



# 助けで! (Help!)

**CATHERINE PRICE** took off for Tokyo with no guidebook and a wacky idea: Let strangers decide every detail of her trip. Four days, 29 brief encounters, one collapsible bicycle, eight octopus balls, 600 flesh-eating fish, one *goma* fire ceremony, and too much fried food later, she'd discovered the joy in letting go.



**I**T WAS FRIDAY NIGHT IN SHINJUKU, a Tokyo neighborhood famous for neon signs, subterranean shopping malls, and rent-by-the-hour lodgings known as love hotels. In crowded bars, people tipped back beers and sang karaoke. Young men with black jackets and gelled hair stood on street corners, offering menus of available escorts to passersby. In the midst of the action was a store window, covered except for a narrow strip of glass. If you were to have stopped and looked through it, you would have seen something strange: my legs, submerged to the ankles, with 600 flesh-eating fish feasting on my feet.

This is the story of how I got there.

LIKE MANY PEOPLE, I APPROACH VACATIONS with a level of preparation appropriate for a medical licensing exam—poring over Internet reviews, reading guidebooks cover to cover, and studying maps so I'm oriented from the moment my plane touches down. I research, I plan, I strategize, transforming my trips into long to-do lists I must conquer in order for them to be judged a success.

This tendency was in full effect during a

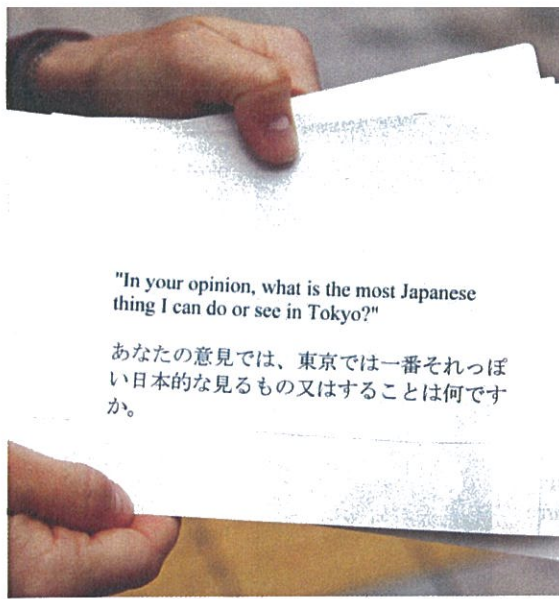
recent week my husband and I spent on Kauai, when I broke the island into quadrants and made long lists of every activity we should do while “relaxing” in paradise. It was exhausting, and somewhere in the process, I started to ask myself why I was doing this. What was I trying to accomplish? What if, instead of meticulously planning, I were to just show up in a new place and let the experience unfold? By stage-managing every detail, I realized, I was ruining one of the best parts of travel: the adventure.

So I decided to take a different approach. I would go on a trip in which I relinquished control. No guidebook, no Internet research, no list of things to see or do. Instead, I would base all my activities, from where I stayed to what I ate or saw, on the recommendations of strangers. Even the destination would be chosen by someone else.

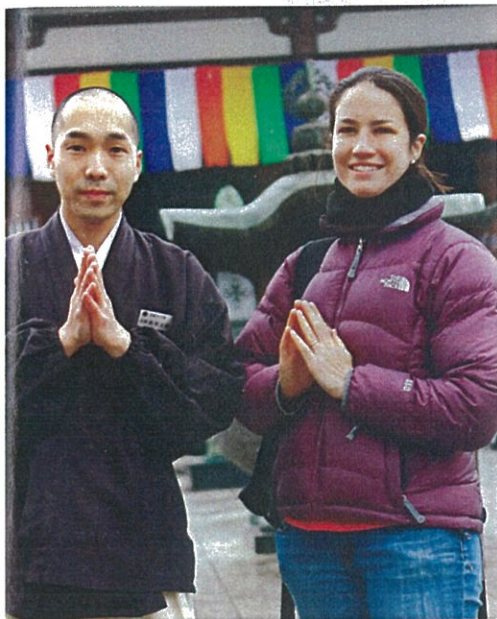
I started by approaching a woman in the fiction section of a San Francisco bookstore and asking her to tell me the most interesting place she'd ever been. She responded, “I love Tokyo,” and two weeks later, I boarded a flight. I had a map. That was it.

