

For some people, a single cup of coffee opens up doors to daylong tête-à-tête wanderings of philosophy, poetry, and the arts. This was especially true for literary legends like Jean Paul Satre who met with his contemporaries in the left-bank cafes of Paris in the late 1920s. Thanks to their boundless chats there, the world has existentialism, making life a bit more extraordinary.

For a slice of such bohemia, Tokyo has plenty to offer. Cafes and clubs are no longer strut-city central as they used to be in the 80s. Rather they've become ideal places to goof off and get an often needed lateral perspective on life. Here are a few places in Tokyo where slackers (the 90s incarnation of the bohemians) call home.

Cafe Des Pres

"In Paris people go to cafes in order to be there, not necessarily to drink coffee," says Kyrie Takagi, the manager of the recently opened Cafe Des Pres in Omotesando. He dresses smart and his eyes have the conviction of a man who is on a mission; to introduce the real cafe in Japan.

The interior is a slacker's dream come true. Comfortable dining areas with a sidewalk view make it very tempting to lounge about for the entire day. Inside, there's plenty of energy generated by buzzing conversationalists to keep you amused. The ornate interior, a slice of early 20th century European nostalgia, is a sight to marvel.

Part of the unique atmosphere seems to stem from the absence of attendants with plastic eagerness. "We're not like regular Japanese restaurants where we say *irashaimase* and bring a glass of water, or change ashtrays every now and then. It's just not our style," explains Takagi who has had several confrontations with customers expecting the normal fare of a family restaurant.

Started out by Hiramatsu, a top-notch chef who has a chain of highly acclaimed French restaurants in Tokyo, the place strives to bring an unbridled Paris to the fashionable district in Omotesando. But in doing so, he has made a few compromises. Expensive silver platters with a late 1800s flair caters to customers who harbor a blasé image of European elegance. Also, waitresses in their teens conspicuously outnumber their male counterparts, a sexist marketing ploy no doubt. "In France, it's the garçons who mainly attend to you. And they're usually in their 50s to 60s."

Magazine Shower

Kichijyoji brims with the young. With a panoply of fashion boutiques and offbeat dives, this hip college town is Tokyo's answer to LA's Westwood district. From jazz to rock and even new-age, live music of all kinds can be experienced in a single night's bar hopping session. Reggae is no stranger to this place either. There's Magazine Shower, which just opened in October, offering some good rhythmic bang for the yen.

Located in a narrow alleyway, the entrance entices with a Jamaican flag and a poster featuring the ultimate rastafarian, Bob Marley. Inside, reggae paraphernalia clutter a cozy space divided into a bar and dining area. The bartender, an all-season surfer type with his hair dyed sun-kissed brown sees to it that the music is played loud. There's no excuse for sulking here.

"You don't have to be a rastafarian to enjoy this place," says Tsuyoshi Takarabe, the young assistant manager of the joint. What's Magazine Shower? Just a holdover name from the bar's unknown past. The recommended drink is Jamaica's very own "Reggae Rum," which apparently is a rarity in Japan.

Mandala II

"Genre is not much of a concern here," says the bearded manager of the live spot cum bar, Mandala II, which derives its name from the Sanskrit term used for the symbol of the universe or totality. True to this spirit, the shows featured here cover a wide spectrum of performing arts, from rock venues to poetry readings.

Located next to a convenience store just a stone's throw away from the south exit of Kichijyoji station, the shabby entrance to this underground dive resembles a door to someone's storage compartment. But once you're in, after coughing up a cover charge of about 2,000 yen, a cubist alleyway takes you into a cavernous chamber where the audience and performer are in close proximity of each other. The bar, tucked away in a small corner, is accessible on most weekdays, but is pretty much of a mirage on weekends when the place gets jam packed.

On the night I was there, a soothing violin and piano duet were performing. With a dilapidated wall forming the backdrop and candle light flickering to the cadences of the music, romanticism had its moment.

