



Across Tokyo

Patrick Foss
with Sean Kramer

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CONTENTS

[*Cover*](#)

[*Title Page*](#)

[*Copyright*](#)

[*Map: Tokyo Metropolis*](#)

[PART 1: MOUNTAINS](#)

[PART 2: RIVER](#)

[PART 3: SPRAWL](#)

[PART 4: BUILDINGS](#)

[PART 5: CORE](#)

[PART 6: SEA](#)

[*Notes*](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

The following account reflects the opinions of the author and Sean Kramer and is based on our recollections, spotty notes taken while on foot across Tokyo (we're not journalists), and subsequent research. Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of certain individuals. There are no composite characters. Dialogue has been reconstructed, shaped, and added to at times for narrative purposes.

So call it 90% true. Okay, okay: 85%. But the rest is pretty close.

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Tokyo Metropolis

Sumida River
Arakawa River
Edo River

SAITAMA
CHIBA
KANAGAWA

Okutama
Hamura
Lake Okutama
Tama River
Yokota Air Base
Kichijoji
Shinjuku
Akihabara
Kasai Rinkai Park
23 Special Wards

Islands

0 5 10 km

Route

23 Special Wards



----- Route

23 Special Wards

PART 1

MOUNTAINS



Lake Okutama

AT THE WESTERN BORDER OF TOKYO IS THE KAMOZAWA BRIDGE, WHICH CONNECTS THIS giant metropolis with a village, called Tabayama, which has a population of maybe six hundred people. Here, at least, Tabayama seems the more bustling of the two. As my friend Sean and I get off the bus, we see several houses on the village side of the border, some ancient, weather-beaten statues, and a restaurant that may or may not be open. A motorcycle is parked nearby. An older man is puttering about in the distance.

On the Tokyo side? Well, there's the road. It's called the Ome Highway, but here it's hardly more than two narrow country lanes. We stand in the middle of it for a few minutes after the bus leaves and no cars come from either direction. On one side of the road is a forest-covered hill. The leaves on some of the trees have already turned yellow or orange, but not too many. It's only October 18th, after all, and it's bright and warm and sunny enough to still feel like summer. On the other side of the road is a lake.

And...that's it. There are no skyscrapers at the Tokyo border; in fact, there are no buildings. No neon lights. No crowds. The sign marking the border that reads “東京都” and below, in English, “Tokyo Met.”—Tokyo Metropolis—seems like an elaborate practical joke. But of course it's not. The official heart of arguably the most populous urban area in the world begins here and ends more than 90 kilometers (56 miles) to the east.

We look at each other, grin, and start walking.



Signs at the western border, Tokyo Metropolis

I'M A WRITER AND AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AT ONE OF JAPAN'S NATIONAL UNIVERSITIES. Sean is a director for a library database and software company. We met in Kyoto in 1994, when both of us came to Japan to teach English for a year. It was the experience that attracted us—we had no special interest in Japan itself. In fact, we knew virtually nothing about the country at all. I'd once read a novel by Yukio Mishima and seen Ridley Scott's *Black Rain*. Sean had watched *Star Blazers* as a kid and eaten sushi a few times. That was about it. We could not count to five in Japanese or even say "Please." The extent of our language skills was "*Domo arigato, Mr. Roboto.*" This turned out to be of limited use.

It was a recipe for disastrous culture shock, but somehow it all worked out. Better, actually: we loved everything about our new lives. Ancient temples! Bullet trains! Beer in vending machines! At the end of the year, most of the other participants in our program went back to the United States, but Sean and I stayed. Eventually I got married to a lovely woman named Nobuko. Sean got married to a lovely woman named Yuko. Before we knew it, ten years slipped away. Improbably, without any conscious effort on our part, this small island country became home.

