

Tokyo

David Long loved the film *Lost in Translation* and sets out to follow in the footsteps of the leading man Bill Murray.

Sunday, 7pm: I've often expressed dismay at how far Dunein Airport is from the city, but I need to reconsider, because that journey is nothing like the one from Tokyo's Narita Airport to the city. It's a dull two-hour bus ride, during which the only experience I get is a grasp of the sheer enormity of Tokyo. I consider getting a taxi to my hotel, but I decide there are better things I can spend \$600 on.

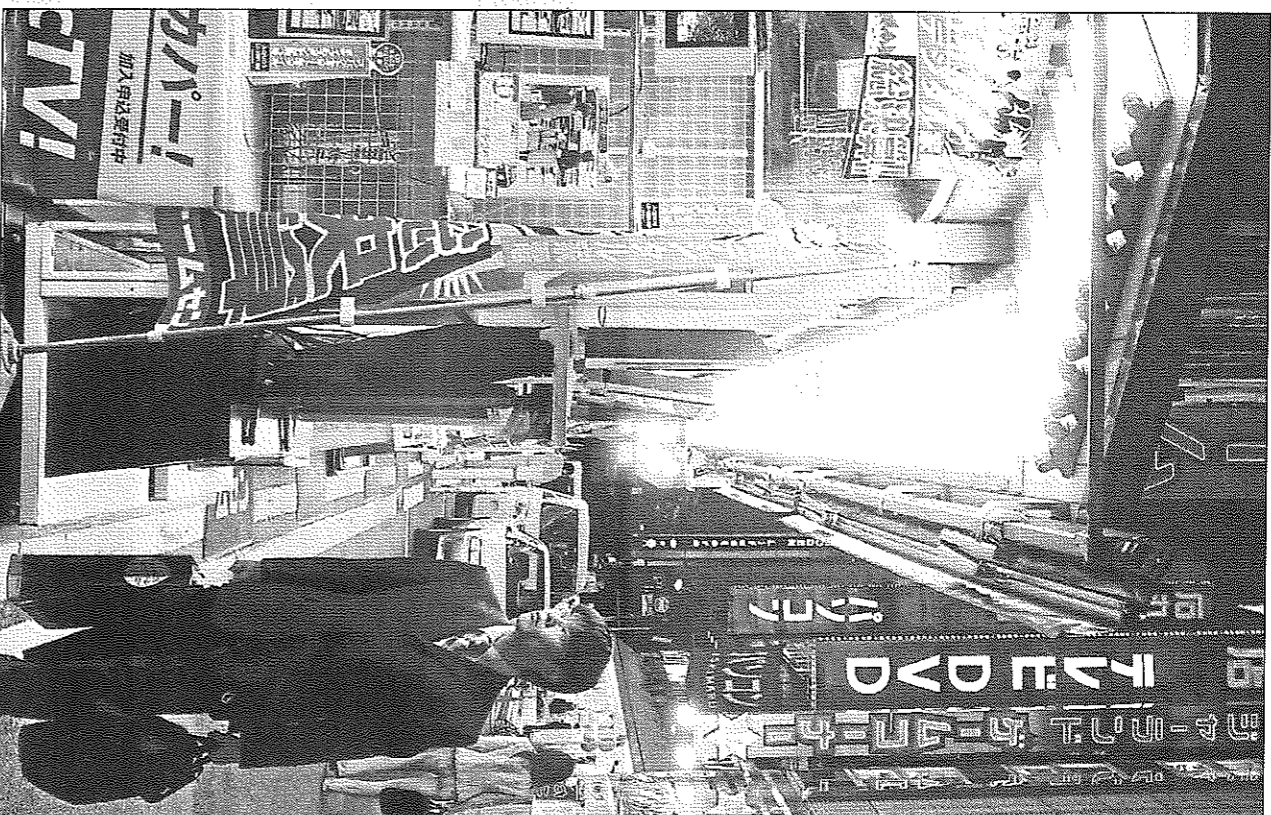
As a mark of respect to Bill Murray, I order a Suntory whisky and repeat his words from the film: 'For relaxing times, make it Suntory.'

