

A Brief Guide

LGBTQ TOKYO

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In 2016, someone I'd not seen in nearly a decade messaged to ask if Japan was safe to travel as a same-sex couple. It was a sobering reminder that the safety I felt as a queer person in Tokyo was a combination of many factors. These factors are not easy to research, so I compiled my experiences and advice from local friends as an effort make transparent considerations that may affect someone. I hated the idea that unnecessary doubt might trail her on a vacation simply because she couldn't find information.

Since then, Japan's queer community has become more visible to a global audience through programs like *Queer Eye: We're in Japan* and the growing list of Tokyo Wards and cities recognising same-sex unions in Japan. But where do TV shows and legal battles fit into the lives of people every day, as they walk down streets, meet friends, or find apartments? How might the experience of a foreign traveller differ from an expat English teacher? What social dynamics do foreign people need to navigate with local Japanese?

This guide is a working document for gay, lesbian, and trans community members. It does not offer a definitive "lay-of-the-land" and is instead a tentative starting point for people to find safety and comfort in Tokyo.

Athena
2020 Oct

HOW LGBTQ-FRIENDLY IS TOKYO?

Unsurprisingly, it depends. Packed into the LGBTQ+ umbrella is a host of other factors that can affect reception, such as your perceived ethnicity, language ability, perceived gender, and social circles, to name a few factors. LGBTQ-friendliness can be separated into at least three categories: locals, foreigners who live in Japan, and foreign travellers. Even for foreigners, the experience of Tokyo based on Japanese language ability can vary widely. This guide is aimed at visitors and people who might be moving to Japan and looking for communities.

As a general rule, there's virtually no public discrimination against same-sex couples or gender ambiguity. In general, public violence is not commonplace nor condoned. From visible foreign travellers to locals alike, one is likely not going to be called slurs or in danger of getting assaulted. This is partially due to lack of awareness (people don't realise you're gay or lesbian), partially to Tokyo's range of subcultures (you may



just have 'eccentric fashion'), partially that white foreigners have a *gaijin* pass, meaning they're given exceptions.

PDA has a different standard for women and men. No-one would bat a lash at women holding hands, since it's commonplace from grade school right into adulthood. Men don't have the same luxury when handholding.

Travellers making bookings are sometimes concerned about rooms or filling in spousal information. Travelling with friends is common enough in Japan, so there should be no issue filling out the usual booking forms for a shared room. If you have children, it should not be an issue either. Generally, hospitality in Japan dictates that the front desk would give everyone a proper, professional greeting. Officially, Japan recognizes the marriage certificates of any issuing country.

For trans and non-binary people, the washrooms are usually the biggest concern. In Tokyo, accessible toilets are 皆のトイレ "Toilets-for-everyone" are frequently found at train stations, department stores, and malls. They are a great option. Otherwise, go to the washroom of the gender you identify as with the air of entitlement you deserve. I am often mistaken for a boy and might occasionally get a comment about how the men's room is the other way.

If you are trans or non-binary and want to go to an onsen, the easiest solution is to have your own private onsen, which is priced at the cost of luxury. Since everyone must go in nude, it will be expected that you physically match the stereotypes of cis-male and cis-female bodies. Note that visible tattoos are banned, irrespective of gender.

Make your own judgement calls. There are exceptions to the norms I have just described. Generally, whether you are a same-sex couple or trans person, you are likely safe in Tokyo. Rural areas may be more conservative and give more stares, but Japan as a country is generally safe to travel in.

Beyond the travel experience, being LGBTQ can be very tough for for locals. Bullying is a common problem and gender discrimination can manifest in violence. If you are meeting up with a local, be understanding that they may have more at stake than you.



WHAT'S THE COMMUNITY AND SCENE LIKE?

As I wasn't actively in the LGBTQ community while I lived there, most of this information comes from local and expat friends who are fluent in Japanese.

