bags directly to your hotel for a modest fee, arriving the same evening or the next morning depending on distance. Keep only an overnight bag with you and travel the rest of the day with your hands free.

WHY THIS MATTERS MORE THAN IT SOUNDS

Tokyo train stations are enormous, many with a dozen or more exits, and a surprising number of connections require stairs rather than elevators. A rolling suitcase turns a five minute connection into a genuine ordeal. Locals forward their bags for a reason.

Cash Is Not Optional, Even Now

Card acceptance has improved a great deal, but plenty of excellent small restaurants, shrines, and older shops remain cash only, and this includes some of the best food you'll have on the entire trip. Withdraw yen from a convenience store ATM rather than a bank ATM. Convenience store machines reliably accept foreign cards and are open around the clock, while bank ATMs are often closed overnight and can be inconsistent with international cards.

Get a Local Data Plan Sorted Immediately

Whether it's a physical SIM, an esim you activate before landing, or a rented pocket wifi device picked up at the airport counter, do this before you leave the airport. Google Maps genuinely can't be replaced here. Japanese addresses rarely make intuitive sense from the outside, and even locals frequently rely on a pinned map location rather than a written address to find a specific building.