

NAKAMEGURO

Tokyo means flashing neon, slick skyscrapers and futuristic fashions, right? Not in Nakameguro. Welcome to the quiet bookshops, the inviting restaurants, the laid-back lounges and the wild herons that share this sakura-lined stretch of river. It's a world apart, with the buzz of the city never too far away.

**By Adam H. Graham
Photography by Andrés Fazzari**



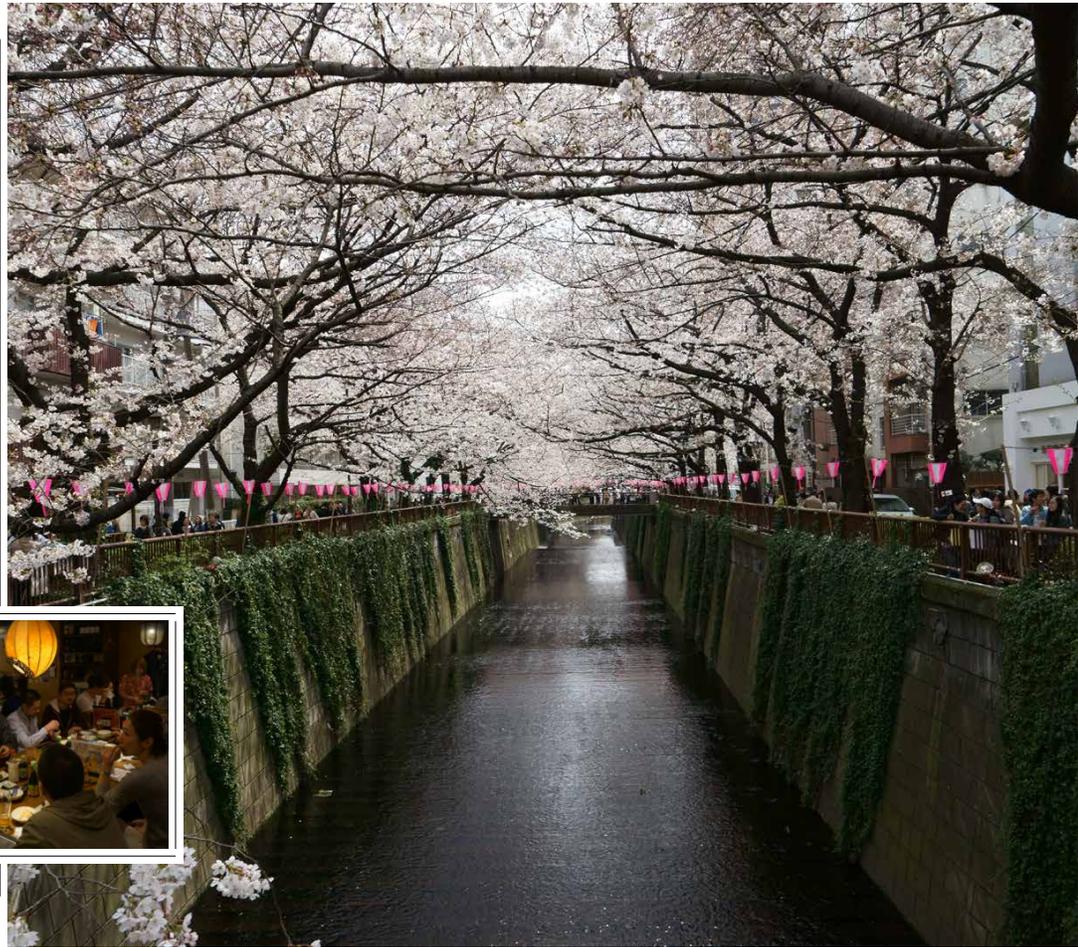
AT FIVE O'CLOCK EVERY AFTERNOON, a jingle chimes over the public speakers and echoes throughout the river valley that is home to Tokyo's Nakameguro neighbourhood. In Japan, every ward has its own daily 5:00 pm chime that's played so children know when to come home. But there's something especially sweet and simple about Nakameguro's chime, almost like a music-box lullaby. While it plays on this sunny Tuesday, I watch a squawky colony of escaped green parakeets munching on plum blossoms, old-timers in overalls quietly pruning bonsai and rose bushes along the street corners, and white-capped school children wending their way home in a line like ducklings.

This is probably not the Tokyo you know. First-time and even repeat visitors to the city get caught up in Shinjuku's futuristic forest of concrete and neon, in Shibuya's and Ginza's raucous department stores, and in Harajuku's Goth Lolitas and *manga-otaku* (geeks). They head to Tsukiji Fish Market, Meiji Temple and the Robot Restaurant, which continue to be top draws for tourists. Visitors by the million—an estimated 10 million in 2014—keep Tokyo in the top 20 tourism cities worldwide, and as it prepares to host the Summer Olympic Games in 2020, the total will rise. But the usual sites don't offer a glimpse of the day-to-day Tokyo that lies beneath the bustle. There's a reason why 38 million people make this the world's biggest metro area.