Shinjuku Nichome is Tokyo's equivalent to New York's Greenwich Village, San Fran's Castro, London's Soho, and Toronto's Church Street. In short, it is where the scene is most visible and active in the way of bars, clubs, and sex clubs. Much like Shinjuku's nearby tourist attractions: [Golden Gai](#) and [Omoideyokocho \(Yakitori Alley\)](#), Nichome is squeezed into a few small blocks, in even tinier venues. If you visit, go after 8pm and you could well be entertained until 8am the next day, hopping from bar to bar, and eventually returning to your favourites. Note that most of them are in upper floors and many change addresses with rent increases.



The local and foreign communities don't mix too much because language remains a huge barrier, but Tokyo's LGBTQ community groups have been growing more visible online in recent years. For gay men, there are Japanese men who only "specialise" in dating foreign men – and I have been told that fetishes are pretty common. If you want to cruise as a gay man, then Shinjuku's saunas may be your place.

Many people, especially locals, are not entirely out. To locals, going to Tokyo Rainbow Pride once a year or hanging out in Shinjuku may be their main community event. Or, they may have a private LINE group with trusted hang out circles. This socialising tends to be organic and introduction-based rather than advertising a community group online. **If you befriend a local, please be mindful of their situation and check in to see how out they are and how they want to be introduced.**

LGBTQ rights and events are growing in number. In the past few years, Tokyo's Rainbow Pride has picked up steam (since Rainbow Tokyo and Tokyo Pride finally joined forces) and attracts a fun crowd in the parade through Shibuya to Yoyogi Park. Tokyo also has an LGBTQ film festival as well as increasingly vocal workplace advocacy and same-sex marriage groups.

LGBTQ things pop up in random places, such as otaku-related areas. Japan, and especially Tokyo, has anachronisms that seem liberal elsewhere. This eclectic mix can all fall under "weird" Japan to the outside world and that means that you might find vintage pornography magazines in second-hand bookshops or cosplayers in the high-end Ginza shops. Be on the lookout for LGBTQ related things, such as yaoi in the anime mecha of Nakano Broadway.

TOKYO

COMMUNITY GROUPS

Meetups:

- [Tokyo LGBTQIAP+ and Supporters](#)
- [Tokyo LGBT Community Cafe](#)
- [Tokyo Gay Book Group](#)
- [Tokyo Gay Professionals](#)
- [Go Meet Japan \(Yaoi interest\)](#)

Since around 2015, the community groups in both English and Japanese have become more visible online. Though Japan's LGBTQ groups are relatively small in relation to its 100 million people, they have nonetheless been present and served communities for years. I suspect it is due to the increasing user-friendliness of online platforms, whether home-grown Japanese ones or the localisation of global ones, which have enabled groups to set up websites. Though I did not feel the need to find local queer groups while in Japan, searching for them online has led to these conclusions:

- [Twitter](#) is a good source of information
- Instagram is gaining popularity, and following LGBTQ spaces there may be useful for events

Japan's content is not well indexed on Google. This makes it hard to search for the right content, even though you can copy and paste keywords in hiragana, katakana, and kanji (which might yield Chinese results). I've tried to include a mix of groups below that might meet a variety of needs, whether for youth, families, professional life, or dating.

Gay and Lesbian

- [akta](#) is a community centre in Shinjuku Nichome and support group for people with HIV
- [Fruits in Suits \(FiNs\) Tokyo](#) is pretty expat-friendly
- [QWRC \(くおーく/Queer and Women's Resource Center\)](#) is for queer women.
- [Kakurez \(隠れズ\)](#) that supports lesbians who are mostly not out
- [Co-Llabo](#) supports lesbians and their visibility

Trans

- [Team Respect and Solidarity \(TRanS\)](#) is for trans people in Japan to connect and share resources.