9pm: Armed with a photocopied map and not one word of Japanese to my name, I go for a stroll through Roppongi, which is the K'Road/Strip/Cuba Mall of Tokyo. I did imagine this would be my first experience of feeling like Bill Murray, walking through the Tokyo streets way taller than everyone else, but the reality is that in Roppongi I am just as likely to hear someone speak English as Japanese. Roppongi is worth a look, because among the Irish, British, Aussie and even Kiwi theme pubs are small side streets featuring cosy little restaurants. I try some sushi at Pinokona. It's one of those places where the food comes around on a conveyor belt and there's a computer chip inside each plate to show how fresh the food is.

Monday, 10am: After breakfast I face my fears and try out the Tokyo Metro system to go to Akhabara. The Metro map looks like a plate of multicoloured spaghetti, and as each line is owned by a different company, you have to go through a multitude of passages, corridors and barriers as well as up and down a few escalators to change trains. In reality it is not as tricky as I feared and I am soon hopping on and off trains like one of the locals.

10.45am: Akhabara isn't dubbed "Electric City" for nothing. There are hundreds of electrical shops in the area selling everything you could possibly imagine and quite a lot of stuff you couldn't. I buy a new pair of iPod headphones, which aren't much cheaper than they are in New Zealand. However, going to Akhabara is an experience in itself. And no, spending a morning looking at electronic equipment is not nerdy, it's interesting.

2pm: I decide to spend the afternoon relaxing at the Grand Hyatt hotel. The place is elegant to the extreme – and it's the little



Inspector Gadget: Akhabara or 'Electric City' is electronic heaven. Photo: Reuters

things that make the difference. Like when I leave my toothbrush and paste by the side of the sink in the morning. I return to find them placed parallel to each other on a towel at a right angle to the bowl.

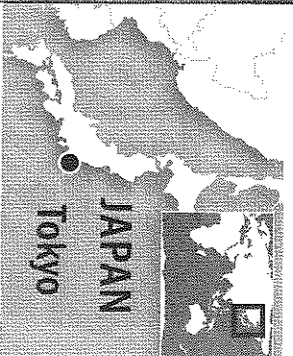
The water from the shower comes directly from the ceiling or out of the wall, or both, and I could spend hours playing with the space-age toilet. Realising that pressing buttons on a toilet is not the best use of my time in Tokyo, I go to the hotel's gym which overlooks the stunningly designed indoor swimming pool. Everything about this place is class.

5pm: Asakusa is home to the first

Western-style bar in Tokyo, the Kamiya Bar, although truth be told it bears little resemblance to current drinking establishments in the Western world. Kamiya is stuck in some kitsch early 1970s time warp – but that's part of its attraction. The place is packed with business men and women desperate to unwind after a day at the office and, after a few cocktails and a bowl of noodle soup, I get chatting to a few of the locals eager to practise their English.

7pm: Still in search of that *Lost in Translation* experience I kick the evening off in the Hyatt Hotel's luxurious Grand Club. Drinking complementary champagne and nibbling on canapes while staring out at the Tokyo skyline is a wonderful way to start an evening. **9pm:** Shinjuku is the biggest red-light district in all of Japan, but it is also a place you can try your hand at the country's national sport, baseball. I head to the oddly named Oslo Batting Centre where for ¥300 (\$4.50) for 20 balls I get to do my own impersonation of Ichiro Suzuki or Hideki Matsui – although I have to admit I'm pretty shocking at it. The balls come flying from a machine at the other end of the building and it's great fun trying to smash them as far as possible.

11pm: After all that activity, I've built up quite a thirst. So I head to the tiny Mon Cheri bar in Shinjuku. As a mark of respect to Bill Murray, I order a Suntory whisky (at a jaw-dropping \$30 for a double) and a friend and I raise our glasses and repeat his words from the film: "For relaxing times, make it Suntory."



Fact file

Where to stay:

Grand Hyatt Tokyo,
6-10-3 Roppongi, Minato-ku,
Tokyo,
ph (0081) 3 4333 1234,
www.tokyo.grand.hyatt.com

Where to eat/drink:

Pinokona
6-4-1 Roppongi, Tokyo,
ph (0081) 3 5771 1133.

