TOKYO

IN WINTER

Tokyo is incredible in any season, but winter offers some unique experiences to try. Whether you fancy a city break or a stop before a trip to Japan's ski fields, here's how to do Tokyo in winter.

By Helen Foster

Tokyo suits winter – the early dark nights show off the neon-lined streets of bustling Shinjuku and trendy Shibuya to their best advantage.

The lively izakaya bars under the tracks close to Tokyo station look warm and welcoming and it's easier to feel at home in the chic shops of upmarket Ginza wearing a winter coat and boots than finding fashion choices that suit both Tokyo's sweltering summer and its somewhat formal dress sense.

Weather wise, expect cold, crisp days, temperatures hover around 10-12C during the day and drop to 2-4C at night. It doesn't always snow, although in January 2018, Tokyo experienced its heaviest snowfall in four years, so pack warm clothing you can layer. It may be frosty outside, but shopping malls, bars and restaurants will be snug and cosy.

Floral paradise

For a built-up city, Tokyo is studded with greenery, even in winter, but at the end of February the plum trees start to blossom. For prime plum blossom viewing visit Hanegi Park about 30 minutes west of Shinjuku. You'll find over 600 trees in bloom and on weekends vendors sell plum-based snacks and drinks. A 20-minute walk will then take you to the unusual Gotoku-ji temple with its thousands of waving cats.

You'll also find nature in all its glory closer to town in the gardens of Shinjuku Gyoen or Hama-rikyu – both open at 9am which, in a town that normally doesn't stir until 11, makes them the perfect place to start your day. Both have gorgeous traditional tea houses in the grounds. Hama-rikyu's Nakajima-no-ochaya house is particularly famous for its green tea and sweet set (720 yen or around AU$9) and the view overlooking the lake is stunning in any weather.

If you're in Tokyo over Christmas, the truly head-turning displays are less natural and more neon with the city putting on the most spectacular displays of illuminations. Check out Roppongi Hills, Tokyo Dome or the area around Shiodome monorail station for some of the best.

Also bright and shiny is Tokyo Disneyland and its sister park Tokyo DisneySea which offer sights you won't see in any other park in the world. Outside of the busy main New Year holiday, winter sees some of the smallest crowds of the year. As queues here can reach two to three hours long on busy days, this is a big seasonal bonus.

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Seasonal eats

When it comes to bars and restaurants, Tokyo has an abundance of them, offering hearty seasonal food and drink to keep you warm.

In winter, it's said the soybeans are freshly harvested, so tofu is popular. You'll also find lots of restaurants serving nabe, a type of one pot stew. Even vending machines on the street will sell hot tea and coffee (look for the red buttons) and if you're lucky, you'll find a traditional sweet potato cart offering piping hot purple potatoes to snack on.

Another must-eat at this time of year is oden, a broth served with root vegetables, tofu or fishcakes. It doesn't look that good but take a chance and you'll be pleasantly surprised at how flavourful and comforting it is.

You can try it on a food tour of Sunamachi Ginza, a traditional shopping street hidden deep in east Tokyo (bookable at viator.com). They'll take you to six or seven different family-owned food stalls – including one selling amazing oden – explaining the specialities on offer. As you cradle a cup of hot green tea made specially for you by the street's best tea maker, you'll likely be the only tourist in sight.

Chilly days are also perfect to indulge in a piping hot bowl of the noodle soup, ramen, and Tokyo now has two Michelin-starred ramen joints – Tsuta and Nakiryu. You'll get a top-class meal for around 1000 yen (AU$12).

Shop till you drop

You're never far from somewhere to pick up a souvenir in Tokyo. For floor after floor of 'only in Japan' merchandise visit the many branches of Tokyu Hands or Don Quijote dotted around town. For higher-end shopping, Ginza is the place to be. Big name brands and designer labels line the main street but nestled in the side roads are traditional stores selling handmade sweets or kimono.

The sales in Tokyo begin early January – expect to see people queueing to get into their favourite stores and to buy fukubukuro, or Lucky Bags. These sealed surprise bags can cost half the value of the items inside and everyone wants one.