Community Support Groups

- [LGBTCatH](#) for mental health support, disabilities and/or addiction
- [Queer&Ally](#) for community events.
- [性と人権ネットワーク ESTO](#) is a non-profit that runs workshops, gatherings, lectures to raise awareness

Workplaces

- [Nijiirō Diversity](#) is for workplace inclusion since 2013
- [Good Aging Yells](#) has been around since 2010 and works with corporates for D&I

Youth

- [にじーず@LGBT系ユースの居場所](#) is a space for LGBTQ+ youth (up to 23) in Tokyo, Saitama and Kyoto.
- [Pride Project](#) has a hotline and events for students (including [Pride Online in 2020](#)).
- [Rebit](#) is focused on youth and university students and organises "Rainbow Crossing Tokyo" as well as leadership programs

Rainbow Families

- [Rainbow Families \(Nijiirō Kazoku\)](#) was founded in 2010 and nation-wide
- [LGBT Family & Friends Group](#)

TOKYO

EVENTS

- Tokyo LGBTQIAP+ and Supporters
- Tokyo LGBT Community Cafe
- Tokyo Gay Book Group
- Tokyo Gay Professionals
- Go Meet Japan (Yaoi interest)

In addition to the clubs and Meetup.com events, there are some annual events to check out.

- Queer Tokyo Fair ([IG account here](#)) started in November, 2019
- Tokyo Rainbow Reel and Tokyo's Gay and Lesbian Film Festival
- Twitter's LGBT Events
- Tokyo Rainbow Pride (Late April - Early May) – with several events and a parade that goes from Shibuya to Yoyogi Park, with performances
- Shinjuku Nichome's Matsuri (August) – like most summer festivals, it feels like a neighbourhood party, but with drag queens, performances, and lots of street food
- Gender Free Party happens a few times a year (tip from a trans friend who lived there)
- Trance DISCO
- Place Tokyo (ふれいす東京) - an HIV positive centre with English speakers meeting nights

QUEER SPACES IN TOKYO

Tokyo has a slowly growing number of queer spaces, though many of them remain under the radar.

Cafe [Ryusen](#) (formerly PURX) is an LGBTQ space with a vegan menu. It is located near Iriya Station 入谷駅, just north of Asakusa. You can also check out the online store [Loneliness Books](#) collects LGBTQ Zines from Asia. I think they have some content at Ryusen.

Most of the night life is in Shinjuku Nichome for both men and women. The area is affectionately called Nichome and I would recommend walking over from the Tokyo Metro Shinjuku Sanjome Station because it is more manageable than the main JR Station.

In this section, I am including advice from a local Japanese friend who used to frequent Nichome before settling down with her girlfriend.



Bar Culture & Meeting People in Nichome

- **It's okay to go on your own.**
- **It's a custom to treat a bartender.** You say *ippai douzo* (一杯どうぞ) and let the bartender choose their own drink.
- **Bartenders help introduce you regulars and the community.** By treating the bartender, they will help initiate conversations to include you. Of course, look for the more chatty ones.
- **Barhopping is common practice.** It is called *hashigo*. Bartenders will usually say *itterashai* when you go, and welcome you back with *okaeri* when you return later.
- **If you like a place, consider having a "bottle keep".** You buy a full bottle and you can likely paint or label the bottle as you like. That will be your bottle every time you come in, which is a great way to invest in a space you particularly like.

Shinjuku has numerous places for men. Places gay men can be categorized from bars, clubs, massage parlours, and sex clubs.

Double check if place are open. Rents are high. Places may close and re-open with a different name. Make a local friend to stay in the know.

For Gay Men

SHINJUKU'S BARS

Shinjuku's bars are within a 200-metre radius. Most aren't 1st Floor.

You can check the [Japan Visitor list](#) complete with a sectional map. The "boy's map" for Japan is [Otoko-machi Map \(男街マップ\)](#).

Shinbashi is a hub that attracts 30+ office crowds. Go with someone who speaks Japanese. [Town House Tokyo](#) and [Bravo!](#) are more foreigner-friendly. Some places are closed on Sundays.