Kamiya Bar

1-1-1 Asakusa, Tokyo,
ph (0081) 3 3841 5400.

Grand Hyatt Club

6-10-3 Roppongi, Minato-ku,
Tokyo

ph (0081) 3 4333 1234,

www.tokyo.grand.hyatt.com

What to do:

Laox Home Electronics Store,
1-15-3 Soto-kanda, Chiyoda ku,
Tokyo,

ph (0081) 3 3255 5301.

Oslo Batting Centre

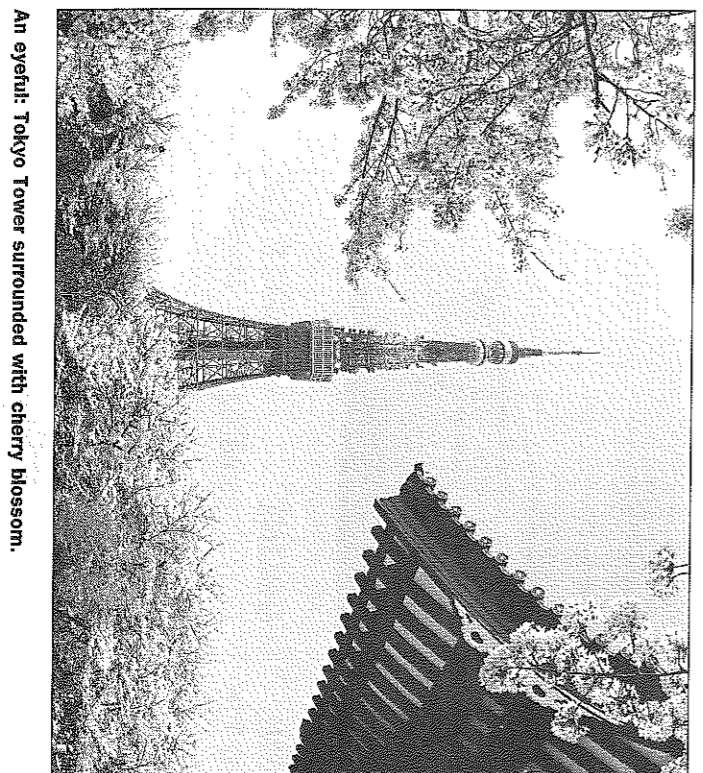
2-34-5 Kabukicho, Shinjuku-ku,
ph (0081) 3 3208 8130.

Tokyo Tower

4-2-8 Shibakoen Minato-ku,
Tokyo,
ph (0081) 03 3433 5111.



Room with a view: The perfect hotel room at the Grand Hyatt.



An eyeful: Tokyo Tower surrounded with cherry blossom.

COCKTAIL CUP

42BLOW is giving the world's best bartenders a chance to live the dream – and you the chance to taste their creations. The 42BLOW Cocktail World Cup sees eight teams of three from all over the world competing in the grand final. Taking place on March 27 in Wellington's Old Museum Building, it's the climax of a week-long adventure for the contestants – from bar testing in Queenstown to extreme sports. A performance by rockers Midnight Youth sets the stage for what's promising to be the party of the year. For \$42, you'll get four cocktails, food and entertainment. See www.cocktailworldcup.com for information and tickets.

* If you don't live in Wellington, you could still make it to the event. Thanks to 42BLOW, we are giving one reader a package including two return Grab-A-Seat flights from Auckland to Wellington, a night's accommodation at Travelodge and a pair of tickets to the 42BLOW Cocktail World Cup event. To enter, email escape@star-times.co.nz with Cocktail in the subject line by Friday, March 12.

MAD HATTER'S TEA PARTY

Have along to The Langham in March for a special Alice in Wonderland afternoon tea. The five-star hotel is already famous for its signature afternoon tea, and this gives it a special twist. "The Langham has a number of connections with the great novel by Lewis Carroll, from tea parties to wonderful experiences. There's also the fact that the original Langham hotel in London opened in 1865, the year Lewis Carroll wrote his famous book," says Rachel Broadmore of the Langham. Hat wearing is encouraged, and spot prizes are on offer, as is a tempting array of treats. Think moist chocolate sledge cake, fresh fruit tartslets with pistachio, pink frosted cupcakes, opera cake, chocolate dipped strawberries, petite macarons, and hand made chocolate and honey truffles. There are even dainty sandwiches on multi-coloured breads of pink, green and yellow. The Wonderland Afternoon Tea runs throughout March. Available daily from midday to 4.30pm, \$36 per adult and \$18 for children under 12. Reservations essential, ph 0800 61 62 61.