THE AMBITION OF THIS PROJECT DIDN'T fully sink in until the plane took off and I realized I was going to have to ask a stranger where to bunk. At first that made me nervous—aren't strangers the same people who steal wallets and kidnap children? But then I looked at the passengers around me. A woman in the next row wore a bumblebee neck pillow. The girl next to me had adorned each long, fake fingernail with a plastic Hello Kitty charm, as if worried a customs agent might demand a finger puppet show. These, I realized, were not the strangers my mother had warned me about.

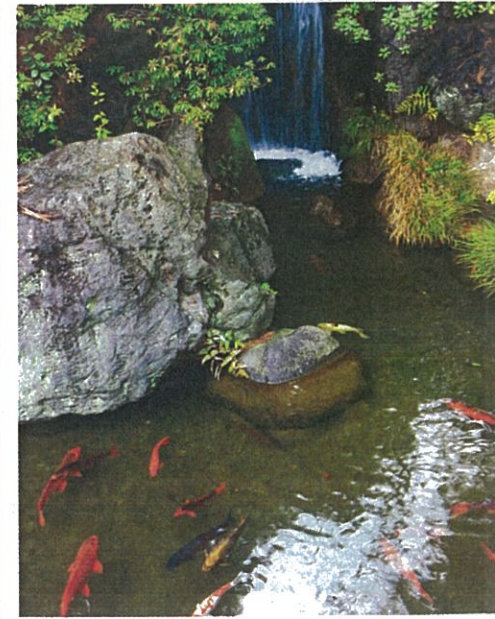
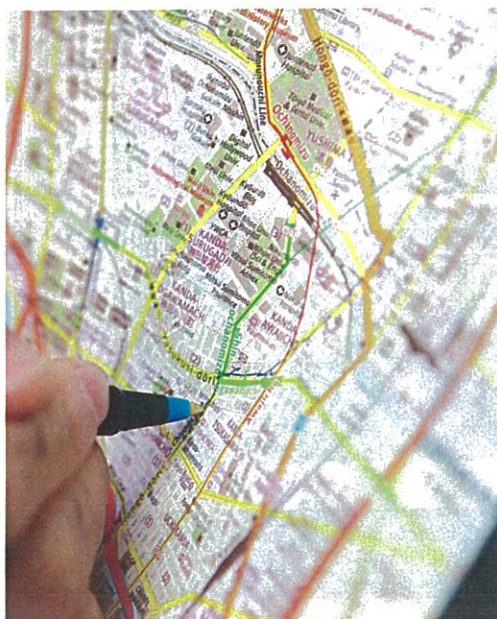
I decided to cast my net wide, and ▶



1 Nighttime in Tokyo's Shinjuku neighborhood. 2 Catherine Price used cards like this one to ask people on the street for guidance. 3 Price consulting her Japanese-English dictionary.



1 With a monk at Nishiarai Daishi temple. 2 A poster of sumo wrestler Tochiazuma promoting sweets. 3 A squid bunny made by a chef at the sushi restaurant Tuna People.



1 The CoolBike people drawing a map of a possible route around the city. 2 With schoolgirls near the Kaminarimon Gate in Asakusa. 3 A koi pond at Nishiarai Daishi temple.

# WHAT I DID ON MY UNPLANNED VACATION

How one random event (an early-morning tuna auction) led to another (*rakugo*)...and another (doctor fish!).



## DAY 1



Go to **San Francisco** bookstore. Ambush woman in fiction section; ask for her favorite international destination. Buy ticket to Japan.



Land at **Tokyo Narita**, jet-lagged and puffy. Call hostel recommended by flight attendant. Wonder how old is too old for bunk beds.



