

# Tokyo; A Breath of Fresh Air

By Margaret Price

In the morning, before heading for work, I will often put my toddler on the bike and off we go to a park. Our favorite is about 30 minutes away along a riverside path. Though the river has concrete along its sides, there can be nothing more pleasant than all the gardens and flowering hedges along its way and seeing the people out with their dogs and babies. One section of the path is lined with chrysanthemums for about 100 meters. I nod and smile at the man who tends them year-round just so we passersby will go Ah! in the Fall.

Getting closer to the park the whole way is lined with weeping cherries. Their beauty stops you dead in April. And this is Tokyo. Right at my back door in an ordinary neighborhood only 15 minutes by train to Shinjuku, the busiest train station in the world.

Tokyo has been taking me by surprise like this for 20 years. The first thing I found was that for every ugly, noisy and polluted main road in the city there were at least 20 back streets full of quiet residences – their pocket-size gardens burgeoning with plants – where the only sound might be a squeaky bicycle. How could a city so populous be so peaceful and agreeable? Tokyo has 17 million people, almost as many as the whole of my country, Australia, but to me it feels at-home.

Part of the reason for Tokyo's agreeability is that it's a walking city. We are so addicted to cars in Australia that I would find myself driving instead of walking even as far as the corner store. But there is nothing going for cars in Tokyo. It is a city perhaps unique in the world for the efficiency of its trains, covered as it is in a fine mesh of railway lines with stations at uncommonly close intervals. These stations have become the hubs of hundreds of towns-within-a-town and this provides the most endearing feature of this incredi-



Photo : Margaret Price

The author and her daughter at a neighborhood park

ble city – the fact that in spite of its immense size and mind-boggling population, one discovers it to be “small,” friendly and exceedingly human.

My station is Koenji. It is a 15-minute walk home from there but there is nothing boring about that walk. The entire way is a jumble of shops and eateries and a jostle of people. The shopping street has such oddities as a tropical fish shop, a health food shop for dogs, an outlet specializing in honey, two charming galleries, three great ethnic giftware shops, a place selling only umbrellas, and I could bore you with much more. I don't need to go to the supermarket: it's more pleasant getting my bread from the best of three fine independent bread shops, my tea from the shop where tea is sold by weight, my *tofu* (bean curd) and meat a few steps from my home, fruit and veges from the man who always makes my daughter giggle. I know all the shopkeepers and they know me.

In the Edo period (1603-1867) when society became highly formalized, the

clever “*goningumi*” (group-of-five) system was introduced for administration and to prevent crime. Every community was divided into units of five households – just small enough that everyone knew everyone else. All the people in the group took responsibility for their own and they could spot an intruder a mile away. There was literally no place for strangers to go. The misfits of society found themselves drawn together into groups that later turned into the *yakuza* gangs. These gangs were initially rather benevolent organizations which, while engaging in activities not considered appropriate for “proper” young men and women – say, running festival stalls – did society an enormous service by providing “families” for those who could not fit in with their own – and with their own strict code of honor.

Edo, which is what Tokyo was called then, can thank the *goningumi* system for the peace and order that reigned. The benefits are still being felt. When I came to Tokyo 20 years ago it was still



common for people to feel safe enough to go out and leave their houses unlocked. Now that the intimacy of such close-knit communities is being lost to faceless high-rise living, though, robbery is also on the rise. But my own neighborhood is low-rise and strange behavior is still relatively easy to spot. And there are quite a number of neighborhoods like mine.

Friends who live in a part of the city which boasts traditionally close-knit neighborhoods, tell me that the people on their street still gather spontaneously outside their houses on hot summer nights to drink beer and talk. That does not happen on my street, but even so, when I compare Tokyo with Australia, I find a more palpable sense of community, and this makes me feel safe.

Recently, Tokyo surprised me again – this time with its parks. After 20 years in this city, I knew about its fantastic gardens – the Zen ones and the grand-scale ones built by *daimyo* feudal lords – but parks? It was only after having a child that parks gave me yet another feature to admire this city for.

All big cities have their vibrant parks – Hyde and Central – where people converge, mainly on weekends to be seen and to watch. Tokyo has a couple of biggies too. But I am not talking about special-outing parks; I am more concerned with the neighborhood ones that are as close as a stroller-ride from home and really part of the immediate community.

In Tokyo, nobody has to walk more than five minutes before they find a park – some are dinky and seldom patronized, but most are places where parents and kids, gateball and chess players, exercisers, oil painters, people with dogs, and musicians gather every day. Mothers who come from all over the neighborhood form friendships around the sandbox that last at least as long as it takes for the children to graduate from mud pies to math. I might go to a different park in my neighborhood every day but there are familiar faces everywhere.

This morning after my daughter and I arrived at our favorite park, she spotted a charcoal-grey schnauzer out for a



The author and her daughter at Inokashira Park

walk and any dog is like a magnet to my child. The old lady walking the schnauzer handed her the lead and off they went – but who was leading who? In a sweat after all the exertion she sat down with me at a picnic table to eat rice balls and we were soon joined by a local man full of stories about what the park was like 40 years ago – all rice fields with croaking frogs. He likes this park because it was not man-made from scratch like the newer ones – it grew in a rather organic way around a natural spring-fed pond, to meet the needs of the times – gradually accommodating a sandbox, things to climb, swings and slides, an open space where the elderly gateball players peg out their course in the mornings and exercise equipment, which seem to be the domain of retired men in tracksuits.

By arriving a couple of hours later we would have found the park a-scramper with two to five-year-olds. Each nursery and kindergarten in the vicinity takes turns in bringing their charges there, one group after the next, so they do not overlap and the park will not overflow. The other day 10-year-olds came with their art teachers on a sketching assignment.

We went to the pond to feed the fish, to see the turtles sunning themselves, and check on the brood of newborn ducklings. Six of the 13 had been picked off – crows maybe, or cats. And so there were only seven.

Tokyo playgrounds have no grass, I

remember telling my appalled mother when I first had my baby. The parks in my home country have lots of grass and state-of-the-art playground equipment. But nobody ever seems to be in them! Tokyo parks, on the other hand, may be short on grass and the bare earth makes them a bit dusty, but they are always full of activity.

Tokyo looks the most abominable mess from the main roads – it can't be helped, since it grew up in such a rush before anyone had time to think about urban planning. But it has occurred to me that I find this aspect of the city extremely appealing. The only "well-planned" city I know is Australia's capital Canberra, man-made from scratch for a forward-thinking, car-centered society with big, wide boulevards and orderly dwellings. But there is no city as deadly boring or as stifling as Canberra in its "perfection." Meanwhile Tokyo, for all its crowded streets and dusty parks, is like a breath of fresh air.

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