

# Journey through Time

The Edo-Tokyo Museum offers 400 years of history, in just a few hours.

by **Rosie Ball**



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The bustle of the Edo period is apparent in this miniature 1/30 in scale of the Ryogoku Bridge district on the east side of Edo.

Japan's illustrious Edo period (1603–1868) ended in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and thanks to the Tokyo Metropolitan Edo-Tokyo Museum it has never been more accessible. Beloved by local and international visitors alike since its establishment in 1993, the Museum provides a space where visitors can see, hear, and touch their way around 400 years of vibrant history, physically tracking the city's evolution from Edo to present day Tokyo.

Located in Ryogoku, inside a unique elevated-floor building designed by architect Kikutake Kiyonori, the journey to Edo begins with an awe-inspiring replica of Nihonbashi Bridge, which is about 8 meters wide and about 25 meters long, half the actual size. The bridge is our first



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People wearing kimono walk around westernized streets in a detail of the miniature replica 1/25 in scale of Ginza "Bricktown" in the Meiji era.



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The modern exterior of the Edo-Tokyo Museum. A wealth of history, culture and tradition is to be found inside.

impression of the sheer scale of Edo period ingenuity, transporting visitors right into the cultural center of Edo. On the other side of it, visitors will find various miniature replicas, including the vibrant streetscapes of the Nihonbashi area and immense households of the powerful feudal lords. With binoculars placed at each model, visitors can peek into the personal lives of the miniature figurines, whose circumstances, facial expressions, and clothing paint an immersive picture of the people of the time and the world they lived in.

There are also hands-on exhibits. For example, visitors are invited to take a seat inside a replica of a gorgeous palanquin. During the Edo period, members of powerful families would sit inside of this compact compartment as up to four people carried them to their various destinations. Entering the palanquin brings forth a compelling mix of sensations—the glee of entering a space that was once mostly used by the elite classes, and the surprise of discovering that these compartments were actually very small.

After witnessing the lifestyle of the Edo period, subsequent displays are laid out in chronological order, the timeline of Tokyo's progress toward modernization. In the Meiji era (1868–1912) section there are two high wheel bicycles that look quite difficult to ride, featured in front of a full-sized replica of a newspaper office, all innovations of that period. And further along, it is possible to take a peek inside the nostalgic kitchens and bathrooms of a Showa era (1926–1989) housing complex. Most impressively, the number of permanent exhibitions is around 2,000, and since these are routinely modified and upgraded, repeat patrons to the museum are never disappointed.

As varied as the permanent exhibition is, so too

is the diversity of visitors. "I knew nothing, so this is all very new for me," says one woman from Australia, "I like the way it progresses from the old to the new... it's very well done." A French couple wandering around the "Life of the Townspeople" corner is more affected by the extent of the exhibition. "It is great because we can see the history on a human scale," they say, "we can *feel* Edo." Regardless of age, culture, or

prior knowledge of Japanese history, reactions from tourists are overwhelmingly positive.

Perhaps one of the greatest highlights of the museum is how it caters to a variety of languages. Audio guides in 13 different languages are available, as well as free volunteer-guided tours in 8 languages. Even if visitors do not use these guides, touch screen panels can be found throughout the exhibition hall, allowing them to easily tap into information written in the language of their choice. For the visually impaired, information in braille, including maps, are to be found throughout the exhibition hall.

In the lead-up to the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020, the Edo-Tokyo Museum has its eye on the future as well as the past. The recent interior renovation of the facility has improved accessibility so every visitor can have a more comfortable and interactive experience. The museum seems to combine the social and cultural aspects of Tokyo's history to encourage people from home and abroad to think about the future of the city and their aspirations here. More than ever, Tokyo is opening its doors so that the world can get to know it better.



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A full-scale replica of a typical performance shows the exuberance of kabuki, the most popular form of entertainment in Edo.