Shaken not stirred: The Cocktail World Cup is on in Wellington, and the Mad Hatter's Party is at the Langham Hotel in Auckland.

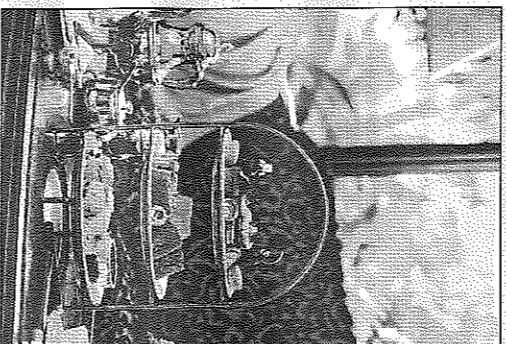
ON THE FRINGE

The South Island's largest festival of experimental art is set to be a vibrant and inspiring event – comedy, dance, theatre, performance and visual art combine in an 11-day, 50 extravaganza. Highlights include popular comedians such as 2010 Billy T Award nominee T J McDonald, The Busting Blitz (complete with sword-swallowing and chainsaw juggling), the aerial burlesque take on Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, French dance troupe Cie Porte K/L, Scottish folk singer Eddi Reader and Australia's Chimera Dance Collective. The festival runs from March 18-28. See www.dunedinfringe.org.nz for more information.

ON THE CHEAP

It's a travellers market – according to the recently released Hotel Price Index from Hotels.com. Prices for hotel rooms are at their lowest level in five years, falling worldwide by 14% in 2009. Overall, travellers spent 13% less on hotel rooms in Europe during 2009 than in 2008, 14% down in the US, 16% less in Asia Pacific and a whopping 21% decline in Latin America. The

average price of hotel rooms for travellers to Moscow experienced the steepest fall in 2009, down by

**TRAVELBUG PICKS OF THE WEEK****Mercury Auckland**

The new public spaces at Mercury Auckland are simply fantastic. If you haven't visited Vertigo Restaurant, you're missing a treat. Even better, rooms are on sale on Travelbug now with 50% off all nights from April to August. The sale ends on Tuesday at 11.59pm.

Ibis Wellington

With their recent refurbishment, Ibis Wellington is sure to please for business or leisure travel. On Featherston St, it is perfectly positioned for shopping, concerts at Queens Wharf, visits to Te Papa or walks along the waterfront. They are also offering 50% off, so head to Travelbug before the end of Tuesday and save.

Travelbug is Trade Me's accommodation website (www.travelbug.co.nz) with deals for New Zealand hotels and more.



44%, while other major European destinations in the top fallers table include Dublin, Warsaw and Stockholm – all of which fell more than a quarter on 2008 prices. Rates in Asia Pacific hotels fell 19% in the last quarter of 2009 compared to the same period a year earlier, representing the biggest drop of all regions globally. Interestingly, Auckland presented one of the cheapest hotel rates of the 77 cities included in the report, higher than only Warsaw and Las Vegas. Sydney and Melbourne also saw the average price of a hotel room fall by around 18%. The most expensive place to stay? The Italian island hideaway Capri – where the rate actually increased by 21%. There has never been a better time to pack a suitcase.

EXPLORE ANTARCTICA

The untamed natural beauty of Antarctica, the White Continent, is the final frontier in tourism. With unparalleled wildlife and scenery, this is the world's fifth largest continent, the coldest place on earth with the highest average altitude and the lowest humidity. Kumnka is offering 50% off its Antarctica tours – but you'll have to be quick as they depart March 10 and March 20. There are also specials for selected tours to Africa, Asia, Central America, Europe, the Middle East and South America. If you book and pay in full, you'll receive 10% off, or book and deposit, and receive 5% off. For more information, see www.kumnka.com

Ask the experts

Q. My wife and I are heading to Thailand and we are keen to see an island or two during our time there. However, we are finding the number of island options a little overwhelming. Can you help us narrow the field a little and recommend some places that are perhaps a little less crowded with tourists than others?

