

City of Fleet Feet

With its clean air, safe roads, extensive greenery and numerous routes, it is no wonder Tokyoites are taking to the streets.

The sounds of running feet can be heard on city streets and country roads all over Japan today. The battle between the Kanto area university teams in the Hakone Ekiden relay marathon race has become a seasonal tradition of the New Year's holidays. The Tokyo Marathon takes place every February, one of many marathons that are run at various locations throughout the year. These are just a few examples that testify to the special position the sport of running holds in Japan.

The seeds of the present-day running boom in Japan were first observed in the 1970s after the national government worked out policies to promote health and fitness. And the number of runners sharply increased after the first Tokyo Marathon was held in 2007.

That year, the Tokyo Marathon started with 30,870 participants, mostly citizen runners, chosen from some 95,000 applicants. The number of applicants jumped to 156,000 in 2008. The most recent event in 2017 saw 35,824 runners chosen from over 320,000 applicants.

The Tokyo Marathon was planned as a large-scale running event in the city center—open to amateurs and professional runners—similar to the Boston or New York City marathons. Since 2013, it has become one of the six World Marathon Majors. Starting from the Tokyo Metropolitan Government buildings in Shinjuku, runners are able to enjoy running through the capital's most interesting locations, such as the Asakusa and Ginza districts, before finishing at Tokyo Station. The marathon attracts two million spectators along the course, making it one of Japan's most popular sporting events.

While there are many running routes around the metropolis, the circuit around the Imperial Palace in central Tokyo has become a mecca for the fleet of

foot. Popularly known as the “Kokyo (Imperial Palace) Run,” lapping the palace has been a part of physical training for students for many years. Recently, it is attracting more office workers from the nearby business districts.

The course is beautiful, featuring greenery that changes with the seasons. Runners can enjoy the contrasting landscapes of the moats and stone walls of former Edo Castle and the skyscrapers of the Japanese business center. There are no traffic lights to interrupt the whole loop, which at around five kilometers is a reasonable distance for a good workout. And last but not least, it's safe, as the palace is guarded 24/7 and the route is well lit after dark.

With the increasing number of runners in the area, changing and shower facilities have been mushrooming. A number of “running stations” have opened around the palace in the last decade. “The idea was to make running a more fashionable activity for working women,” said Hiroshi Kotani, who works for one of the pioneering facilities. The running station opened in 2007, offering clean locker rooms and showers

at its location inside a stylish sporting goods store in the Ginza district, a popular upscale shopping area of Tokyo.

The regular fee to use such facilities ranges from 300 yen to 700 yen (about \$3-\$6). And in an increasingly competitive market, stations are offering extra services to attract customers. Some provide rental gear (shoes, shorts, shirts, towels, etc.) for 550 yen (about \$5) for those who don't want to lug running gear to work; one offers a foot measuring and shoe consultation service to help customers choose the best running shoe.

One of the benefits of these stations for runners is the experienced advisors on hand, ready to assist all levels of athletes. For veterans who are preparing for their next marathon, there's a station that offers a “running lab” to analyze the runner's physical condition and form; and for beginners preparing to take their first step, there's motivational and training guidance.

These facilities also organize events and communities for their city runner customers. “Rather than running alone as an ascetic practice, we want people

to enjoy running as part of their everyday lives,” said Yukie Nagata, an advisor at one of the largest running stations near the palace route. “We get groups of colleagues or friends who come together after work. It's fun for people to run together and perhaps have a few beers afterward.”

While news coverage may focus on overworked employees in Japan, both public and private sectors are promoting various measures for people to achieve harmony between private life and work. For many of those who want to get off the work-only treadmill, running may be a good option.

The Imperial Palace loop does have its attractions, but there are many other running spots around the metropolis with appeal, including the green expanses of Yoyogi Park and Meiji Jingu Gaien, as well as the futuristic environs of the Odaiba waterfront. Those interested in making strides on the city's roads should expect no letup in the development of new facilities and services, as people look ahead to next year's Tokyo Marathon, and the 2020 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games.



Runners take a lap on the popular course known as the “Imperial Palace Run.”