

# Tsukiji Market Gives Foreigners a Glimpse of “Japan Unmasked”

By Isao ADACHI



The Tsukiji Market in Tokyo, which trades fresh fish transported from all over Japan, has become a popular spot for foreign tourists. As Rungis in the suburbs of Paris is home to the world's largest food market, Tsukiji is definitely one of the largest seafood markets in the world. Besides, it is within walking distance of the posh Ginza shopping district. The clamor of middlemen and buyers fills the early morning air, offering a glimpse of Japan as it really is. There is a good reason for foreigners coming to see the place. The history of the fish market, the very place where the traditional spirit of Tokyoites has been nurtured, dates back to the early part of the Edo period (1603-1867).

Tokyoites mean Tsukiji when they refer to *kashi* or “riverbank” (fish market) in the capital. As Tokugawa Ieyasu was named *shogun* and established the seat of government in Tokyo (then called Edo) in the early Edo period, he brought in fishermen from Osaka and gave them a small island, Tsukudajima, off Tsukiji. Tsukuda fishermen began to deliver some of the fish caught in Tokyo Bay to Edo Castle, peddling the rest on the riverbank in Nihonbashi in the heart of Edo. So, the fish market is still called “riverbank” despite the fact that it has been located in the present place away from the Nihonbashi riverbank since 1935.

As many as 730 intermediate wholesalers are at work in the Tsukiji Market, overcrowding the place with bidders yelling in *seri* auctions and fish being brought in and out of the market. Auctioneers act briskly, fixing prices in split seconds. They utter short words and even do so sparingly, showing their short-temperedness. In fact, what they show is one of the traditional traits of *Edokko*, or Tokyoites, that is no longer seen anywhere else in

Tokyo today. Being *iki* and *inase*, or dapper and gallant, is another set of traits that Tokyoites use to differentiate themselves from those of Osaka and Kyoto. Tokyoites may be short on patience indeed but are compassionate, extending a helping hand at first sight of people in need. They are of plain character, giving little heed to money and just spending all they earn. A saying goes that “Tokyoites don't keep money overnight.”

It may be that ordinary people could afford to live like that in the affluent capital of the Edo government that had a population of one million. The Edo trait *inase* stems from *ina* or young lively fish growing into mullet. *Inase* refers to the posture of open-handed youngsters of the riverbank that, along with that of carpenters, other artisans and merchants, constituted the foundation of townspeople's culture in Edo.

The popularity of the Tsukiji Market results in part from the fact that anyone can enter without reservation. The Rungis market is also open to visitors, but it requires reservation as well as an admission fee of 38 euros per head. A meal comes with the admission fee, but it is a bit expensive. Some 5% of all foreigners visiting Tokyo reportedly come to Tsukiji. In 2009, foreign tourists visiting Japan totaled about seven million. With nearly 60% of them visiting Tokyo, this means about 210,000 foreign tourists visited Tsukiji. There is a maze of narrow streets lined with fish shops and eateries in an area just outside the market. Called the Tsukiji Outer Market, the area is a big attraction for visitors who can actually sample fresh fish.

Tsukiji was never intended for amateur visitors, thus forcing tradesmen to walk side by side with tourists in the market. Consequently, trouble does occur. At a popular daily tuna auction starting at 5:30 a.m., some foreign tourists could not help but touch the fish with bare hands in the past. This has forced the market to set a quota of auction viewers to 140 per day. Judging by Internet postings by foreign visitors, however, they seem to understand the new rule. One such posting read that they felt like they were obstructing the work of people in the market.

There are new observations about the Tsukiji Market on Internet postings, including “the ordinary life of Japanese unseen in other tourist spots” and “a new addition to the image of Japan.” There is no doubt that foreign visitors find in Tsukiji a chance to appreciate that modern Tokyo has the root in Edo as depicted by *ukiyo*e artists Utamaro and Hiroshige.

Tokyo has a plan to relocate the Tsukiji Market about 2 km east to Toyosu, a reclaimed tract of land, by 2014. The new market will be designed to have guide paths for tourists, complete with an auction observation facility built on the second floor. The new market will also have a building for the Outer Market eateries. It is an altogether different matter though whether the lively attraction of the market, nurtured over a long period of time, can be reconstructed or not. It makes me worried.

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