Tokyo has an often overlooked soft side, and it's the perfect place to find some shade, browse specialty boutiques, sample local and not-so-local fare, and while away a peaceful day.

Calm Nakameguro lies a mere two subway stops or 20-minute taxi ride away from Shibuya Station, the world's second-busiest train station, handling some 1.09 billion passengers every year. But you'd never guess it. Nakame, as locals call it, is bisected by a stretch of the Meguro River lined with cherry trees. Known to Tokyoites as the former home of luminaries like Crown Princess Masako and Japanese folk singer Shigeru Izumiya, the neighbourhood is renowned for its springtime *sakura* (cherry blossoms), leafy parks, and small shops, galleries and restaurants. It's bookended by Nakameguro Station in the east, and in the west by the **Meguro Sky Garden**, a marvelously engineered rooftop garden perched atop a multilevel motorway rotary. The Sky Garden is an excellent place to take in aerial views to help you get your bearings—and it's just one of many "only here" secrets that Nakame and the surrounding area hide.

“Tokyo has an often overlooked soft side: Nakame is the perfect place to find some shade, browse specialty boutiques, sample local and not-so-local fare, and while away a peaceful day.”



previous spread: Out for a walk along the photogenic Meguro River
this spread: (right) the izakaya-style Nakame no Teppen restaurant; (far right) the tranquility of Sakura season



this spread:
 (colour images, left to right from top) Cow Books; Kinfolk Lounge; Ofr Gallery; Cherry Blossom Festival selfie; Pizzeria da Isa; interior of Pizzeria da Isa; Hashidaya restaurant; personality in the details

“ Discover off-the-beaten-track pockets with steamy ramen joints, mom-and-pop pork tonkatsu counters, boulangeries that could have been transported from Paris, and coffee shops that seem to belong in Brooklyn. ”

After repeated visits and a recent two-month stay in Nakame, I continue to discover off-the-beaten-track pockets with steamy ramen joints, mom-and-pop pork tonkatsu counters, boulangeries that could have been transported from Paris, and coffee shops that seem to belong in Brooklyn. Leafy Shinto shrines, tucked-away temples, residential parks. Start at Nakameguro Station and walk one kilometre in any direction, and you're bound to find something special.

Most visitors to Nakame will want to begin with a walk along the river (technically more of a steeply banked canal) to enjoy the Yoshino cherry trees, which get older and grander the farther west you go. It's worth strolling along both sides of the canal. There's no bad time of day to visit, but my early-morning and evening weekday walks have been rewarding, providing glimpses of an area with its guard down and wild birds like night herons and white egrets.

These walks are also the best time to visit canal-side shops, which can get busy on weekends. Stop into **Cow Books**, specialising in rare, out-of-print and limited-edition English titles, with an emphasis on the Beats, counter-culture writers, and cult titles by the likes of Bruce Weber, Diana Vreeland and Japanese photographer Ikko Narahara. Nearby, you'll find **General Research**, a meticulously curated menswear shop offering a collection of outdoor gear with an urban edge, such as slim-fitting fly-fishing vests and luxurious cow-leather moccasins. You could spend hours browsing through stores like these.

But don't spend all your time shopping—Nakameguro and the greater Meguro area are famed for their food. Dozens of excellent restaurants hug the canal, but one of the prettiest is **Hashidaya**, a honey, timber-clad *nabe* (hot-pot) restaurant specialising in chicken and charcoal-grilled vegetables. Watch as fragrant enoki mushrooms, cabbage, leeks and balls of gingered chicken are stuffed into a pot of simmering broth on the table in front of you. Don't leave without nibbling a few deliciously addictive *abe*, tiny chicken wings marinated in soy and honey and flash-fried. (Reservations are required, especially for the coveted window seats in the upstairs tatami-mat room.)

At the other end of the spectrum is **Koop**, a casual café serving cakes, salads, pizzas and daily specials. I wandered in late one Saturday afternoon and was surprised with a delicious taco rice—the contents of an American-style taco (spicy ground beef, diced tomatoes, shredded cheese and lettuce) served over white rice. It's a classic Okinawan dish popularized

this spread:
(left) The social scene along the river; (far left) at ground level, below the Meguro Sky Garden



ASIA & THE PACIFIC



Where to Go

Wander the streets of the Nakameguro neighbourhood to find some of the best shops, restaurants and parks Tokyo has to offer.

