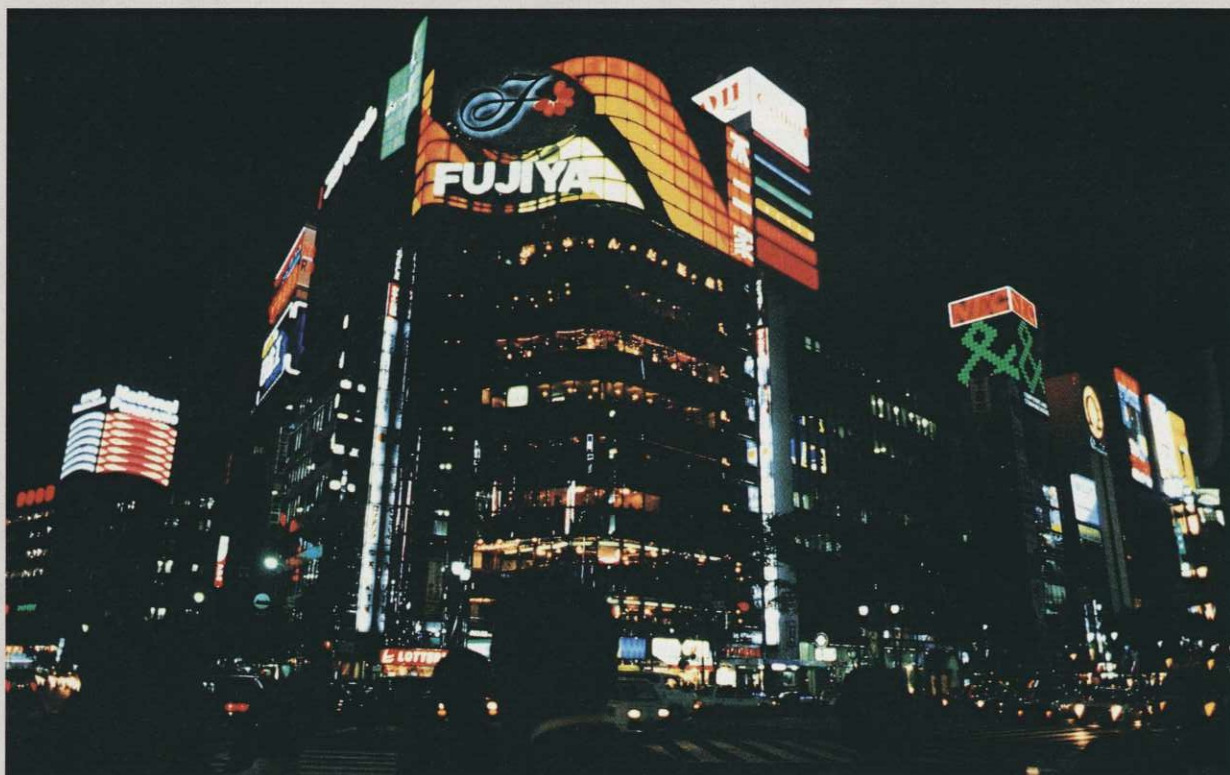


Year-end Adventure

Photos and text by Naoki Mukoda



It is the end-of-the-year party season again. Called *bonen-kai* in Japanese, these end-of-the-year parties are an integral part of Japanese social life. They are an indispensable rite marking the end of the year for almost any Japanese group—be it a project team at work, a gaggle of housewives studying flower arrangement together, the neighborhood merchants association, students studying under the same professor, people who go fishing together, or any other group that meets regularly for one reason or another.

Japanese dictionaries succinctly define the *bonen-kai* as “a gathering held at the end of the year to enable people to forget the tribulations of the year just ending,” and the term might be literally translated as a “forget-the-year meeting.”

The more groups a person belongs to, the more end-of-the year parties he or she will go to. In addition to the ones at work, businesspeople will often be

invited to parties with clients and suppliers. In fact, December schedules are so crowded with *bonen-kai* that close friends frequently move theirs up to late November.

Although there is no set format for these *bonen-kai*—young people even hold them at discos sometimes—they are frequently followed by a round of bar-hopping. As a result, the town's eateries and drinkeries do a booming business at the end of the year—not just in the urban centers but even in rural villages. Especially on Fridays and Saturdays. Just look for the flashing neon lights, and you are likely to stumble across a party in progress. Take a chance, and you may discover an adventure.

Speaking of adventures, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* was one of 1989's favorites at Japanese movie houses. A tale of high-adventure, it demonstrated once again the enduring popularity of thrillers. Whether they are

books or movies, adventure stories seem to have a special appeal to people who are otherwise hemmed in by the strictures of modern society. When everything is laid out ahead of time and boringly predictable, our minds seek the stimulus of adventure. And often these are adventures into the labyrinth of the unknown. Not knowing what lies around the corner is half the fun.

So is it with the neon-lit pleasure districts of Tokyo. They are winding labyrinths with little side streets full of hole-in-the-wall bars. They are whirling kaleidoscopes of adventure. Just follow the neon. The *bonen-kai* season is a time to forget the year—but it might well also turn out to be an unforgettable time of year.

Naoki Mukoda is a photographer and adventurer.