For truly unique gift ideas though, visit an 'antenna' shop. These specialised shops highlight the best crafts and produce from individual areas of Japan. If you want to pick up one of the many sakes or gold leaf lined products from the Ishikawa province, for example, their antenna shop at 2-2-18 Ginza is where to go. There are over 50 antenna stores dotted around Tokyo but the largest concentration in one place is Tokyo Kotsu Kaikan close to Yurakucho Station near Ginza. »

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Illuminations light up Caretta shopping mall in Shiodome district, Odaiba area; geishas wearing traditional Japanese kimono at Sensoji Temple in Asakusa; nabe, a Japanese hot pot; waving cats at Gotoku-ji temple.

Take in a shrine

Traditionally New Year's Day in Japan sees people visiting a shrine to ask for blessings for the next year – thousands will turn up to major shrines like Senso-ji in Asakusa or the Meiji Shrine near Harajuku, and the crowds are a sight to behold.

A smaller temple not to miss (but maybe not for New Year's Day) is Fukagawa Fudo-do, in east Tokyo. This temple is home to the hypnotic Goma fire ritual. There's loud drumming, rhythmic chanting and, in the middle of it all, a priest sits surrounded by fire in which blessings are burned. While on normal days this ritual happens every two hours from 9am to 5pm, on New Year's Day five extra services are put on with up to 200,000 people queuing to have their possessions blessed by the flames.

Soak away your worries

Lastly, the best way to spend a cold winter's day in Japan is soaking in one of the traditional baths known as an onsen. In Tokyo, the easiest to visit is the 'thermal theme park' Oedo Onsen Monogatari on Odaiba.

Start by soaking weary feet in the warm, winding footbath in the garden. This area is communal (and you'll wear a traditional Japanese robe to soak in it) but to soak the rest of you, you'll head inside to the ladies or gent's area – things are segregated as everyone soaks nude.

It's daunting at first but you soon realise no one is concerned with you – so long as you wash your body and hair in the washing area before entering your first bath. The outside pool lets you soak in the fresh air while staying toasty warm, but don't miss the effervescent white pool. It's known as the 'bath of silk' because of how soft it leaves your skin feeling afterwards. It's also reassuringly opaque. Beautifying and concealing – they really have thought of everything.

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Cable Sky on Snow mountain at Gala Yuzawa near Tokyo, Japan.

Skiing in Japan

The main Japanese ski season runs from mid-December to March, although some fields open as early as October using artificial snow.

The closest ski region to Tokyo is Niigata Prefecture which includes resorts like Gala Yuzawa - which is just 80 minutes by bullet train from Tokyo, or Naeba, one of Japan's most popular resorts. Also in this area is Myoko City which has some of the biggest snowfalls.

Three hours away is the Nagano area, also famous for its onsen-bathing snow monkeys. With the country's ultra-fast bullet train system, it's easy to reach even the furthest fields in Hokkaido with a day's travelling.

You can rent skis at most resorts, but it's probably best to bring your own clothing and boots – sizing is small in Japan and although bigger sizes are more common now, it's better to know what you have fits. Rental also isn't cheap – Snow Japan estimate a full kit could cost as much as 4000 yen (AU$48) a day. If you don't want to take kit around Tokyo with you, all the main Tokyo stations, and even many metros, have lockers that you can leave bags in for a reasonable price.

Getting there

Singapore Airlines flies to Haneda and Narita in Tokyo as well as a host of other airports across Japan from Perth with just one stop in Singapore.

Getting around

Tokyo has an incredibly efficient rail and metro system. Buy a Suica or Pasmo card from any station and you can transfer through all the different lines without having to buy multiple tickets. These cost 500Y for the card, you then add multiples of 1000Y to pay for fares.

Where to stay

Great central areas are Shinjuku, Asakusa, Shibuya or Ginza. Hotel rooms are plentiful but often very small – check room and bed sizes carefully before you book. A semi-double bed will be very cosy for two. As well as room size, check your proximity to a station – after a long day sightseeing, anything more than about a 10-minute walk will seem like forever. Hotel prices are higher over the New Year holiday.

What to bring

Comfortable shoes – you will walk further than you think.

Lots of socks – shrines, temples and even some bars and restaurants may ask you to remove your shoes.

Some yen – Tokyo is a cash society but most bank ATMs won't take an international card. Instead, use the ATMs in convenience stores like 7-11 or Family Mart to get your cash. It's good to have some yen handy for the first couple of days while you get your bearings.