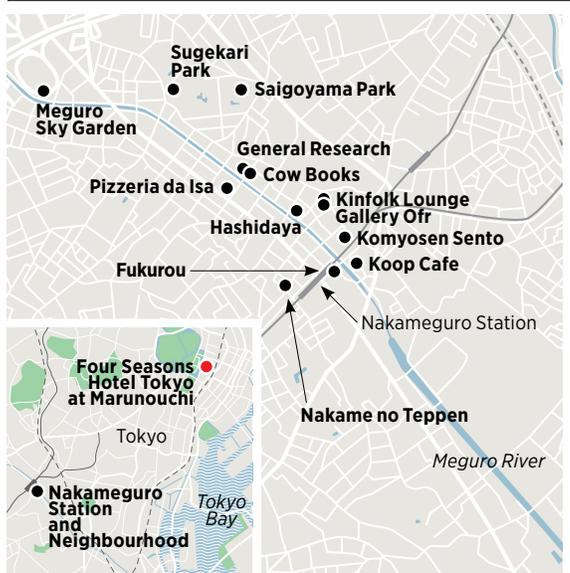


Illustration: Ole Hantzsch

by American soldiers yearning for a taste of home. I washed it down with a glass of Japanese Chardonnay, which like all Japanese wines is worth getting to know, along with the country's sakes and *shochu*.

Appealing as they are, the canal's side streets are only part of the action. Many of Nakame's gems tuck into the alleys and lanes that spoke out from the canal. **Nakame no Teppen**, a two-block walk from Nakameguro Station, is one of the neighbourhood's most delicious secrets. Its entrance is hidden inside a stairwell: Crouch down under a Lilliputian sliding door to enter. Once inside, the aroma of grilled sardines, the sizzle of searing beef, the clink of Chu-hais (highballs made with shochu) and the chatter of locals will open up the world of Japanese *izakaya*, pub-like establishments serving tapas-style dishes.

For something perhaps more unexpected, try **Fukuro**, a French *robata* (home-style charcoal-grilled) counter near the train station. As at all the best restaurants I've visited in Japan, the menu is in Japanese only. True foodies, though, need to know only one phrase to get the best meal every time: *Osusume wa nan desu ka?* ("What do you recommend?") My reward for asking at Fukuro: tender Wagyu beef, melt-in-your-mouth tuna, briny oysters and a chargrilled lobster tail bathing in drawn butter. When I finished the lobster,

the chef threw the shell into a pot of boiling water, added a bit more butter and cream, and returned it to me in impromptu bisque form, for no charge. It was a great example of *mottainai*, a Japanese concept of reusing, recycling and reducing waste.

I realise you may be thinking, "French food in Tokyo?" Many visitors to Japan intend to eat only Japanese food, but to skip international cuisine here would be a travesty—especially in Nakame and Meguro, renowned for Japanese chefs who are perfecting international cuisines from Italy to Ethiopia to Sri Lanka. While many travellers know Tokyo holds more Michelin stars than any other city in the world, few outside Japan know of its excellent international offerings. New Yorkers—and even Neapolitans—

who assume they've cornered the market on pizza should prepare to be blown away by Nakame's **Pizzeria da Isa**, which sees lines

around the block on weekends. Proprietor Hisanori Yamamoto won the World Pizza Cup, held in Naples, three years in row.

When it's time to walk off all that food, two of Nakame's most picturesque parks lie connected nearby: **Saigoyama** and **Sugekari**. Saigoyama features plenty of cherry blossoms, walking paths and some of the best views in the city. If you're travelling with kids, Sugekari in particular is very popular with the stroller set. It's also home to a *wakan*, a Japanese-style house and garden that is open for tours.

To thoroughly absorb the neighbourhood's relaxing vibe, I like to cap off my day with a soak at the handsomely designed public bath, **Komyosen Sento**. Or have a nightcap—rooftop lounges and jewel-box cellar bars abound here. During local festivals and sakura season, pop-up bars and food trucks line the streets, hawking glasses of pink rosé and flutes of sakura-spiked shochu. My go-to bar is **Kinfolk Lounge**, a relaxed space perched above **Gallery Ofr**, which is a great place to browse for books or grab a coffee. It's also a magnet for artists, gallerists and creative expats. French artist/owner Frank Le Petit, who came to the area by way of Australia, has lived here for seven years and has seen the neighbourhood undergo several transformations. "In some ways, it's changed dramatically in the last decade, but it still remains a place where small independent shops and boutiques thrive, without the presence of big corporations and department stores," he tells me. "It's not easy to find neighbourhoods like this in Japan."

Nakame today shows a bright, sunny disposition, but its past has a sombre side. Some say the river is home to ghosts. On the night of March 9, 1945, about 100,000 Tokyo residents perished, many in this area, and more than 286,000 buildings were destroyed in a World War II bombing. On the 70th anniversary of that day, I walked around the canals, uninterrupted by any ceremony or memorial service. I paused to marvel at the recovery of both the city and the neighbourhood. As if on cue, the gentle chime began to play, and the area began its beautiful descent into evening. There may be ghosts in the water and memories in the trees, but Nakameguro has found peace, and, like the river that sustains it, keeps moving forward. ■

Adam H. Graham is an American journalist and travel writer based in Zürich. His fourth trip to Japan took him from an extended stay in Nakameguro to Toyama Bay and the mountains of Hakuba in the Japanese Alps.