A. There are so many great islands in Thailand it can be overwhelming trying to pick between them. The one thing they all have in common is great casual restaurants set up right on the beach at night, serving fresh, tasty seafood.

One of the easiest ways to cut down the potential holiday spots is to check which season you will be travelling in. The islands in the Andaman Sea off the west coast of Thailand have a different rainy season to the islands in the Gulf of Thailand on the east.

In the Andaman, Phuket is the most well known of the islands. From here it's easy to catch a ferry to Koh Phi Phi, which is much smaller and famous for its clear waters and the fact it was the location for movie *The Beach*. Lots of day trippers come over from Phuket, but once they leave the island is quiet. Krabi on the mainland and Koh Lanta further down the coast are famous for the dramatic limestone formations rising out of the sea. Koh Lanta is 95% Muslim so it's much quieter with a more family friendly rather than party atmosphere. In the Gulf of Thailand, Koh Samui is the most famous island followed by Koh Phangan, a short 45-minute ferry ride away. A great hidden gem is Koh Samet, just a two hour drive and short ferry from Bangkok. It has great white sand beaches and a fantastic mix of accommodation options.

#1 O'Sullivan, assistant product manager – Asia, House of Travel. Want a travel question answered? Email escape@star-times.co.nz with Ask the Expert in the subject line.

* House of Travel is giving away a \$100 voucher for use on houseoftravel.co.nz for the best reader's question sent in each month. Vouchers are not redeemable in store.

**Expat tales – the lowdown from Kiwis overseas****REBECCA GREENSHIELDS Banos, Ecuador**

Why did you move to Banos?
We moved here after travelling and being shocked by the lack of regard for the environment. Ecuador is one of the world's most biodiverse countries and species are unnaturally dying out due to pollution and deforestation. We were touched by this, and the beauty of this country, which is why we ended up here.

What do you do there?
We have built and are now running the town's first eco hostel and are also helping to educate locals about sustainable living.

What to do you like/dislike about it?
We like the laid-back way of life, but it is a double-edged sword. While it's good to relax and cruise along, it's not so great when you need something done quickly. We

enjoy the way self-sustainable and eco living are relatively easy here.

How does the cost of living compare to New Zealand?

Very cheap! The cost of our weekly grocery shop for two adults and a toddler is \$36. A meal at an international-quality restaurant is around \$17 per person and domestic help is about \$15 a day.

What do you do on weekends?

My husband Doug and I often take our son John to one of the local waterfalls and swim in some of the cleanest and coldest water in the world. Sometimes we ride our bikes further down the Valley of the Waterfalls, stopping to look at the bridge swingers, people rafting and the abundance of flora on the way down. When feeling particularly lazy, we go up to the thermal pools and soak up the minerals and relax.

What do you think of the food?

The food is generally very nutritious and tasty. A specialty is cuy (guinea pig). Doug thinks it tastes like wild rabbit, but it's definitely something we don't eat too often! The climate and volcanic soil make it very conducive to growing anything here, so eating locally is easy to do. The best things are the tropical fruits.

What's the shopping like?

Lots of great shops with products from local and national artisans. A big favourite is the jewellery made from tagua (a vegetable ivory).

What's the nightlife like?

A lot of great bars and restaurants. Most bars play a mix of music, but mostly salsa and latin rhythms. Also in the evenings, they have open-air trucks which take you to various volcano-viewing lookouts.

What time of year is best to visit?

The best time is in summer, October to March. It rains a little less than winter. However, Banos has a spring-like temperature year round, so any time is good.

What's your must-do thing?

Hiking to look-out points over Banos and chatting with the friendly local farmers along the way, spending a few hours soaking in the local thermal pools and having a massage.

Top tips for tourists?

Travel responsibly and leave only very light footprints. Open your mind and heart to unique experiences and respect the culture. Most of all, enjoy!

* If you know an expat who wants to share the inside knowledge on their home away from home, email escape@star-times.co.nz with expat in the subject line.