



Bar code: Customers chat in Club Annex in the Shinjuku 2-chome district in Tokyo on Jan. 31.
ANDRONIKI CHRISTODOULOU

Shinjuku gay enclave in decline but not on the surface

Life goes on behind the closed doors of nightspots in 2-chome

By DAVID McNEILL

Special to The Japan Times

Nothing outside Tokyo's 24-Kaikan hotel hints at what goes on behind its gray concrete walls.

Tucked in a back street in Shinjuku 2-chome, the seven-story building could be an apartment block for retired civil servants. Only in the lobby, cheerily adorned with scenes from a sex movie, does it become clear this is one of Asia's biggest gay landmarks.



After passing the ticket machine — ¥2,600 for a 13-hour stay — pretty much anything goes, according to the guests, who come from across Japan and even abroad.

Soak in the sauna/bathtub, then make your way up seminaked through the floors, where porn flickers 24 hours a day in dimmed communal sleeping areas equipped with futon. Wander around or lie back and wait for someone who fancies you, instructs one guide, which blissfully advises customers to expect "some mind-blowing tableaux." Amid the satyric excess, bilingual signs posted throughout telegraph the only constantly visible rule: "gentlemen who chew gum" will be evicted from the premises.



Out in the open: Two men pause recently on a street in Shinjuku 2-chome on Jan. 31.
ANDRONIKI CHRISTODOULOU

It is very Japanese: discreet, compartmentalized, fastidiously careful about order and details.

Live and let live as long as the outward appearance of things is maintained.

"This is a country that happily lives with contradictions," says Taq Otsuka, author of several books on Japan's gay scene.

Thus Tokyo, with a reputation for being one of the planet's most uptight, buttoned-down capitals, also boasts one of its densest and most diverse concentration of gay bars and clubs: 2-chome, home to the 24-Kaikan.

And largely unknown to the straight world beyond its borders, the area is in crisis.

Roughly 300 businesses are squeezed into 2-chome's couple of blocks, including sex shops and watering holes catering to a staggering array of tastes — known as "kei" (specialty).

There are bars for overweight men, transvestites, the hirsute, the young, men over 70, and older men who want to be with younger men.

"I've even heard of one place that is for 'busaiku-kei' (ugly men)," laughs Otsuka, who has run the local bar Tac's Knot for 28 years. "There isn't much you can't find here."

But roughly half a century since it emerged as a refuge for homosexuals in what was formerly a red-light district, the block is in decline.

The local commercial organization that promotes 2-chome estimates the number of gay bars in the area has fallen by at least a third in the last decade.

"This used to be a place for communicating with and discretely meeting like-minded people," explains the organization's head, Mitsuo Fukushima. "Now there are many other ways of communicating."

Last year, artist Susumu Ryu tried to document the decline in a 276-page "manga" comic book.

Ryu blames gentrification associated with the opening of the Fukutoshin subway line, which has pushed up local property prices and made many of the tiny bars here unviable, and the rise of the Internet, giving men with secret lives a way to navigate the world. Recession hasn't helped: Many of the bars demand a cover charge of up to ¥1,000.

On a Saturday night, though, the decline is not immediately obvious.

Crowds and taxis throng 2-chome's streets, and clubs and bars fill up after 11 p.m. But many businesses are clearly struggling.

In Sazae, a retro-themed disco for cross-dressers, men trickle in wearing suits and civvies, change into dresses and don wigs in the lavatory, then dance and pair off.

Like many of these bars, the master — a middle-aged queen with a passion for '70s soul and funk — sets the atmosphere and discreetly regulates the clientele.

"Business has certainly peaked," he laments, grimacing unhappily. "It used to be packed here and you can see what it's like now," he says, sweeping a hand around the half-empty bar.

Fittingly, perhaps, as he shouts over the noise of the disco, Gloria Gaynor's great '70s gay anthem "I Will Survive" comes pounding out of the speakers.

The area partly mirrors the changes in Japan's gay culture.