Not that we accepted this. We couldn't accept it—we were Americans. Americans didn't *emigrate*. People from other countries emigrated. To America. This was the natural order of things, the way the world worked. Despite all the fun I had that first decade in Japan, I took it for granted that one day, eventually, I would go back to the United States. And, one day, eventually, I *did* go back. So did Sean. I found a job that I was happy with; so did Sean. My wife set about exploring her new country; so did Sean's. We found cool places to live. We met even cooler people. In no time at all, in fact, things were going swimmingly. There was only one problem.

It wasn't Japan.

I was astonished at how much I missed it. I was astonished that I thought much about it at all. A military brat (like Sean), I had spent my childhood as a nomad. I liked discovering new places. I was excellent at shedding attachments. But not this time. I missed everything about Japan. Shouts of "*Irasshaimase!*" ("Welcome!") in markets. The thinly-sliced marbled beef in *sukiyaki*. Hiking

through silent forested hills. The drone of cicadas in August. That Filipino Bryan Adams cover band. *Everything*. I missed things I didn't even like, like the way it can get so humid in July that it feels like you're breathing through a sponge.

Nobuko felt the same way. We returned to Japan in 2006, only two years after we'd picked up and left in the first place. Sean and Yuko followed a few years later. Completely by chance, in 2010 we found ourselves practically neighbors again, living about an hour by train from each other on opposite sides of Tokyo.

It was a new beginning, and in more ways than one. Neither of us knew a lot about this part of Japan. Our wives didn't either. We'd spent the majority of our time up to then in the western half of the country; the Kanto region (where Tokyo is located) was largely unknown to us. Also unknown: the future. Gone was the certainty that we would one day "go home"—*this* was home, for real this time, and we were still trying to get used to the concept. It was unfamiliar physical and psychological space, both of which we found we wanted to explore. We like walking, so from time to time we set off on foot, crisscrossing the center part of town and selected surrounding areas on longish urban hikes. Typically we'd pick starting and ending points about ten to fifteen kilometers (six to nine miles) from each other and then spend the day meandering from point A to point B. It was a great way to talk things out and learn about our new home, and over time we came to a number of valuable insights, chief among them:

Holy crap, Tokyo is big.

A reasonable response to this observation is probably something along the lines of, "Well, no shit, Sherlock," but it's hard to appreciate just *how* big Tokyo is, even for people who live here. Thirteen million people make their homes inside its boundaries—this is more than the populations of New York City and Los Angeles combined. *Thirty-eight* million people live in the greater metropolitan area. Thirty-eight million is almost the number of people that live in "crowded" California. It's more than 1.5 times the population of Australia. It is, in a word, ridiculous.

Tokyo is geographically bigger than you might think as well. Many people, even many Japanese, only consider the twenty-three wards that make up the hyper-urbanized core of the city to be "Tokyo," but this is like defining New York as Manhattan. These twenty-three wards make up less than one-third of what's officially considered to be the metropolis. The whole of Tokyo is nearly 2200 square kilometers, which is more than twelve times the area of Washington D.C. Land-wise, it's eighty-one percent of the size of Rhode Island. And while Rhode Island may be the smallest U.S. state, it's still, you know, a *state*.

Thinking about all these facts made Sean and I realize that our occasional strolls through random parts of the city were not enough, not if we really wanted to understand Tokyo. They weren't enough for us to really understand the hold that it—and Japan—had come to have on us either. Somehow, we had to see it all. Why not, I said to Sean one day, attempt the *ultimate* urban hike? West to east, across the whole metropolis. Had anyone even done it before? The British novelist Marcel Theroux had tackled a chunk for *The Guardian* a few years previously, walking from Mt. Takao, near the western border, to Nihombashi, next to Tokyo Station, but had anyone ever knocked off the whole thing?

Sean was all for it, so one morning we met on the train and took it to the end of line. Hopped on a bus. Got off at the border.

And turned around.

