

# Ups and Downs

Photos and essay by Sonia Katchian



Take my word for it, there are more stairs in Tokyo than in any other city in the world. They are possibly also the longest.

"Oh, you get used to them," was the blithe reply of one expatriate I questioned in my early days in Japan. I found myself doubling, and sometimes tripling, the amount of time I needed to reach an appointment.

Up two flights to catch a train, then down and up again to transfer to another line, then down to get out; but we're not yet home free. The city fathers have thoughtfully built pedestrian walkways over the traffic—but it's up, up, down, down again!

The Japanese seem to take it all in stride. How do the elderly cope with the problem? Many are admirably spry and manage very well; others pause and catch their breath at every step. There are escalators, but not always where you need them. Women in kimono face double jeopardy since there is a "proper" way to ascend and descend stairs in kimono.

The Japanese have been building and climbing stairs for centuries. There are stairs of worn stone leading to teahouses, stairs made from cut-down trees leading to shrines, stairs that use the roots of living trees for steps. In a nonfunctional setting stairways offer a challenge and imply endeavor or a sense of striving. That's why you find stairs at the approaches to religious sites all around the world. But nowhere are they so lovingly made, and nowhere so tortuously long, as in Japan.

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