JAPAN

From cool bars to vintage fashion, the Japanese city's alleyways yield surprises aplenty. **Paul Ewart** picks the best

TOKYO'S TOP SECRET STREETS

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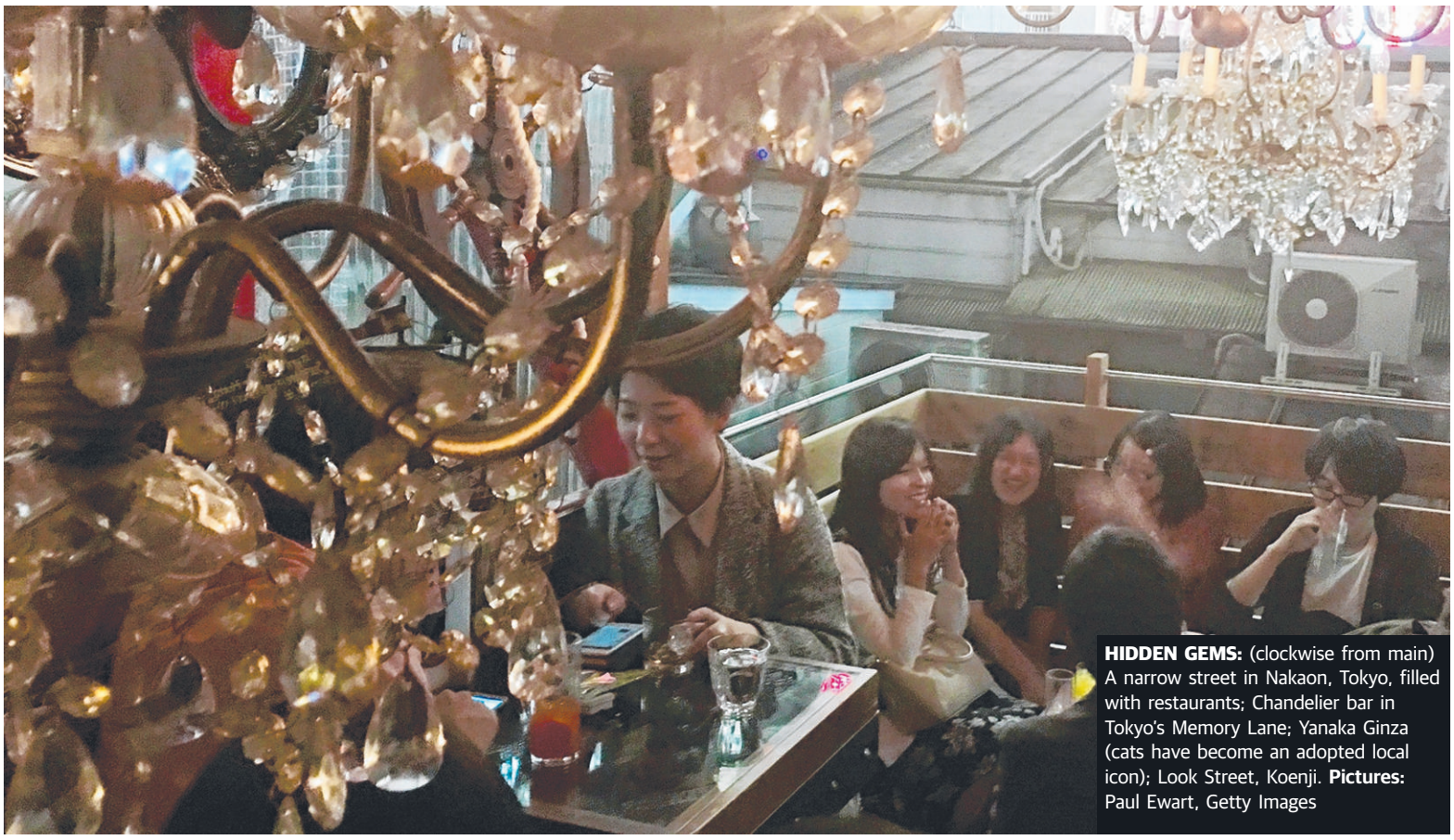
WITH its towering glass skyscrapers, packed subway trains, cutting-edge technology and an A to Z of the world's biggest shopping brands, Tokyo is the epitome of a modern global powerhouse.

However, if you step beyond the frenetic main streets of the neon-filled metropolis, a totally different world awaits – the world of a yokocho alley.