THE FIRST CAR THAT PASSES US IS A 4x4, THE NEXT AN ANTIQUE HOT ROD. TWO MORE hot rods and then a dozen or so motorcycles follow. It's like a scene from *The Fast and the Furious*, but the drivers all look like retirees and everyone's going the speed limit. Call it *The Sprightly and the Mildly Irritated*—maybe Vin Diesel will star when he's eighty.

Motor enthusiasts have it rough in Tokyo. City roads are narrow and clogged with traffic. Expressways are wide and clogged with traffic. According to the most recent figures from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, the average speed in the central part of town during peak travel times is a spirit-crushing 16.8 kilometers—10 miles—per hour. Off-peak it only rises to 19.8 km/hour. The only thing to do is to head for the hills. You still can't go that fast, but at least it's pretty. There also aren't quite as many cars on the road, and—most importantly—there are no junior high school kids on their bikes, listening to music on their headphones while texting their friends and riding on the wrong side.

Downtown or deep in the hills, the roads are pristine. This one could have been set down yesterday, and, for all we know, it was. There are neatly spaced out drainage grates on the side, and the base of the hill on our left has been reinforced with a ten-meter-high rock wall. Where this isn't enough to prevent branches, rocks, and other debris from sliding down to the road, there are wire fences covering the wall.



Rock walls on the Ome Highway

“Like walking next to a castle,” Sean says. He’s right; some types of castle walls in Japan *do* look like this.

“Must defend ourselves against nature,” I say.

I’m both joking and I’m not. I’ve never quite been able to decide whether to be impressed or appalled by the way the environment is managed here. In Japan—and be warned, for from here on out I’m going to blithely generalize to my heart’s content; feel free to disagree in the comments—nature is well-loved from an aesthetic point of view. High school students regularly extol the beauty of the four seasons when asked what they like best about their country, and their parents and grandparents will travel for hours and suffer stifling crowds to see the perfect cherry blossom tree in spring or a row of red maples in fall. However, “real” nature—wild nature—is seen as destructive and therefore not tolerated. Concrete is poured down hillsides to keep them from sliding away in the rain. Rivers are dammed or effectively turned into canals to keep them from shifting or flooding. Pilings—thousands upon thousands, as far as the eye can see—are dumped on the shoreline to limit the effects of erosion.

These are, of course, perfectly reasonable things to do on a mountainous archipelago that regularly suffers the effects of typhoons, earthquakes, and (to a lesser extent) volcanic eruptions. But you don't necessarily want to see a rock wall on the side of an otherwise beautiful forest hill. As a long-term resident who loves the outdoors, I long sometimes for less trammelled vistas, but these are few and far between. There are only about 5,600 hectares (14,000 acres) of land designated as "wilderness" by the Japanese government, which the Ministry of the Environment defines as "areas that preserve and maintain the original ecosystem and that are free of human influence." The American government has a somewhat more expansive but nevertheless similar definition. As the United States is about twenty-five times the size of Japan, a proportional amount of wilderness would amount to roughly 350,000 acres.

The U.S. has more than 106 million acres of wilderness.

"On the other hand," Sean says, "people in California build houses again and again on hillsides that collapse again and again."

True. And every time this topic comes up I always think about the Pacific Coast Highway. During my last stint in the United States, I briefly considered moving to Los Angeles. I'd been offered a job in Calabasas but wanted to live someplace more walkable. The trick was how to get to work and still avoid the freeways, which after a decade in Japan seemed like something out of *Death Race 2000*. One afternoon I tooled up the Pacific Coast Highway from Santa Monica and thought: *This isn't bad*. My wife and I could find a small place near the beach, I could drive to my job through Malibu and the Topanga Canyon...It would take an hour or so, but it was a beautiful route.

A friend who lived in L.A. just laughed at me. "You can't afford to live in Santa Monica," he said. "And anyway, wait till the rains come in March and a landslide closes the PCH or the Topanga Canyon Road for three weeks. Your hour commute is now two hours. Then what?"

I didn't take the job. And I also thought: *You know, the Japanese could fix those hills in Malibu.*