



Patrick Colgan

# HORIZON JAPAN

Travels through the culture, cuisine and nature  
of a seemingly incomprehensible country

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# TRAVELTELLING





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JAPAN**

Travels through the culture, cuisine and nature  
of a seemingly incomprehensible country

goWare

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## INTRODUCTION

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From the crowds of Tokyo to the bears of the far North, from the jungle of the tropical islands to the blooming cherry trees in Kyoto, eventually arriving at the big emptiness left by the devastating 2011 tsunami and nuclear disaster. Patrick Colgan, journalist and traveller, immerses himself in Japanese culture, nature and cuisine and writes about his discovery of a seemingly incomprehensible country. A place, Japan, where feeling a little lost can be fascinating, and trips never really end.



PATRICK COLGAN was born in Bologna, Italy, in 1978, of an Italian mother and British father. He began traveling fifteen years ago with an InterRail pass and never stopped since. He has been in almost forty countries and all five continents but he loves going back to Japan, where he has been (so far) seven times. When he is not travelling around the world he is a Journalist at the daily newspaper Il Resto del Carlino. He has been writing his travel blog Orizzonti for years, in Italian. He has recently started a [blog in English](#) too.

# Foreword

This book is the result of six trips to Japan in the space of four years, in different seasons, different conditions, alone and with a companion, and with a different degree of knowledge of the country and the language. The chapters are not in chronological order. Some are partly adapted from my blog, originally written in Italian.

# Prologue

Panic. It's what I feel while the half-empty Alitalia plane I'm on is descending over Tokyo, on a crisp, clear January morning. Exhausted by twelve hours squeezed into an economy class seat, I suddenly find myself surrounded by people speaking a language I don't understand, while we are moving towards the unknown. I know this feeling, this emptiness in my stomach, this sudden wish to flee. I felt it before touching the ground in India, and during my first big trip on my own, when I saw from the plane the vast sprawling urban mass of Istanbul grasping the margins of two continents. It's the fear of facing something unknown, a pleasant shiver of which you suddenly lose control.

And in spite of all the aspects of Japanese contemporary culture that are well known in the West, at least superficially, from sushi and manga, to the success of authors such as Haruki Murakami or Banana Yoshimoto, Japan unfailingly evokes a sense of obscurity, an inability to communicate, and thousands of incomprehensible ideograms.

The questions I was asking myself that day while the plane was landing in Narita are the same that many readers of my blog ask me every week: "Will I be able to find my bearings? Will I be able to make myself understood? What troubles will I face?" This book is about a journey which from that day hasn't yet ended. This is also because, luckily, the answers to these questions are not always positive ones: feeling a bit lost

and out of place in Japan can be exciting, and makes you want to try to understand it a little bit more.



# The places



# The cities

## Tokyo subway

The railway is drawing me into Tokyo's enormous stomach, this gigantic abdomen. It's the Narita express moving along the tracks, but to me it seems that a superior force is inexorably dragging us along these bundles of intertwined nerves. Tokyo is a huge living being, and the gargantuan railway and underground stations are its synapses. The people, the crowds, moving in an orderly way inside them, are the electrical pulses giving life to this city. Everything seems to obey laws, patterns infinitely repeating in the habits of millions of people getting together there. These scores falter only at certain times, always the same. It's not during the morning rush hour, when platoons of resigned office workers end up squeezed into overflowing underground cars. No, that's everyday life. The system seems on the verge of falling to pieces only at closing time on the weekends, when the crowd dissolves at around midnight, dashing for the last train, staggering from the way-too-many drinks had in the *izakayas* with their colleagues.

The image of this city as something alive, an enormous stomach, an intertwining of nerves and arteries, stays with me. It has been fixed in my mind for two years, ever since I saw an exhibition on Metabolism, a Japanese architectural movement which included Kenzo Tange among others. It theorized, briefly, that men, and life, adapt to changes in the

environment; that cities renew themselves continuously in a constant exchange. Or this is how I understood it, perhaps wrongly. This idea stuck in my mind and inevitably made me think of the city as a living organism which grew with its inhabitants. And while I was in a lift, climbing to the top of the sky-high Mori Tower that hosted the exhibition, I was still obsessed with what I saw, like the model of an immense megalopolis of 100 million people imagined between Tokyo and Osaka. And here I was, surrounded by a sea of lights as far as my eyes could see. Tokyo, with its 13 million lives, was an ocean-city. And from that height the streets, the trains, looked like blood vessels, the conduits through which the fluids of a huge living being flowed. While I was trying to resist the freezing cold wind of that winter night, I could hear the city's background noise, its big, deep breath that reached me from below.



