

Above the City

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley





It is not easy to visit central Tokyo and miss the spindly red and white spire of Tokyo Tower. Jutting up over the endless warren of streets and buildings, it looks foreign and awkward. The tall tapering web of its beams and columns brings to mind another era, a time when Japan was trying hard to be what it has now become. Back in the '50s and '60s—even in to the '70s—Japan had an apparent fixation on the superlative. Something Japanese had to be the “-est,” even if it was a qualified “-est.” Fastest, highest, whatever. Somebody—evidently a lot of somebodies—thought that if Tokyo had its own answer to the Eiffel Tower, well, that would be another kind of “-est,” too. So Tokyo Tower was built and became part of the capital's landscape.

Standing here on a steel beam, several stories above the higher of the tower's two public observation platforms, I get an adrenaline-charged new perspective. A stiff breeze off Tokyo Bay plucks at my clothes; the sun plays hide-and-seek behind a sky full of clouds. The city spreads out in all directions, a mammoth scale model of itself, complete with tiny cars and trucks and even people. Trying carefully to keep my balance, I glance straight down between my feet, to the roof of the wax museum-cum-aquarium-cum-souvenir shop-cum-restaurant building a couple of hundred meters or so directly below me. Tokyo never looked like this before.

Mr. Mishima and his assistant are right out at the edge. They remove the reflector cover from a light fixture and ease out its huge bulb. While the assistant holds the fixture, Mishimasan inserts a new bulb. It, along with several hundred others, is part of the array of lights that illuminate the tower at night. With the new bulb in place,

he wordlessly checks a list, looks across the angled maze of white-painted beams and motions to his helper. Carrying their tools and cartons of bulbs they move off. I follow, stepping where they step.

Later, after they have installed all the new bulbs that they have painstakingly carried up narrow ladders and across even narrower beams and catwalks, we ride down from the observation platform in the elevator. The tourists riding with us warily eye the work clothes and helmets and boxes of used bulbs.

Mr. Mishima, a man who gives new dimension to the word laconic, suddenly breaks character and announces, “Tomorrow we'll be doing the Kasumigaseki Building. Gotta fix a couple of antennas. I've been doin' this for over 10 years, but every day's different, even if its the same place for two days in a row.” His bespectacled assistant nods but says nothing. I nod, and say nothing. “Hard to get young people interested in real work these days;” he continues, “seems all they want to do is wear suits and take it easy. That's a problem in this country now. Hard to find good help, not like in the old days when this tower was new.” The assistant nods. I nod. “They don't want to admit that somebody's actually got to make things work.” The elevator stops. The door opens. We bow and say our good-byes. Mr. Mishima and his helper disappear into the dark maw of the maintenance department. He is an anachronism like the tower, a surviving remnant of the days the superlative.

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