Meaning "alley" or "lane", these hidden time-warps are scattered throughout the city and offer a glimpse into Tokyo's past. Pre-war architecture, cash-only bars and ramshackle eateries packed to the brim with drunken salarymen are just a few of the delights that await those who are game for an exploratory ramble.



HIDDEN GEMS: (clockwise from main) A narrow street in Nakaon, Tokyo, filled with restaurants; Chandelier bar in Tokyo's Memory Lane; Yanaka Ginza (cats have become an adopted local icon); Look Street, Koenji. **Pictures:** Paul Ewart, Getty Images

Omoide Yokocho

Tucked between the tracks on the west side of Shinjuku Station – mere steps away from the lights and blinding progress that defines modern-day Tokyo – lies a decidedly less glitzy collection of small eateries and bars known as "Memory Lane" or colloquially, "Piss Alley".

So called for its former lack of restrooms, nowadays the area is far more salubrious and you definitely won't find public urination taking place, well, probably. Saying that, the place has definitely retained all of its pre-war charm.

Here, hungry commuters and passersby will fill-up on everything from soba noodles to dirt-cheap yakitori. The restaurants are really cramped, which means that your neighbours will undoubtedly become firm friends by the end of the night.

If you're game, pay a visit to the alley's most infamous restaurant, Asadachi. Roughly translated to "morning wood", unsurprisingly the food on offer is all geared towards improving the, er, "vigour" of its male clientele. Think frog sashimi, pig testicles and grilled salamander.

When you've had your fill, there's an abundance of drinking spots nearby and one of the funkiest is undoubtedly Bar Albatross. Offering a bit of glamour amid the old-school chaos, the tiny three-storey space is packed with low-hanging crystal chandeliers and Victorian-inspired decor. Try to sit at the outdoor terrace, which is bathed in Shinjuku's neon glow.

Address: 1-2-11 Nishi-Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku
Omoide Yokocho is located right next to the train tracks on the western side of Shinjuku station.

Yanaka Ginza

For an experience that's decidedly off the tourist trail – and much more relaxed than fast-paced Tokyo – head to the Yanaka Ginza shopping street. A residential area that also lays claim to some of the oldest buildings in the city, the marketplace here has remained unchanged for a century and has an atmosphere that brings you back to the Edo Period.

This isn't a tourist area; it's where locals shop so expect typical grocers, fishmongers and traditional artisans.

The shops are situated mostly along a single avenue, but there are numerous side streets and alleyways to explore too. Try the local "taiyaki" – a traditional fish-shaped Japanese cake filled with bean paste – which has been reimagined in the form of a cat in homage to the adopted symbol of the shopping street (and its copious feline residents). Make sure to take a detour and explore the nearby Yanaka Cemetery, which is a favourite cherry blossom viewing site.

Address: 3 Chome-11-15 Yanaka
A short walk from either Nippori or Sendagi stations.

Harmonica Yokocho

First built as a flea market in the early post-war years, this maze-like collection of alleys on the north side of Kichijoji Station is so called because of the tightly packed two-storey buildings resembling a harmonica's mouthpiece.

Unlike many yokocho, Harmonica offers old-fashioned shopping during the day – from clothing stores and florists to fortune tellers and hair salons – alongside a selection of great little eateries and bars. However, it's at night when the atmosphere really amps up. The lanes teem with people intent on bar-hopping from one tiny hole-in-the-wall to another.

Address: Kichijoji-Honcho 1-chome / 2-chome, Musashino-shi
An easy 1-2 minutes' walk from the north exit of JR Kichijoji Station.

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JAPAN

QUIRKY WORLD: (from main) A view of Shibuya Crossing, one of the busiest crosswalks in the world; a yakitori bar in Memory Lane; and antique masks in Yanaka's Yanaka Ginza.
Pictures: Paul Ewart, iStock

TOKYO'S TOP SECRET STREETS

Nonbei Yokocho

Away from the hustle and bustle of Shibuya yet accessed down a laneway from one of its busiest roads, Nonbei Yokochoor "Drunkard's Alley" does what it says on the tin.

Although it's in a relatively quiet corner of the area (save for the rumble of the nearby Yamanote Line trains), come sundown this place becomes a beacon for salarymen eager to fritter their wages away on a night of boozing.

Marked by a string of faded lanterns, this 1950s laneway has a distinctly *Bladerunner* feel, with its position under the train tracks and the smoky scent of yakitori filling the air.

It's become a tad more touristy in recent years, but it's still one of the best yokocho in the city.