Hostel is near one of Tokyo's most distinctive landmarks, the Asahi Super Dry Hall. Locals' nickname for rooftop sculpture: **kin no unchi** ("the golden turd").



Accost **young mother** on street, ask for restaurant recommendation. Woman politely obliges. Baby begins to cry.



Dinner: **deep-fried shrimp**, first of many.

## DAY 2



Watch **tuna auction**. Confirm impending extinction of one of ocean's top predators.



Breakfast: See **deep-fried shrimp**, above.



Visit male fishmonger's favorite place in Tokyo; upscale shopping area called **Ginza**. Wonder whether he's a Prada or Hermès kind of guy.

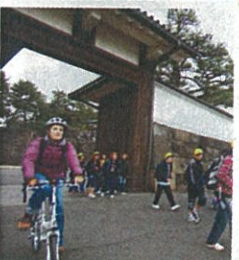


Dinner at **Amor**, run by fish-market friend. Menu does not include shrimp.

## DAY 3



Rent **collapsible bike**. Receive order to find "octopus in a bowl."



**Bike to Imperial Palace**. Develop deep gratitude for helmet; earn mockery from schoolchildren.



Ask **happy retirees** for evening activity.



Continue trend of healthy eating with **Hawaiian-themed hamburger**.



Engage in heartfelt photo sessions with **young women dressed as cats**.

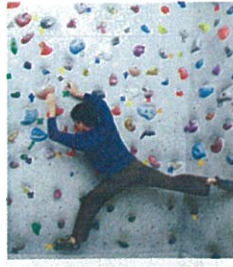
FROM LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM: JUN TAKAGI; IAN CUMMING/BETTY IMAGES; JUN TAKAGI (2); COURTESY OF CATHERINE PRICE (3); JUN TAKAGI (6); OPPOSITE PAGE: JUN TAKAGI (13); ILLUSTRATIONS: KATE T. WILLIAMSON



r at Amor  
fish-  
friend.  
does not  
shrimp.



Receive list of TV host's favorite Tokyo experiences: soba noodles, small bars, public baths, crowded subway trains.



Discover gathering spot for lithe young Japanese men.

ible  
3



**Rakugo!** You can't see it, but this man has on tap shoes.



Encounter bizarre fashion trend known as Gothic Lolita. Or, in the case of these two, just **Lolita**.



**Eat raw squid.** Meet charming businessman and wife, who recommend a visit to their neighborhood temple.



**Takoyaki—octopus balls!**

**DAY 4**



Ride **rush-hour subway**. Question TV reporter's judgment.



Attend **goma ceremony** at sushi patron's temple. Debate whether indoor fires at wood-framed historical sites are really a good idea.



Breakfast: **soba noodles** at stand-up counter. Shrimp, in this case, has been replaced by tofu.



Visit tiny bar in Shinjuku area called **Golden Gai**. Make new friends; enjoy \$20 bottle of beer.



Engage in favorite Tokyo pastime: **shopping**. Visit photo booth arcade; take more incriminating photographs I never expect will be made public.



Celebrate last night in Tokyo with a visit to the **"doctor fish."**

asked a flight attendant to make an announcement to the entire cabin, requesting that people ring their call bells if they could recommend a hotel for the night. I imagined the plane lighting up like a Christmas tree as, one by one, my fellow travelers suggested their favorite Tokyo lodgings or offered keys to their unused pieds-à-terre.

The flight attendant politely informed me that the other passengers had not signed up to be my personal travel agents. But he offered to make up for it by consulting with the rest of the Tokyo-based crew. Several minutes later, he found me in the darkened cabin and handed me a piece of paper with suggestions, including "Asakusa."

"This is my neighborhood," he said, introducing himself as Yori. "And this," he pointed at a different word, "is a hostel popular with backpackers." I hadn't even arrived in Tokyo and I had already learned two important lessons. First, it's not that scary to ask people for help. Second, I should dress better.

