Level: B2: Upper Intermediate

Skill: Reading

Tiny Tokyo Apartments

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You could cook while on the toilet: a night in one of Tokyo's micro-apartments

Through the open door, every part of the living space except the sleeping area is visible. A tiny entryway leads to a small shower cubicle on the right, next to a toilet that – with the door open – you could sit on while making dinner in a kitchenette 50cm away on the other side of the "corridor".

The Guardian spent the night in Shanti Casa, in Tokyo, the answer to growing demand among young people who are unable to afford the capital's high and rising rents.

Each micro-apartment measures just nine square metres – just under half the size of a typical studio apartment in Tokyo – white walls, a large window at the back and a 3.6-metre- high ceiling balance out their cosy proportions.

The block is among 100 buildings opened in Tokyo by the real-estate company Spilytus in the past seven years.

Gap in the market

Rents for micro-apartments can be as low as ¥50,000 ($376) a month, rising to ¥80,000 in more fashionable locations. At Shanti Casa, the monthly rent is ¥20,000 to ¥30,000 lower than the average rental in the area.

Some say the micro-apartment boom shows the lack of affordable urban housing for young, underpaid workers, with quality of life sacrificed for convenience and affordability. But Keisuke Nakama, the firm's president, says the idea is to give tenants a chance to save while they consider their long-term futures.

"Many younger people these days don't have many possessions. They have a few items of clothing and not that much money, so these apartments are ideal for them," said Nakama, whose 1,500 micro-apartments have an occupancy rate of 98%.

"We want to provide a place for people who are moving to Tokyo from outside the city and who can't afford the high rents here," said Nakama, "Most of them stay in these apartments for two or three years, save some money and move to a bigger place, maybe after they've met a partner and want to settle down."

Cramped but restful

The Guardian's stay in one of the firm's model flats lasted just 24 hours.



I spent the night alone. My biggest fear – of tumbling out of bed to the floor – never happened. Actually, the night was more restful than in my own apartment, which is almost four times bigger.

Tenants living in Shanti Casa's 30 units are spread out over three floors. Each flat comes with a ground-floor living space, shower and toilet, and an upper-floor "bedroom" accessible by a ladder. About 60% of the tenants are male, and most are in their 20s or 30s, with just one in 10 over 40.

'Saving for somewhere bigger'

The idea for compact living spaces came to Nakama after he moved to Tokyo from rural Oita and was shocked to find that a flat cost more than four times as much in Tokyo.

Exhausted from his long daily commutes, Nakama envisioned accommodation with just enough space to eat, sleep and store a few essential belongings, and in locations that made it possible to walk or cycle to work.

Reina Suzuki, who began living in her micro-apartment in western Tokyo in the summer of 2022, was initially surprised by how small it was. "I found it difficult to stretch out and relax. But it's a 10-minute walk to work, I like the interior ... and I've got used to sleeping on the upper floor," said Suzuki.

With just a single electric hob in her kitchen, Suzuki, 30, likes to eat out but occasionally makes stir-fries and salads. She plans to move out in a couple of years. "I'm going to save up for somewhere bigger. When I moved in, I felt tired a lot of the time but, over the months, I've got to quite like the place. Surprisingly, I can relax here."

LIVEWORKSHEETS

Level: B1 | B2: Upper Intermediate

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Decide if the following sentences are TRUE or FALSE

1. Shanti Casa is one of 1,500 buildings in Tokyo opened by Spilytus, a real-estate company.

2. Keisuke Nakama, the firm's president, got the idea after he moved to Tokyo and was shocked at the rental prices and tired of long commutes.

3. Micro-apartments are uncomfortable, but they allow people to live close to work while saving money.

4. Many of the micro-apartments are empty now.

5. Each flat has a living space, shower, toilet, and an upper-floor "bedroom".

6. The writer feared falling out of the bed on the upper floor.

7. One convenient thing about micro-apartments is that people can flat-share with friends.

8. People who live in micro-apartments are mostly over 30.

9. A flat in Tokyo can cost more than four times as much as in a rural location.

10. One tenant says she can relax in the micro-apartment now but felt tired when she first moved in.



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