24 Kaikan Hotel and Sauna Shinjuku 7-story sauna with communal and private rooms, baths, steam rooms, glory-hole room, cafe. ¥2,600 for 13 hours. Open 24 hours, 365 days. Foreigner friendly, but limited English. This article explains [navigating 24 Kaikan](#).

AiiRO Cafe is a small place with an English-speaking proprietor.

Aisotope Lounge is a two-level gay bar and club with quite a packed party schedule.

Arty Farty has enough space for a dance floor, and unlimited drinks with the cover during happy hour.

DNA is a good place for a chat and open daily.

Dragon Men is a streetside bar (in contrast to some of the upstairs spaces) and is one of the more spacious options. Daily happy hour is from 6pm-9pm.

Fuji has karaoke and is for more mature foreign guys and Japanese guys into them.

Kinsmen has friendly bar staff and no cover charge.

Leo Lounge

Tac's Knot also features gay artists' work.

For Queer Women

BARS

Some places for have monthly events for queer women or unofficial events.

Travellers often visit Goldfinger, which is perhaps the most famous and used to foreign visitors.

Adezakura (艶櫻) Is a recommendation from a friend who says it's popular amongst locals and foreigners.

Agit アジト is a lesbian-owned bar with karaoke (has cover charge)

Bar Goldfinger is probably Shinjuku's most famous lesbian bar.

Cocolo Cafe is a low key space that my friend recommended.

Diamondholic – A local friend says the staff try to connect people and get everyone chatting to each other. My friend has had introductions to English-speaking people.

Dorobune is a teppanyaki restaurant and lesbian bar-in-one.

FIVE is a local friend's recommendation. She says it's popular among foreigners too.

絆 Kizuna is for an older crowd and has kareoke

Motel #203 might have been folded into Goldfinger now, as the website is down.

Peach (1F Shinjuku 2-15-8, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo) – *Might* be closed. Open Tues – Sat 11pm-7am. Peach mark in a brick building.

Tamago is a women-only bar. A friend told me was mainly FTM and that they can rip off customers (¥2000 cover, ¥1000 drinks).

WHAT'S IT LIKE LIVING IN TOKYO?

Like any big city, the Tokyo one experiences depends on a host of factors in addition to being LGBTQ.

Race is probably the most constant factor. If you are white, you will probably find a support group for your grievances on how Japanese treat white foreigners. In reality, it is a fraction of what POC people experience (without a white *gaijin card*) if you are from a wealthy Western country. Whether you are a Japanese Nissei, seen as Chinese, South-East Asian, brown or black will lead to slightly different pattern of experiences.

Your command of Japanese will also affect your experiences. If you have basic Japanese and some patience, then a whole world of information opens up to you online, but that might not translate to comfortably navigating offline experiences. If you are fluent, you will likely understand far more sentiments than you care to know, especially in local offices. At the same time, it will



also likely make all of Japan feel accessible to visit.

Finally, your work will be a major factor. If you are in a Japanese company, it is likely that unless you have to address gender markers, your colleagues will not speculate or question about your identity, even as they ask about boyfriends and girlfriends. This could be due to lack of awareness. Corporate Japan is now getting behind global diversity and inclusion initiatives, largely as a talent recruitment strategy, but I do not have first-hand insight into what LGBTQ support they have internally. Most English speakers will end up teaching English, in tourism, or increasingly in the tech industry. Remaining in these communities will bring the comfort of familiarity, but at some point might become a bit homogenous.

People who choose to date will usually identify patterns such as a particular type of gay man who might only be into white foreigners. The popular US apps for online dating are used in Japan. In the end, the challenges one finds in LGBTQ communities back home are largely the same, with an additional language barrier and dynamics of racialised identities (assuming you're not ethnically Japanese).