**W**HEN I ASKED BARRY Glassner, PhD, sociologist and author of *The Culture of Fear*, why we love guidebooks so much, he hypothesized that it's because relying on experts alleviates our fear of the unknown and makes us feel more in control. It's an approach that makes total sense, except for one thing: It's an ineffective way to plan a fun trip.

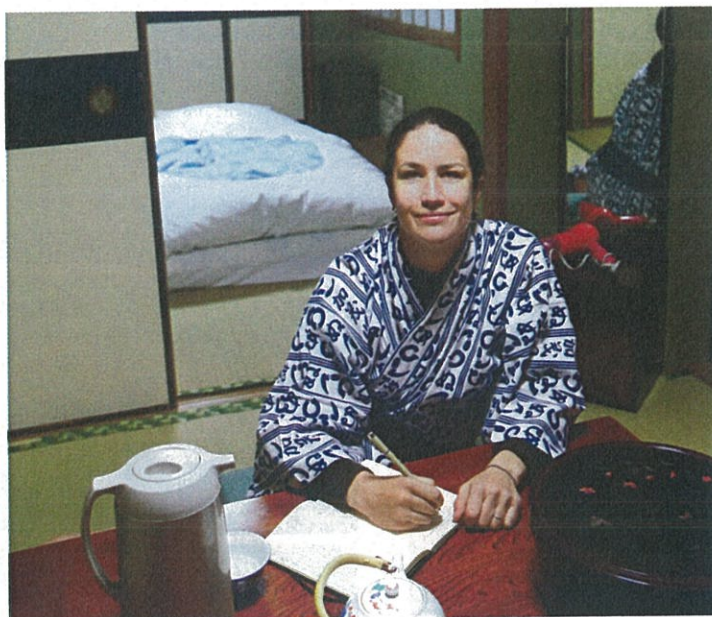
The problem with guidebooks has to do with what psychologists call affective forecasting—our ability to predict our emotional (that is, "affective") reaction to a future event. It's a skill at which we're not particularly good. We overestimate how much a positive event will improve our lives; we underestimate our ability to bounce back from hardship. And when it comes to travel, we're likely to be remarkably bad at predicting how much we'll enjoy the very experiences we've so carefully researched. "People have the notion that if they just gather the right information themselves, they'll make a better prediction of their reaction than they would if they tried to replicate the good experiences of others," says Matt Killingsworth, who runs a project out of Harvard called trackyourhappiness.org. "But we've found the opposite to be true."

The key, Killingsworth insists, is that bit about "replicating the good experiences of others"—instead of basing our decisions on our own research and analysis, we should just ask other people whether they had a good time. He's got ample research to >

back this up, but I still fall into the large camp of people who find it hard to believe that strangers could be better than a guidebook at predicting what I'll like.

So I was surprised when I emerged from the train station at Asakusa to find that in this case, Killingsworth—or at least the flight attendant—might have been right: The neighborhood was in northeast Tokyo, a subway ride from downtown, and would never have jumped out at me on a map. But it was perfect. Instead of the high-rises and endless brand-name stores that characterize downtown, Asakusa was filled with charismatic pedestrian streets lined with small shops and restaurants, and was home to the Sensoji temple, the oldest in Tokyo. After dropping my bags at the hostel—which was clean, if basic—I asked for a restaurant recommendation in English from a young mother on the street and ended up in a small restaurant that specialized in tempura. Soon I was digging into the waitress's favorite dish: a bowl of fried shrimp on top of rice. It wasn't the best tempura I'd ever had, but I didn't care. Alone in a strange city on my first night in town, I felt inspired by my experiences thus far—and excited about what might happen next.

BEFORE COLLAPSING IN THE HOSTEL, I asked a woman who had helped me find a towel what I should do if I woke up early, a likely scenario, since 2 A.M. in Tokyo was 9 A.M. the day before on America's West Coast. She suggested the Tsukiji Market. This wasn't particularly creative—Tsukiji is one of the biggest tourist attractions in the city, as well known as the Empire State Building or Times Square. But at 4 in the morning, what else was I going to do?



