

Ningyocho - The Doll Town District

Had we not lived nearby, it's unlikely that we would have visited Ningyocho even once. But although this former pleasure district doesn't have any of Tokyo's must-see attractions, we returned repeatedly, drawn by its restaurants, traditional shops and low-key, residential atmosphere.



Located where Nihonbashi meets the Sumida River, Ningyocho attempts a tricky balancing act, blending equal amounts of modern and traditional Tokyo. Emerging from Ningyocho Station, you might as well be anywhere in the city, looking up at towering office buildings and dodging hectic businessmen racing toward the fastest possible curry lunch. But with a turn onto Amazake Yokocho-dori, the ambiance changes entirely, with historic restaurants, craft shops, and butchers that cater to teetering grandmothers who've probably lived in Ningyocho since before the war.

Ningyocho is built on former swampland, filled in during the seventeenth century after Edo became the seat of the shogunate. A considerable distance from the castle, the neighborhood was populated by the working class and licensed by the city as a pleasure district. The arts flourished, particularly Bunraku (puppet theater), and even when the entertainment was officially moved north to Yoshiwara, the puppet-makers stayed, providing Ningyocho its name. "Ningyo" is