The factors above nonetheless lead to a myriad of queer experiences of Japan. Though I did not actively engage in Tokyo's queer community, many of my friends were queer and spoke fluent Japanese. A Chinese friend lives with her girlfriend, both of whom work in local companies and they have their own routine. One local female friend used to be a Nichome regular, had an ex who was married and is now with someone who never previously identified as queer. One white trans friend had regular Nichome connections in bars and a theatre. Another white male friend dated, but was determined to be miserable. These may not reflect "typical" Japanese or expat experiences because my friends are bilingual.

For local perspectives, you can follow the [Gender Cooking Blog](#) by a black-Japanese lesbian in Japan and also check out Masaki Matsumoto's video on [5 Things You Didn't Know about LGBT/Qs in Japan](#), or [Being A Gay Couple In Japan \(ft. TabiEats\) | THE VOICELESS #9](#).

Articles include [Being Black & Gay in Tokyo](#) (2016), [Another Gay Man in Tokyo](#) (2015), or follow [@GraceTing](#), who is doing a PostDoc at Waseda.

I recommend listening to locals, POCs, and immigrants (not expats) when you search for online voices.

LGBTQ Content and MEDIA

English Content

Masaki Matsumoto is a queer writer and YouTuber (Channel: Queer ESL)

Yay Feminism - A blogger advocate of social, political, legal, and economic rights for women and trans.

Naminanamix - English & Japanese blogger on trans activist

Loneliness Books is an online store of LGBTQ Zines from Asia

Youtube Videos

- Being A Gay Couple In Japan (ft. TabiEats) | THE VOICELESS #9 (2018) - a bilingual interview on the changes in the gay community in Japan
- QueerESL is hosted by a bilingual local, Masaki Matsumoto
- 100 people featured on National Coming Out Day Videos in 2017, 2018, 2019.

Twitter

- @GraceTing グレイス・ティン 丁恩宜 - Wades PostDoc; Assist Prof in Gender Studies at HKU 香港大學. Queer theory, feminism, Jp/Asian literature & pop culture.
- @gendercookingen - The English account for a biracial demisexual/lesbian living in Japan.
- @toomanybirdy - Sunny @ dissociation; English & Japanese (based in the US)
- @Gregor_Wakounig - English/German in Tokyo. Writer for Zatsudan
- @nnn_tomoya: creator of the documentary *I am Here*

Instagram

- [Blossom the Project](#)
- [Ko archives](#) - an Instagram account with lots of gender, LGBTQ, and social justice material
- [Fuyukikanai](#) is an illustrator on Instagram
- [+81 Instagram](#) and [+81 Podcast](#) isn't LGBTQ, but might end up there at some point.

Media

- [Pride House Tokyo LGBTQ Guide](#) - from 2020 in anticipation of the Tokyo Olympics and in English and Japanese
- [Purple Millenium](#) - A Genderless Magazine in Japanese (IG [@purplemillenium](#))
- [Gender Cooking Blog](#) - A bilingual blog by a biracial lesbian in Japan
- [Gay Japan News](#) - A Japanese gay and lesbian news site, with an English section
- [Tokyowrestling](#) - A Japanese-English bilingual site with lesbian and queer culture

- [Nijiirō Diversity](#) - Company that advocates for diversity in the workplace
- [Zatsudan - 雑談](#) (Deutsche) - based in Tokyo
- Japanese sites include [Nijipi](#), [Rebit \(Japanese Site\)](#), [Letitbee Life \(Japanese Media\)](#), [Huffington Post JP \(Japanese\)](#)
- Gay men's content in Japanese includes: [Gay Map \(Japanese\)](#) and [Genxy](#)

Articles

- [Being Black & Gay in Tokyo](#) (2016)
- [Another Gay Man in Tokyo](#) (2015)
- [Being gay in Japan](#) (2013)

Movies and TV

- [I am Here](#) (2020) - Trans Documentary
- [Out in Japan \(Photo & Video Series\)](#)
- [弟の夫](#) (Ototo no Otto / [My Brother's Husband](#)) (2018) is a TV adaptation of a manga

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