Until the 1980s, says Otsuka, 62, the area was an escape for men who were often married and hiding their sexuality.

"When I came here first in my 20s, everybody used fake names and it was just accepted that you were going to be unhappy," he recalls. "Even couples came separately."

Though blighted by the usual agonies of personal identity and need for

secrecy, gays and lesbians in Japan didn't suffer the same outright repression as in other parts of the world.

Discrimination in Britain and the United States, at least until the '60s, was "horrendous," points out Mark McLelland, a U.K.-born academic and author of "Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities."

"You could be prosecuted there, whereas the Japanese are fairly laid-back about sexual scandal — it's not personally harming in the way it is in the West."

While British cops were still busting men in lavatories, Japan didn't even have an antisodomy law, nor did it have what McLelland calls the "antihomosexual rage" of many Christian cultures, the lethal fuel for homophobic gay-bashing.

As Otsuka puts it: "Homosexuality was never considered a sin here, just shameful." But if Japan was more laid-back about its sexual preferences, it also lacked the political and social frisson that helped transform the lives of homosexuals elsewhere.

Gayness was and is still largely seen as a personal lifestyle choice, not something to be flaunted or argued over on the streets and in the Diet.

Otsuka says he sometimes looked with envy at the battles for gay equality in other parts of the world.

"I mean, it seemed very extreme and frightening, but I admired how you could shout your identity from the rooftops, and tell everyone that you were in a gay relationship."

Today, men in 2-chome are far more likely to use their real names, bring their male partners and announce their same-sex relationships to the world. But progress has been tortuously slow, and many gays and lesbians are still living a lie, says David Wagner, a business consultant and 24-year veteran of the 2-chome district.

"It's the Stone Age here. This is one of the biggest cities in the world, but the gay scene is pathetic. The Sydney gay parade has maybe 500,000 people coming together every year? Tokyo has maybe 3,000, when it happens."

He still meets many gay men who are lying to their families about their sexuality.

"I say if you all came out the same time, everything would change."

Homosexuals are still not legally recognized in Japanese civil law, civil unions are prohibited and there is, as yet, not a single openly gay lawmaker, admits Kaneko Otsuji, a lesbian activist who ran in 2007 as the country's first openly gay candidate in a national election after publishing her biography: "Coming Out: A Journey to Find My True Self."

"There is a saying in Japan: 'to put a lid on something smelly,' " she points out. "The topic is ignored and disregarded. You don't touch it. But this is still not a bad place to be homosexual."

Young gays hopping from club to bar around 2-chome in particular find Otsuji's struggles to change society, or force it to acknowledge their sexuality, bewildering — one reason perhaps why she finished near the bottom in the 2007 election.

Many have never heard of her, or taken part in the Tokyo Pride parade, which limps into action some years and other years doesn't happen at all.

But many accept that their lives have been transformed since the last generation of gay corporate samurai fled here from tormented lives.

"I came out to my parents when I was 11," remembers Yusuke Takane, 23, a university student who sips a drink in Arty Farty, one of the district's most popular clubs.

"I don't know what it means to be hiding because I've always been out."

His experience living abroad has convinced him Japan is friendlier to gays than elsewhere. "I lived in France and people there shouted 'pede' (fag) at me. I couldn't imagine that here, especially not in this area."

Few seem worried or even aware that 2-chome may be dying.

But among many proprietors, the talk is of little else.

Some speculate that Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara, irritated by the area's reputation for sexual freedom, may have a hand in its decline, but there is no proof of that.

"He doesn't have to crush 2-chome," says Wagner. "It's imploding."

If it is, nobody has told the clientele of 24-Kaikan.

At nearly midnight on a Saturday, the building is three-quarters full. Foreign and Japanese men in towels wander the corridors. Nobody is chewing gum.

"I've been here dozens of times and I love it," says one middle-aged

Japanese man, who requested anonymity. "I hadn't heard about the problems in 2-chome, but even if it's true, so what? We will always find ways to meet. You can't stop people enjoying themselves."

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