[\[1 – Tokyo from the top of the Mori Tower\]](#)

“Why do you like Japan?” I was suddenly asked by Lorenzo, a 36-year-old that had been teaching Italian for a year and half in Sendai. I never know exactly what to say when I am asked this question. I am still looking for the answer after travelling six times to the country. I love the nature and culture of Japan, even the aspects that I understand the least. I love that feeling of recognizing something and still not being able to completely get it. I try to explain it, but Lorenzo stops me: “I love Japan,” he says, “because I like the Japanese, the real wonder of this country. And I think it’s the same answer you are giving.”

He was right. And, speaking of people, here, crammed in the city, there are a lot of them. It's impossible in Tokyo not to be surprised by the sight of the crowd and intoxicated by the feeling of being part of it, even if only briefly. It's the first thing that astonishes you when you arrive and are at once swallowed by its stations, like the tentacular Shinjuku one. The best vantage point from which to watch this great daily show is the underground, the bottleneck through which everybody flows and from which they are spat out: everyone from the schoolchildren dressed in their uniforms, who often take the trains by themselves, to the old ladies in kimono. There are students, office workers, elderly people, and few Westerners. These are often tourists who here, completely out of scale, lost and asynchronous with respect to the orderly flow, invariably look like foreign bodies. "The greatest travellers made themselves invisible," wrote Paul Theroux; here it is not possible.

The train is a pervading presence in the life of this metropolis, where people can completely renounce the car, which here is expensive and not that useful. Most of my Japanese friends don't even have a driver's license. The train is a constant thought, because it's the underground that scans and filters every movement; the rhythm of life itself revolves around its timetables. At first sight on a map, its reticulate looks absurd, unintelligible, a tangle of coloured spaghetti thrown onto a white sheet of paper. Actually, it's tough to read even for Tokyo residents, who while travelling, cling to their daily habits. And when they deviate from them, they trust in their smartphones' apps, accurate to the second, to orient themselves in this labyrinth.

Haruki Murakami's *Underground* is the tale of a terrorist attack and of

the wounds that it inflicted on the nation, written through a series of interviews with survivors. But it's also a great essay on the Tokyo underground. From its pages I learned that for many passengers the daily routine is always the same, full of certainties. Everybody is part of a mechanism which maybe isn't perfect, but that unfailingly works. For this reason, many couldn't believe what happened in 1995, when the Aum cult launched a series of deadly attacks with sarin gas on subway cars. Many people who were already feeling the effects of the gas and suffering shooting pains stayed put, believing that at the end everything would be fine. Eight people died.

An act of terrorism was something unthinkable, just like finding a seat on a crowded stretch of the Yamanote surface train line - such an unexpected event that it can change a commuter's day for the better. I am here on holiday, and I think about the stressful life and the exhausting, long commutes. I feel sympathy for these people. And, on the crowded train, I remain standing, even when I have the chance to grab a seat. While I stand, I look around and try to work out some statistics from what I see. A few people sleep, even vertically, which is probably an ability unique to Tokyo residents: they fall sleep while standing, a few minutes after they enter. And they invariably wake up a few seconds before they reach their station. About a third of the people read newspapers, novels or comics. It's difficult to tell between the two latter categories, since almost everybody uses an anonymous cover. Finally, about half of the passengers are bent over their smartphones, sometimes playing video games, but more often using an app called Line, messaging friends who are probably on a train headed for the

opposite side of the megalopolis. People here are seldom lucky enough to share the commute with colleagues. When it does happen, they speak softly; they whisper. Or they don't speak at all. Nobody eats, nobody talks on the phone, because nobody wants to bother the person next to them. Maybe, like Paul Theroux again writes, politeness and attention to the rules really are a survival strategy in a city so big and crowded. It's the only way this crowd can work. This vision might be superficial, but it's an overview. It's a start.

## The food

I am walking in the back streets of Shinjuku, far from the famous neon signs that inspired the set design of Blade Runner, but I feel alien, just like a replicant. I glimpse the doors that open up in the buildings. There are men dressed in dark suits sitting at the counter, bent over their bowls. There are places where young people gather around men moving skewers on a grill. In some, men move a plastic curtain aside and come out, opening a view into places full of smoke and steam, from which only the sound of wooden chopsticks exits, or that of noodles that are eaten in a liquid symphony of air-sucking mouths. It might be five in the afternoon, or six, or even midnight. These are images that replicate themselves ad infinitum, like in a mirror-covered passage.



[2 – Skewers are prepared in a tachinomi, a place where you eat and drink while standing]

It might be anywhere, even Osaka, Sendai or Sapporo. They are all cities