

Workers Who Go Home to a Hotel Room

By Hiroyuki Yamamuro

For more and more office workers in Tokyo, the end of the working day signals that it's time to return to their hotel.

One might well ask why they should choose the loneliness of an empty hotel room to going back home to spend the evening with their families.

To answer that question requires a crash course in Japan's most precious commodity—land. Land prices in Tokyo are among the highest in the world. One plush apartment some 15 minutes by car from central Tokyo was rented out for ¥2.5 million (roughly \$20,000) a month when it was completed last year.

Taxis too dear

Tokyo is no longer a place where salaried workers can afford to live, and that means that their "rabbit hutches" are now getting further and further away from central Tokyo.

Nowadays, a daily commuting time of 90 minutes is considered to be quite reasonable for Tokyo workers. Many, however, take as much as two hours each way to reach their jobs by public transport. Quite often, though, when a company man's day is over, and the trains and buses have already stopped, the only way to get home is by taxi. It will cost more than ¥10,000 (\$77) to go so far out of town. It's cheaper to stay in a hotel.

Besides, they can also save on traveling time and get a longer rest. No two hours standing in a sardine-packed commuter train the following morning. Considering the alternatives, no wonder a worker elects to stay in a hotel, near his job.

However, the hotels concerned are hardly five-star establishments. In fact, the boom in hotel hopping was ignited in Osaka in 1979 by the appearance of an institution peculiarly symbolic of modern Japan, the "capsule hotel."

In a typical capsule hotel, molded plastic or fiberglass "capsules" are stacked on top of each other in dimly lit rooms. Inside the mass-produced capsules, each measuring some two meters long by one meter wide by one meter high, are a mattress, an alarm clock and a small televi-

sion. For this high-tech, air-conditioned park bench, the overnight guest pays between ¥3,500 and ¥4,000 (\$27-30). So popular have these bizarre creations proven that they have spread throughout Japan, with nearly 20,000 beds in service. There are between 50-60 capsule hotels in Tokyo alone.

But capsule hotels aren't the only beneficiaries. Big city hotels, facing heavy competition because of a recent hotel-building boom, have jumped at the opportunity. Last year, the Seibu and Tobu groups both opened luxury hotels in Tokyo's fashionable Ginza area, triggering a "hotel war." Now, to increase turnover, they have come up with a midnight discount rate. One hotel distributes "discount coupons" to snack bars, clubs and companies in its neighborhood. Anyone checking in after 10 p.m. with this coupon gets a 40% discount on the regular room charge. Another hotel has countered with what it calls, the "Sunday study room." The check-in time is advanced on Sundays to 11 a.m. instead of 2 or 3 p.m. as is more usual. The check-out time is 10 a.m. the following day, allowing the guest to use the room a full 23 hours—and at a 30% discount.

A new poverty

Recently ads started appearing for a space-lending business called "self-study room." In this brainchild of a cram school in Osaka, ordinary desks are surrounded on three sides with panels, creating small cubicles in a larger room. The cubicle is then rented out for ¥200 per hour. For a lump sum of ¥12,000 (about \$92), the desk can be reserved for a whole month. The cram school started the service for students, but it has been so popular among salaried workers, who account for more than 40% of all renters, that the school is now thinking of getting into the business in earnest.

The popularity of rental desks is yet further evidence that Japanese don't have enough space in their own homes. And those homes, moreover, are getting farther and farther away from central Tokyo.

According to a survey of 285 major



More and more salaried workers living far from their Tokyo offices are staying in hotels during the week, sparking competition in which some hotels offer a discount to guests registering after midnight.

firms by an external organization of the Ministry of Labor early this year, the average annual income of a *bucho* division general manager was ¥9.5 million, that of a *kacho* department manager ¥7.34 million, and that of *kakaricho* section head ¥5.54 million. The average annual income of rank-and-file employees was ¥4.12 million.

Yet a survey by the Urban Developer Association of Japan, an organization of real estate companies affiliated with private railway companies, showed the price of one square meter of condominium floor space was ¥642,000 (roughly \$4,940) within a radius of 10-20 kilometers from downtown Tokyo Station. A 75 square-meter condominium for a family of three would easily cost ¥48 million (about \$369,000).

That is roughly 12 times the average annual income of a rank-and-file employee. The general yardstick for affordable housing for a salaried worker is said to be five times annual income. It is thus well nigh impossible for an average company worker to own a house within 20 kilometers of central Tokyo.

Thus, salaried workers, given the choice of burning themselves out just commuting for hours in a crowded train, have no alternative but to stay at hotels in central Tokyo. Staying in hotels may seem a luxury, but in fact it is a mark of a new brand of poverty, the product of skyrocketing land prices in Japan's capital city.

Hiroyuki Yamamuro is a reporter on the City News Desk of the Yomiuri Shimbun.