**“Alone in a strange city, I feel inspired by my experiences thus far—and excited by what might happen next.”**

When I awoke at 3:30, sans alarm clock, I was tempted to stay in bed on principle—but I fought the urge and headed into the dark. The streets were deserted, the subway uncharacteristically empty, and I was surprised when I walked out of the station into a stream of people sweeping me toward the cavernous market.

Unfortunately for my jet lag, Tsukiji operated at the speed of a stock exchange. Motorized carts barreled down its wet streets in unpredictable directions, forklifts hoisted pallets of sea creatures onto trucks, and no matter where I stood, I was

in someone's way. Worried about meeting my doom under a box of soft-shelled crabs, I stuck close to a row of parked trucks and soon entered the main area of the market. Rows of stalls displayed Styrofoam containers of fresh seafood—eels, mackerel, tightly coiled tentacles of octopus—each booth presided over by vendors wearing overcoats to keep out the cold.

The sun had barely begun to rise, but at the back of the market, the daily fish auction was already under way. Dozens of enormous frozen tuna lay on the ground in a large warehouse, each with a round steak



**{Big Experience #1}**  
**REGAINING  
YOUR  
EYESIGHT  
AFTER  
33 YEARS OF  
BLINDNESS**

“Simple everyday things bring me to tears. Watching butter being spread is fascinating. Cutting my meat

without struggling gives me so much joy. I look at my husband and say, ‘I did that myself.’ I’m surrounded by so much beauty and color: my husband’s blue eyes, the red pieces on the Candy Land game that my grandson and I play, the way the light hits the colored glass windows at church, the stark branches against the blue winter sky. I’ve been watching movies of my children when they were in high school, playing volleyball, acting in plays. Imagining them doing those things wasn’t the same. I was 23 when I lost my sight, and my children were 2 and 5. When

I see my young grandchildren, it’s as if I’m looking at my children again when they were little—picturing how the wind blew my daughter’s hair across the side of her face. I can’t wait to witness my granddaughter’s first steps. And I love watching my grandson dance. When he used to visit and wanted to play outside, he always knew that Grandma stayed on the deck. But I recently told him, ‘Grandma isn’t going to stay on the deck anymore.’”

**Jenny Peterson, who received a prosthetic implant in January 2010 to restore the sight that she lost in 1976 after a reaction to antibiotics**

cut from its tail and attached to its body by a piece of colored plastic rope. Buyers in black galoshes moved methodically from tuna to tuna, jabbing the exposed flesh of the tail with hook-tipped wooden sticks to determine the fattiness of the meat. As I watched, a man climbed atop a small box and began frantically ringing a small bell. Then, in a torrent of Japanese and hand signals, he auctioned off the fish.

Despite the other tourists packed around me, I felt exhilarated, as if I'd stumbled onto something secret. The most likely reason for this sense of achievement—an emotion I felt repeatedly over the course of the trip—was that getting up before dawn to watch a tuna auction is not something I normally do. “At first glance, challenge and novelty may seem like things to avoid,” explains Gregory Berns, MD, PhD, a neuroeconomist at Emory University, in his book *Satisfaction: The Science of Finding True Fulfillment*. “But they are the exact ingredients that make for a satisfying experience.” This rang true. The downside of traveling with no plans was that everything took effort. But the upside was that each time I managed to, say, feed myself, I felt I'd accomplished something big.

I SHOULD PAUSE HERE TO EXPLAIN MY method. Figuring that most people's English would be as nonexistent as my Japanese, I'd had a fluent friend translate an introduction and several key questions, which I printed out on oversize cards and carried in my bag. If I wanted to ask people their favorite dish or sight to see, I would show them the card, have them write down the answer, and have someone else tell me what it said. (It was an excellent system overall, but beware Google Translate. Based on its software, my introductory card said: “Put fear! My name is Kasharin Price.... We are forced to travel to ask your opinion of the residents there, since the threshold and what to look funny or what should I do.”)