“We like to be individualistic and not get hung up on one genre,” says Nakano. After performances, the bar stays open for those in need of stretching the good time just a little bit longer.

Call for December schedule: 0422-42-1579

Tantra

There is no sign to this place. Just an enigmatic wooden emblem posted on the wall. But after descending the staircase and opening its palatial iron door, you’re unmistakably in mystical India. Here, statues of ancient goddesses in yogic postures welcome visitors inside a bare chamber for an entrance cover charge of 1,000 yen.

Open for four years, this little known hideout, tucked in the basement of a building a few blocks away from the Aoyama tunnel, is a favorite late-night hangout for quite a few media glitteratis of Tokyo.

“We depend on word-of-mouth advertising”, says the armani-clad Masaharu Kabashima, the slick manager with a cryptic smile.

With all its enigmatic ambiance and mind-warping music, Tantra, which is Sanskrit for pleasure, is definitely not a place to enact a Roppongi rampage. Candles and ground-level seats add to the meditative ambiance accentuated by a spacious Hindu temple interior. If you get hungry, there’s always curry rice, Indian style. But should you need to get a noodle fix, don’t worry, you can help yourself to a slurp fest with some *udon*.

A bar exists in a quiet corner, where the bartenders have an open ear to your inebriated ramblings. “We have fortune-teller services as well, says the clean cut manager who didn’t look like he ever attended yoga classes.

The place is to be avoided on weekends, if meditating in crowded conditions isn’t your game.

B1F Ichimainoe Bldg.
3-5-5 Shibuya Shibuya-ku
Tokyo 105 Japan
Phone: 03-5485-8414
Open 8:00PM-5:00AM
Drink: ¥800

Togenbo

Although people are seated in an Izakaya, a traditional Japanese style drinking salon, the atmosphere buzzes with a raucous intensity that possibly rivals English-style stand-up pubs. After all this is the place where 9 to 5 busybodies of Japan Inc. let loose their non-tatemae selves, their true colors.

Togenbo is one such place, where fun becomes a turbulent affair of eating, drinking, and laughing. Its interior is reminiscent of the early Showa period when the era of cultural enlightenment was still fresh in the memories of the national psyche. The entrees, which range from the classic *nikujyaga*, (meat and potato) to other Japanese barroom delicacies that go down well with beer, are served in compact dishes, making it possible to try a little bit of a lot.

“We have foreigners come in here, and feel at home, even in such crowded conditions” says Ohta the pony-tailed manager of the joint located in Shinjuku.

On some nights, famous rock stars drop in to join in the general hullabaloo.

For information call 03-3356-2393

Club Blue

“After the war, Bali, Katmandu, and Tokyo were the three bohemian avant-garde hippie centers,” says Johnnie Walker, a patron extraordinaire of the arts and an intrepid reveler, when he’s not busy playing the financial markets. Within Tokyo’s cosmopolitan circle, his name has become synonymous with the art exhibition parties he organizes. Most of them happen at Club Blue, if not in distant lands such as Goa.

Located in Aoyama’s fashionable Kotto Dori, where the legendary Blue Note Tokyo is also located, the club is only recognizable from the outside by its blue-lit archway. Stairs lead down to the African Lounge, where often avant-garde art exhibitions of young artists are showcased. One more flight down takes you to a dance hall.

In the December 11th party at Club Blue, the guest of honor, along with two featured artists from Germany, was Junko Koshino, the empress of fashion in Japan. And there was no cover charge.

“Ten to twenty years ago, Japan was much more *koseiteki* (individualistic). It had underground bars and underground discos that were much more interesting and crazy. So, in order to preserve that, we’re trying to collect more bohemian individuals,

you know, and trying to preserve the old bohemian spirit of Tokyo," explains Walker.

For information on Club Blue: (03) 3797-1591

For information on Johnnie Walker parties: 5389-7018