Address: 1-25 Shibuya, Shibuya-ku
Exit at Shibuya station, the entrance to the alley is a short walk from the crossing.

Ameya Yokocho

Beginning life as a black market, the shops on Ameya Yokocho originally peddled leftover supplies (including lots of candy) from the American military ("Ame" means both "candy" and "America" in Japanese).

Nowadays, it's still a brash, bustling and busy market, where the air is filled with cries of hawkers selling everything from cheap trainers and jewellery to seafood and vegetables.

There are more than 400 shops, and haggling – unlike most of Tokyo – is readily accepted here. Hungry shoppers can also take advantage of the plentiful open-air eateries.

In December, New Year's shoppers make its bustling streets impassable.

Address: 6-10-7 Ueno, Taito-ku
Exit to the railway tracks between Ueno and Okachimachi Stations.

Golden Gai

Tucked away in a corner of the giant centre of commerce and entertainment that is Shinjuku lies Golden Gai.

This area is a seven-strong network of tiny alleys that comprise a fragment of old Tokyo – the Tokyo that didn't succumb to the great earthquake, wartime bombings or Japan's race to become a modern economic powerhouse.

Dwarfed by high-rise developments all around, the area's 270-plus eating and drinking dens are only a few feet wide, which means literal shoulder rubbing with your neighbour.

Happily, the area is regarded as one of the friendliest places in the city, so you'll make friends in no time.

Note: Many of the bars have cover charges and some will only serve regulars (new customers have to be introduced by an existing one).

However, you can usually guess that any bars displaying signs in English are open to new clientele.

Address: 1 Kabukicho, Shinjuku-ku
Golden Gai is a short walk from the east exit of Shinjuku Station between the Shinjuku City Office and the Hanazono Shrine.

Amazake Yokocho

Removed from the high-rises of Nihonbashi, this quaint shopping street was named after the amazake (sweet sake) shop that marked the alley's entrance during the early Meiji period (1868-1912) and today, its past and present collide with many shops still selling the sweet Japanese liquor.

About 70 shops line the 400m-long street offering a mix of great food options, from soba noodles and sushi to soy milk doughnuts. It's also a treasure trove for crafts, with shops selling Japanese musical instruments, ceramics, lacquerware and kimonos.

Address: 2-3-37 Nihonbashi-Ningyocho, Chuo-ku
Walk 400m from the Amazake Yokocho intersection outside Ningyocho Station.

Ebisu Yokocho

The newest food alley on the block, this gaggle of lively eateries is already a firm favourite with locals despite only opening eight years ago.

Built on the remains of an old apartment block in a deliberately retro style, the small arcade serves a medley of foods.

You'll find yakitori next to hotpot and deep-fried kebabs and everything in between, which includes both horse and whale meat.

There are also western-style wine bars for those so inclined.

Address: 1-7-4 Ebisu, Shibuya-ku
Take the train to Ebisu Station and leave via the west exit.

Hoppy-Dori

Stretching along the west side of the well-known Senso-ji temple in Asakusa, this 80m-long street is named after the popular local "hoppy" beer-like drink.

Next to an off-track betting zone, it has been a longtime haunt for a hard-drinking crowd of gamblers, but these days young Japanese and travellers are mixing the crowd up a bit.

The street is also called "Nikomi Dori" (Stew Street) after the popular stews it serves. The signature offering of gyu-stews suji nikomi (stewed beef tendon) comes highly rated.

Address: 2-5 Asakusa, Taito-ku
Get off at Asakusa Station and follow directions to the Senso-ji temple.

Look Street

Miles away from the frenetic shopping experience of Harajuku is Koenji, Tokyo's real youth subcultural centre.

Here hipsters congregate in a friendly haven of cool cafes, live music venues and record shops. But the area's biggest drawcard is its abundance of vintage clothing shops, most of which are on Look Street.

Here, you'll find more than 80 shops selling everything from American military surplus and vintage kimonos to customised 1960s dresses and second-hand designer clothes.

Address: Look Street, Koenji
Look Street is an easy walk from Koenji Station.

The writer travelled as a guest of Wendy Wu Tours and Japan National Tourism Organisation.

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TOKYO

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Japan Airlines fly daily from Sydney to Tokyo direct.
See jal.com

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Wendy Wu tours offers several deals to Tokyo, including the four-day Tokyo Short Stay itinerary, which includes three nights' accommodation at Shibuya Excel Hotel plus multiple activities, including the Tsukiji Fish Market and city tour.
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