Other than seeking variety, I had no criteria for the people I approached—the first person who made eye contact with me usually got a card. Such was the case with a woman selling greens in a produce market next to Tsukiji. One smile tossed my way, and I thrust a question into her hands. It said, “What is your favorite restaurant?” so I tried to explain, via hand gestures, that what I *actually* meant was “I am hungry for breakfast but already had a large bowl of shrimp tempura for dinner, so could you recommend something a little lighter?” She shook her head shyly and handed it back.

Meanwhile, [CONTINUED ON PAGE 184]



# 6 Steps TO TAKING A BIG STEP

So you're eager to move outside your comfort zone—but you can't find the exit ramp, you have no directions, and your destination is hazy. Fear not, brave explorer! We've got the road map to your next adventure, whatever it may be.

**Step 1** **Get your bearings.** A great leap is about fulfilling passions that already burn inside you. So if you hate sports and heights, daring yourself to climb a mountain by 2011 is inviting disaster. “I ask my clients to draw up a list of five to ten things that make them thrive,” says Margaret Moore of the McLean/Harvard Institute of Coaching. “If it's cooking, you might be ready for a culinary adventure. If you love exercise, maybe white-water rafting is in your future.” Todd Kashdan, PhD, associate professor of psychology at George Mason University and author of *Curious?*, suggests simply walking into a bookstore and seeing which section catches your attention.

**Step 2** **Visualize, visualize, visualize.** When you put aside a few minutes each day to create a mental picture of your adventure, “you start believing it's going to happen, and belief fuels action,” explains Jonathan Fields, author of *Career Renegade*. If your fantasy is to open a yoga center, close your eyes and conjure it: What does that beautiful, profitable studio look, sound, and smell like? Research shows that this mode of “outcome simulation” increases the chances of achieving your goal. Even more effective is “process simulation,” in which you picture the mundane tasks required to reach your dream (checking Craigslist for potential yoga studio locations, calling contractors for quotes). “If you go that extra step beyond writing the to-do list and actually visualize doing all of those tedious things, you're more likely to get them done,” says Fields. “It's not sexy, but it works.”

**Step 3** **Consult the masters...** Track down role models, experts with credentials, “reverse mentors” (younger folks who might have unexpected wisdom to share), and what Kashdan calls transcenders. “We all know these people who are a little bit punk rock—they're flexible and creative and they've figured out how to break free from the box they're stuck in,” he says. These advisers can offer both practical tips (“In Ghana you must check out this wildlife sanctuary that's not in the guidebooks”) and inspiration (“The mantra that got me through the last 20 miles of that bike tour was...”).

**Step 4** **...And ask for blessings.** Seek advice and encouragement from the people who know and love you best. “For the most part, our family and friends want to give us permission to change,” says life coach Debbie Ford, coauthor with Deepak Chopra and Marianne Williamson of *The Shadow Effect*. “So ask for it. Maybe they want to be adventurous along with you.”

**Step 5** **Think holistic.** Getting your pilot's license, learning Mandarin, or planning a trip around the world might feel like all the excitement you need. But if you search for little bursts of surprise in other areas of your life, Moore says, “you create an entire mind-set for change”—exactly what the adventurer needs. “Finding novel sensations in the everyday hits a mental reset button,” adds Kashdan. “It recharges your batteries, so you have more energy for bigger challenges.” It could be as easy as “trying a new cuisine, a new route home, or a new position in bed,” says Temple University professor Frank Farley, PhD, who studies risktaking. Bonus: People who are most open to change are also the most resilient in the face of setbacks, Farley says.

**Step 6** **Find comfort in discomfort.** “Remember, it's supposed to hurt; you're supposed to feel sore,” says Ford. She's not talking about just the physical aches and pains of the couch potato turned triathlon competitor, but also the mental and emotional uneasiness of the would-be CEO or aspiring artist. “Accept that you'll never get rid of self-doubt,” Kashdan says. “An adventurous person will always have moments of feeling like a fraud—it's a sign that you're creating new roles for yourself, that you're evolving. It means you're doing great, passionate work.” —*Jessica Winter*